



Star Courier

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'Old Scouts' help solve stage coach patch mystery

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By DAVE CLARKE Of The Star Courier

It took less than 90 minutes after Wednesday's Star Courier hit the streets to find out about the patch lettered with Kewanee Stage Coach and Pony Express Trail found in e-bay we asked about in that day's "Around Town" column.

Bill Grice called to tell us that when he and Harold Dillon were Boy Scout leaders at the Methodist Church back in the 1960s they were in charge of the trail which began at Francis Park, went across country to the west about 20 miles, and ended at Cosner's Corner northwest of Kewanee. Boy Scouts from other towns and states would camp at the park on Friday night, then hike the trail all day Saturday. Those who completed the trek received the aforementioned patch, or badge for their accomplishment. A few minutes later, Harold called to say he had just picked up the paper and knew right away what the patch was for and added a little bit to what Bill had told us. "The trail only lasted about 10 years and while we were supervising it the proceeds went to the Organization for Retarded Citizens," said Grice. "After awhile Harold and I just wore out and no one took over so the trail kind of died," he said.



Lloyd Dyer, right, one of the organizers of the Kewanee Stage Coach and Pony Express Trail, north of Kewanee, and fellow Boy Scout leader Gus DeToye, left, another member of the original committee, point out sites along the trail to Explorer Scouts from Downers Grove in this photo which appeared on the cover of the June, 1962 edition of Hi-Lines, a statewide magazine published for employees of Illinois Power Co., which included Dyer, now retired. According to the article which accompanied a number of photos of the project, more than 1,500 Scouts and leaders had hiked the trail in the two years since it opened. The magazine was shared by John Lindbloom of Kewanee.

But the real gold mine of information came Thursday morning in the hands of Charlie McMahon who brought in a big, thick scrapbook full of clippings and memorabilia from his a

long career as a Scoutmaster. It included several articles on how the trail began saved by McMahan, a member of the original committee.

The trail was the idea of two local Scout leaders, Gus DeToye and Herb Rowe, Sr., who were looking for something that would highlight the history of the area, while bringing Scouts from all over the country to Kewanee to hike the trail. Boy Scout hiking trails were apparently very popular at the time with many around the state and nation with most of them now gone.

Planning apparently began in late 1959 or early 1960 and included creation of a museum for display of historical items established in the old west office of the Walworth Company, a two-story, brick building on the east side of North Main Street between the Eagles Club and the tracks. Gil DeMay and the Jaycees renovated the vacant building which also included headquarters for what was to be called the Kewanee Stage Coach and Pony Express Trail. A dedication ceremony was held on Saturday, May 7, 1960, with ceremony at the new museum followed by a rather unique "ribbon cutting" at Francis Park. Scout Dennis DeToye, Gus' son, used an axe to cut a rope officially opening the trail.

According to the first news articles, the line of march — officially listed as 19 miles — extended north from the park along the county line road, then west to the southern edge of Johnson Sauk Trail State Park. From the park, the trail went to the northern tip of Messmore Hill, north of Kewanee on Route 78. From there, the trail continued west on an old stage coach route eventually ending at Cosner's Corner, northwest of Kewanee on Route 81. Each Boy or Girl Scout paid \$1 which included a 16-page booklet with a map of 14 sites along the trail, and, if they finished the route, received the patch. For an additional \$1.50 they could also have a red, white and blue ribbon with a Stage Coach/Pony Express Trail medal. A decal was also available.

The hike took a full day with each Scout carrying their own food, water and medical supplies. None were provided along the way. They also had to make the journey in their Scout uniform.

Toulon Boy Scout Gary Steward remembers his day on the trail well. "It was hotter 'n blazes and when we got done we had to write a 100-word essay about what we had seen and learned," said Steward, who also hiked the Amaquonsippi, a Boy Scout trail along the Spoon River west of Bradford.

The sites, each marked along the trail, included several Indian campsites and burial mounds, in addition to a house once used as a stage coach stop, a rock quarry where gold was supposedly found, and the locations of three stagecoach robberies. The best-known holdup supposedly took place a few miles north of Francis Park in the 1840s. The stage driver, Mort Hughes, heard outlaws might be up ahead and buried the money box somewhere between the county line and Neponset. The outlaws shot Hughes before discovering the box was gone, the location of its burial going to the grave with the driver.

The "stage coach" part of the trail's name is evident, but how does the Pony Express fit in? As we said last time, the cross-country mail service ran from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif. in 1860-61, and went nowhere near Kewanee.

According to the information printed in the booklet, the stage coaches carried the mail and at selected points, one of them at the top of Messmore Hill, men called pony mail riders would meet the stage, pick up the mail for areas off the stage route, and deliver it to its destination. One of the mail riders, "Pony Bob" Haslem, of Kewanee, did actually become a rather well-known Pony Express rider for Wells Fargo and later joined another rider, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, in his Wild West Show.

One more thing about the patch — what was the function of the mysterious little loop at the top of the round badge? Another longtime Kewanee Scout leader, Don Tomsic, helped us with that one. Bringing in his own Kewanee Stage Coach and Pony Express patch, he showed how the loop was placed over the button used to close the flap on your shirt pocket so it would hang freely in case you didn't want to sew it to the uniform. Dan Craig brought in two vests worn by his father, the late Ray Craig, leader of Troop 112 at the First Christian Church, which were both covered with badges from dozens of trails, including the patch and medal from Kewanee's stage coach trail.

A granite marker was placed at the entrance to Francis Park, which Kewanee Zoning Building and Health Officer Kip Spear says is still there, marking the beginning of the trail and the date it opened — May 7, 1960.

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