

# Call of the Katy

BY JOHN BEAHLER

ADVENTURE always seemed to be one of the passengers on the old Katy Railroad. One trip might find you eating dinner off starched linen in the sleek dining car of the Texas Limited, hooting and highballing through the night down to Galveston Bay. On the next, you could just as easily be clacking along the spur line into Columbia, making the slow, seven-mile milk run from the little river hamlet of McBaine. Either way, it was a ride you weren't likely to forget.

"Katy" was the affectionate nickname that travelers gave the MKT Railroad, which in turn was shorthand for Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. As a youngster growing up in Columbia, Darwin Hindman, AB '55, JD '61, remembers walking the tracks on his way to school. Now an attorney and the mayor of Columbia, Hindman recalls two trips in particular on the Katy line to McBaine.

His father, Darwin Hindman Sr.—dean of men for many years at Mizzou—and psychology Professor Fred McKinney decided one day to take their kids for a train ride. Everyone shoehorned into McKinney's old wood-paneled station wagon and headed downtown to the MKT depot.

"When we got there the train was pulling out of the station, so Prof. McKinney just drove his car right down the tracks, with the wheels bouncing along the railroad ties," says Hindman. "Someone on the train must have seen us, because they stopped and backed up, waited for us to buy tickets, and we went down to McBaine and had a picnic."

As an undergraduate at MU years

later, Hindman joined some college friends for what by then had become a campus ritual—a late-night jaunt on the Katy. The train left around midnight and returned to Columbia in the wee hours of the morning. Mizzou students often went along for the trip, but it was no posh pleasure ride on a Pullman coach.

"I'm not sure if it started off being a passenger car that was converted to carry lots of baggage, or a baggage car that they added seating to," Hindman remembers. There were just a handful of seats on either side of the aisle. The light came from coal-oil lamps; a pot-bellied stove supplied heat in the winter. "It was pretty outdated stuff even then," he says.

Elegance wasn't necessarily the idea. The Katy's laid-back approach to travel fit perfectly with the amble-along ambience of a small college town. If you knew the conductor, you could ask him to stop the train at Brushwood Lake, about halfway to McBaine, to let you off for a fishing excursion. The train even picked you up on the way back, after you'd landed a luncheon or two.

And when the school year kicked off,

townspeople came down to the station to watch special trains pull in filled with Mizzou students. For football games, locomotives chugged into town carrying trainloads of Tiger fans. Opposing teams and their fans sometimes spent football weekends on sleeper cars parked down at the station.

After the Katy went out of existence in the 1980s, Hindman and a handful of others wanted to make sure that a whole new generation could build their own memories of the old rail line. Their effort has paid off. The abandoned railroad right-of-way has been converted into Missouri's longest and skinniest state park as part of the nation's "rails to trails" conversions, which includes nearly 10,000 miles of trails. But Missouri's Katy Trail State Park is still the longest.

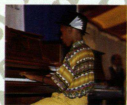
The Katy also is one of the state's most popular parks. The trail draws an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 visitors each year as it takes a 185-mile jaunt across the state. It skips along Missouri River bluffs and bottomlands from St. Charles to Boonville, where it angles south toward Sedalia.

Hindman is not one bit surprised by the trail's overwhelming popularity. "Because the trail covers such a large portion of the state, it generates interest wherever it goes," says Hindman. "One of the great things about these trails is the serendipity,

*While a blur of traffic thunders over the Missouri River bridge on Interstate 70 near Rocheport, the pace is much slower on the Katy Trail. Hikers and bikers amble along the riverbank with plenty of time to enjoy the sights and to smell the wild roses.*

PHOTO BY NICK DECKER, MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES





### Sedalia:

When the Katy Railroad came to town, it fueled an economic boom that made Sedalia a mecca for musicians, including composer Scott Joplin, famous for his "Maple Leaf Rag."



### Rocheport:

Once a busy steamboat landing, Rocheport is bustling again with antique shops and lodgings like the Schoolhouse Bed and Breakfast, located just off the Katy Trail.



### McBaine:

The spot where the old spur line from Columbia hits the main Katy tracks has been named Hindman Junction, to recognize Columbia Mayor Darwin Hindman's efforts to establish the Katy Trail.



### Hartsburg:

The Hartsburg Cycle Depot, located in a restored 1890s building, offers cycling equipment and espresso drinks.



## DOWN THE LINE: POINTS ALONG THE KATY TRAIL

the unexpected benefits you get."

### RECREATIONAL CYCLING

Tom Uhlenbrock knows all about serendipity and the Katy Trail. Uhlenbrock, BJ '69, an environmental reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, was just a few days shy of the big 5-0 when he set out last summer on a cross-state adventure.

He had landed what seemed like a plum assignment: Pedal the length of Missouri's Katy Trail State Park from Sedalia to St. Charles and share his experiences in a series of daily articles.

"I thought this would be kind of a lark, doing 200 miles on a bike on my 50th birthday," says Uhlenbrock, a self-described "recreational" cyclist. "As a matter of fact, I probably should have trained a little more."

Last summer's journey wasn't Uhlenbrock's first brush with the trail. When the Katy was under construction in the early 1990s, he took a similar trip—biking some sections, riding with park officials on others. It was a different experience back then. He recalls trash-strewn right-of-ways, few if any businesses that catered to bikers and hikers, and

irate landowners who saw the trail as an undisguised government land grab.

This time around, the Katy Trail had grown into one of the jewels of the state park system. Park workers have groomed the crushed limestone roadbeds into a cyclist's dream highway. Trailside hamlets welcome riders with hometown hospitality. On his latest trip Uhlenbrock met travelers from around the country and the world, drawn by the prospect of a bicycle jaunt through the heart of America.

Although the going could get tough on steamy summer afternoons, there was a cushy side to his ride. "The editors wanted us to camp out," Uhlenbrock says. "I said, 'No, I don't think so.'"

He reasoned with his bosses: Our readers want to know about more mainstream, cozier accommodations. It really was his duty to stay in the string of bed-and-breakfasts that have sprung up along the trail. So instead of sodden sleeping bags and tepid cans of beanie-weenies, weary days on the trail ended in a comfortable bed, with gourmet meals, hot tubs and chilled cocktails.

A few days into the ride he remembers showing up at the door of a Boonville B&B—with a flat tire on his bike, soak-

ing wet, swathed in a garbage bag to ward off the driving rain. It took a while before his leg cramps subsided enough to write the day's installment.

### PICTURE PERFECT

Last fall, an article in *The New York Times* travel section highlighted the Katy Trail. It'll be interesting to see what happens when the trail gets more notoriety, Uhlenbrock says. "People always want to ride the biggest, the baddest, the oldest and the longest."

Add "historic" to that list of adjectives. "The whole trail is steeped with history," says Jim Denny, AB '65, MA '66, a historian with the state's Department of Natural Resources. The Missouri River valley has always been a highway for explorers—from Native American hunters, to adventurers like Lewis and Clark, to the settlers who poured into central Missouri in the early 1800s.

The stretch of trail from St. Charles to Boonville is the "longest nonmotorized segment of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail," Denny says. Trail riders move at about the same pace as that band of explorers when they muscled up the Missouri River in a keelboat and canoes.





### Marthasville:

French fur traders knew this historic hamlet as Charette. Later, it was one in a string of thriving railroad towns that dotted the Katy through Missouri.



### The Missouri:

Travelers on the Katy Trail retrace a portion of the same route that Lewis and Clark's tiny flotilla followed up the Missouri River in 1804.



### Augusta wineries:

A day on the Katy Trail isn't all hard work; there are ample opportunities to relax in picturesque wine gardens and sample Missouri vintages.



### Missouri's first state capital:

Is St. Charles the beginning or the end of the Katy Trail? Either way, the town's historic district is a gateway to Missouri's past.

Scenic, Marthasville and Augusta photos by Missouri Division of Tourism, Roseport, McBaine and Hartsburg photos by Nancy O'Connor, Lewis and Clark art courtesy of State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, St. Charles photo courtesy of St. Charles Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Some of the sights that Lewis and Clark detailed in their journals are still there for today's trail travelers to see. The little town of Marthasville was a French village known as Charette when the explorers passed through in 1804. "It was literally the last settlement they saw in the United States," Denny says. Park officials have even located several of the explorers' riverfront campsites along the trail and marked them with signs.

But for Denny, the real bonus that the trail offers is a glimpse into the last century, when small towns blossomed along the Katy tracks during the late 1800s.

"That's what makes the Katy Trail such a special place to me, the little picture-postcard hamlets. You get the feeling that you're a long way away from complex urban problems," he says. "They look like ghost towns today, yet in the golden age of railroad towns they had all kinds of businesses. They were thriving places."

### BUSINESS BLOSSOMS

The tiny river hamlet of Hartsburg never quite reached ghost town status. When the MKT railroad dried up, so did Hartsburg's once bustling business district. But business is blossoming again

with the Katy Trail. A turn-of-the-century storefront that once sold dry goods and hardware and horse collars is now home to the Hartsburg Cycle Depot.

Business couldn't be better, says owner and manager Karen Rotts, BJ '87. And a lot of it comes from folks who've been bitten by the biking bug after a trip on the Katy Trail. "People stumble in and say they haven't been on a bicycle in years. We rent them Schwinn cruisers, the type of bike they probably grew up with," Rotts says. "The trail is getting people back into biking—people who would never think of bicycling before."

The Katy has advantages for occasional trail warriors. Bikers don't have to do battle with cars on crowded streets. Also, the stretch of trail along the river is generally flat, without steep grades that get out-of-shape cyclists huffing and puffing.

And, Rotts says, a leisurely ride down the trail is "good for people's mental attitudes. It's a good way for families to get out together."

### GUIDE TO THE TRAIL

Brett Dufur has pedaled the entire length of the trail twice now, and has made countless shorter forays, to research his

popular trail guide. The Katy Trail has become a cottage industry for Dufur, BJ '94. As a Mizzou journalism student covering Missouri River towns for the *Columbia Missourian*, one of the biggest news stories along the river was the flood of hikers and bikers who poured onto the trail. Dufur noted the need for a comprehensive guidebook, so he sat down and wrote one. *The Complete Katy Trail Guidebook* is in its fourth printing since 1995; each of the early editions sold out quickly.

Since then, his Pebble Publishing Co. has branched out to include a nature guide to the Missouri River valley and other Missouri guidebooks and histories. Company headquarters is within hollering distance of the trail, on the second floor of a home in the old river town of Rocheport.

The enduring interest in the Katy Trail doesn't surprise him. "The trail is like a living organism. It's really hard to put your finger on it," Dufur says. "It's the sunsets. It's the slow, quiet river. It's the seasons that change so slowly it's imperceptible. This is a gorgeous strip of Missouri, and it's right here in our own back yard." ❁