



**NEWS RELEASE**  
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FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
Kari West, City of Parsons, Public Information  
Officer  
620/421-7030; [kwest@parsonsksk.com](mailto:kwest@parsonsksk.com)  
OR  
Kansas Humanities Council  
785/357-0359; [www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org)

### **All Aboard to Parsons, “Queen of the Great Southwest”**

**Parsons, KS** – *All Aboard! Head to Parsons!* That’s what thousands of people did upon the creation of what some called the “Queen of the Great Southwest.” The evolution of transportation shaped more than just another railroad town, it created a prominent city in southeast Kansas and left behind a rich history. The railroad heritage of Parsons represents the many American transportation stories featured as part of the Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition *Journey Stories* on display November 20, 2009 – January 3, 2010 at the Parsons Public Library, 311 S. 17<sup>th</sup> Street in Parsons.

In 1870, stagecoaches brought several leading eastern businessmen to Labette County, Kansas in hopes of creating the first rail line to travel south to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Levi Parsons were included among the group. The men joined an elite party of investors who financed the Missouri – Kansas – Texas Railroad, known as the “Katy.” The Katy became the first passenger railway to cross from Kansas into Indian Territory.

The success of the Katy railroad sparked the rapid development of Parsons. Named for Levi Parsons, the community grew to 1,000 people by 1871. “The Katy railroad was responsible for the rapid growth and subsequent development of the City of Parsons,” said Labette County Tourism Director, Jim Zaleski. “The Katy prompted the influx of residents, new homes, and businesses and sparked exciting growth that would continue throughout the next 60 years.”

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In 1875, the Katy moved its general offices from Sedalia, Missouri to Parsons. The city grew at a rapid pace throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Growth of the railroad, and its central location, prompted many construction projects throughout the years at the Katy. With that growth came construction workers and their families, along with those searching for a new life in a booming town. With each year the Katy grew. In the early 1900s, it was estimated that nearly 30 passenger trains a day were stopping in Parsons. By April of 1907, Parsons had grown to 16,372 residents.

The Katy also provided many cultural and athletic opportunities for the residents of Parsons and southeast Kansas. On October 7, 1916, the Katy Athletic Field was dedicated. More than 5,000 people came to participate in the dedication festivities. “For years the Katy Park hosted a variety of events. In the spring of 1917, the park hosted the Minneapolis Millers vs. the St. Louis Cardinals in an exhibition baseball game,” Zaleski added. “ Many teams, such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and the Chicago White Sox played in the park.”

The railroad played an important role in World War I. Parsons was a stopping point for troops traveling on the Katy. It is estimated that more than 100,000 soldiers made a stop in Parsons between 1917 and 1919.

In the mid-1900s, the evolution of transportation changed Parsons forever. The affordability of personal automobiles meant that passenger trains were no longer popular or profitable. In 1957, Katy offices in Parsons closed, relocating workers to their new offices in Denison, Texas. In 1958, the Katy’s popular signature line from St. Louis to Parsons also stopped. Finally in July 1965, after 94 years of passenger service through Parsons, it ended, along with an era of prosperity.

The Katy will forever be remembered in Parsons through pictures, memorabilia, and stories dedicated to the rich rail history that helped to shape Parsons and the rest of the country.

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To learn similar stories of the railroad’s impact on American communities, make the trip to the Parsons Public Library for the *Journey Stories* exhibition. Journey stories – tales of how we got here – are as American as apple pie. Why did our ancestors come to America? Why did our families choose Kansas as home? The exhibition explores four centuries of American history through images, audio clips, music, maps, and artifacts. Visitors will listen to stories of travelers and trace their route on an interactive map; read harrowing accounts of escaped slaves on the road to freedom; and use an 1859 guidebook to prepare for a westward trip on an overland trail.

"As a community that was formed on the back of western migration, we are pleased to be able to present *Journey Stories* to southeastern Kansas," said Kari West, Public Information Officer, City of Parsons. "As people headed west, the Katy Railroad melded different cultures into our diverse population. Our companion discussions and exhibit will feature Mexican-American heritage, the great migration of African-Americans and how transportation laid the foundation for our community as it is today."

Three local companion exhibits to *Journey Stories* will be featured in Parsons. The first features material related to the Union Electric Railway line, an interurban line, and its operations in Parsons from 1912 to 1947. The second exhibit highlights the Katy Railroad and its role in bringing people to Kansas and points west. The third exhibit looks at the Mexican-Americans who came to Parsons to build the railroad and their cultural contributions to Parsons. The Parsons Historical Society Museum is working in conjunction with the Parsons Public Library to produce the local exhibits.

The Parsons Public Library is one of six Kansas community cultural organizations to host *Journey Stories*. Other Kansas hosts include the McPherson County Old Mill Museum in Lindsborg, the Glasco Community Foundation, the Geary County Historical Society and Museums in Junction City, the Prairie Museum of Art and History in Colby, and the Atchison County Historical Society.

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The *Journey Stories* exhibition is part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Kansas Humanities Council, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Support for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the United State Congress.

The Kansas Humanities Council sponsors the Kansas tour of *Journey Stories*. A non-profit cultural institution, the Kansas Humanities Council conducts and supports community-based programs, serves as a financial resource through an active grant-making program, and encourages Kansans to participate in their communities.

For more information about *Journey Stories* and related exhibits and events in Parsons, contact the Parsons Public Library at 620/421-5920 or [www.parsonslibrary.org](http://www.parsonslibrary.org) or the Kansas Humanities Council at 785/357-0359 or [www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org).

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*Historical Research Courtesy of Parsons Historical & Iron Horse Museums  
Other Historical Facts from Maynard Harding’s Collection of Rail Stories*