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**Explore Kansas’ Five National Historic Trails During This 50th Anniversary Year**

Speedy Pony Express riders, westward wagon trains and the intrepid Lewis and Clark expedition once crisscrossed Kansas, enroute to frontiers beyond. Today, wagon ruts, trailside springs, Pony Express stations and other landmarks remain along the pathways, preserved by the National Trails System Act that celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

Kansas boasts five of the 19 National Historic Trails, protected by the act signed into law in 1968 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The act identifies historic routes for the public to access and experience. In Kansas, remnants remain of the Santa Fe, Oregon, California, Lewis and Clark and Pony Express National Historic Trails, and today, parks, monuments, markers and museums help trace the westward journey.

Along the Santa Fe Trail, the towns of Council Grove, Larned and Elkhart plan 50th observances of the National Trails System Act. The Rendezvous at Council Grove kicks off the festivities April 20-21 with stagecoach rides, wheelwright demonstrations, native Kaw dancing, a Civil War recruitment camp, music, the dedication of the area’s Rock Creek Crossing on the Santa Fe Trail and living-history appearances by President Truman. Also that weekend at the Council Grove Lake: a Kansas City Barbeque Society-sanctioned competition and the Seth Fest music and food festival.

Follow the trail west to Larned September 20-22 for living history and a retreat ceremony at Fort Larned National Historic Site, dedication of a marker at the Pawnee River crossing and history talks at the biennial Rendezvous History Seminar. On October 5-7, Elkhart’s regional celebration (spilling over into Oklahoma and New Mexico) includes tours of the 108,000-acre Cimarron National Grassland, which contains a continuous 23-mile section of the Santa Fe Trail.

About two-thirds of the Santa Fe Trail’s approximate 800 miles cross through Kansas, enroute from the Missouri River to Santa Fe. The trail served as one of the first major commercial highways, used mostly by freighter wagons and the military. Once travelers reached Dodge City in western Kansas, they had to choose which of two main routes to take the rest of the way to Santa Fe: the rugged Mountain Route or the shorter but more hazardous Cimarron Route, possibly facing drought and Indian raids.

From 1821 to 1880, the trail hauled goods to Santa Fe and beyond, etching out a legacy that stretches the length of Kansas. In 2021, the Santa Fe Trail marks its 200th anniversary.

Unlike Santa Fe, the Oregon and California National Historic Trails were avenues for settlers and a gathering point in Kansas for wagon trains. After rolling into Kansas from the Independence, Westport and St. Joseph, Missouri, areas, caravans often camped at Lone Elm near Olathe before heading west. Today, Lone Elm Park reminisces with interpretive signs, restored prairie and walking paths. On June 2, Lone Elm Park hosts its National Trails Day Rendezvous, marking the National Trails System 50th anniversary and the 175th anniversary of the Oregon Trail with a day of trail history and entertainment.

From there, the Oregon and California Trails, joined for briefly by the Santa Fe Trail, wind west, leaving behind ruts, interpretive signs and prairie flora at places like Harmon Park in Prairie Village and Gardner Junction Park at Gardner, and on through Lawrence and Topeka before the intertwined settlers’ trails arc north. The path eventually enters Nebraska in east-central Kansas near Hollenberg, passing through the Indian Pay Station Historic Site and Oregon Trail Nature Park near St. Marys, Scott Springs Oregon Trail Park at Westmoreland, and some obscure, off-road remnants.

A must-see near Blue Rapids, Alcove Spring is considered the “crown jewel of trail sites in Kansas,” says Travis Boley, manager of the Oregon-California Trails Association. “It’s on the main branch of the Oregon and California Trail, and the raw, undeveloped 230 acres have the look and feel of what trail travelers truly experienced.” Emigrants carved their names in the rocks surrounding Alcove Spring, a popular trailside campsite and watering hole, and some of the carvings remain visible today. Interpretive signs throughout the park and wagon swales retell the historic story.

Some 140 miles of the Pony Express National Historic Trail also thunder through Kansas’ northeast territory. At breakneck speeds, riders carried mail in 1860-61 from Missouri to California, covering more than 1,800 miles in only 10 days. One of their stops, the Hollenberg Pony Express Station State Historic Site near Hanover, still stands sturdy today as the only original relay station on its original site. Visitors can tour the station, resembling the 1860s inside, and a nearby visitors center. At its annual Pony Express Festival (August 26 this year), Hollenberg Station salutes its heydays with period crafts and music, a mail exchange and a vintage baseball game.

East a ways, Marysville’s Pony Express Home Station No. 1 served as a livery stable on the mail route and remains the only home station on its original site. A museum inside the station, along with a trails display in the historic courthouse and a downtown statue of a Pony Express rider, recall Marysville’s past.

Both the Hollenberg and Marysville stations are stops on the annual 10-day National Pony Express Association Re-Ride from Sacramento to St. Joseph, which closely follows the original route. Visitors are welcome to come witness the mail exchange, scheduled this year to arrive in the middle of the night—midnight June 29 at Hollenberg and 2 a.m. June 30 at Marysville—as the riders speed on to St. Joseph.

Slower paced, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail traverses about 100 miles of northeast Kansas, crossing the Missouri River into Kansas at Kansas City and following the waterway north to the Nebraska-Iowa border near White Cloud. Lewis and Clark Park at Kaw Point in Kansas City, Kansas, gives a good glimpse of what the explorers experienced when they arrived here at the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers on June 26, 1804. The expedition camped at Kaw Point for three days to rest, repair their boats and explore the countryside. Today, the 10-acre metro park, popular for its spectacular view of downtown Kansas City and the two rivers, preserves the point with trails, untamed woodlands, interpretive signs, and a riverside statue of Lewis and Clark pointing to their destination upriver.

The party paddled north, leaving a present-day trail of history along the Leavenworth and Atchison riverfronts. In Leavenworth, historic markers overlook the Missouri River and the Frontier Army Museum showcases Lewis and Clark displays. Atchison, where the expedition celebrated the first Independence Day west of the Mississippi, pays tribute with the Lewis and Clark Pavilion in Riverfront Park, and a five-mile hiking/biking trail leading to the site where Lewis and Clark camped and on to Independence Creek, named by Lewis and Clark, and a re-created Kanza Indian earth lodge.

Lewis and Clark and the other National Historic Trails nationwide plan 50th anniversary parties this year. While several in Kansas have announced upcoming rendezvous, others in the states are still in the planning stage.

“This anniversary is a perfect opportunity for Kansans to celebrate our trails and take a journey through history,” says Linda Craghead, Assistant Secretary for Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. “Our five National Historic Trails are true treasures, waiting to be explored.”

For more information: [www.Trails50.org](http://www.Trails50.org); [www.TravelKS.com](http://www.TravelKS.com).

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