

Wileys – Railroad Museum

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The Santa Fe Railroad. This railroad played a significant role in Kansas history. Today we'll meet a couple who not only have amassed a remarkable collection of Santa Fe memorabilia, they have founded a museum so that others can enjoy this history. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Perry and Sherry Wiley are the owners and proprietors of the Panhandle Railroad Museum in Wellington, Kansas. This museum contains a remarkable private collection of railroad memorabilia dating from the early 1900s.

Perry, or P.H. Wiley as he is known, is originally from West Virginia. While stationed with the Air Force at McConnell Air Force Base near Wichita, he met and married Sherry who was born and raised at Wellington. P.H.'s business career took them to Ohio and Kentucky before they came back to Kansas. In 1977, he joined the Santa Fe Railroad which would later become BNSF. P.H. began as a brakeman and advanced to become an engineer.

He was stationed in Wellington, which was a division point on the Santa Fe Railroad. This was a headquarters for the part of the Santa Fe known as the Panhandle Division. Wellington had a Santa Fe office building as well as a roundhouse, depot, and Harvey House for travelers.

In 1992, P.H. began collecting railroad souvenirs and storing them in his basement. By the time he retired in 2004, he had amassed a large collection and wanted to share it with others. The Wileys renovated an historic stone building that had been built in 1886 in Wellington. In 2005, they opened the Panhandle Railroad Museum.

The museum has an amazing collection of all things Santa Fe. For example, there are plates, pens, signs, caps, lanterns, lunchboxes, staplers, padlocks, towels, pins, pens, cups, uniforms, calendars, and much more.

One feature attraction is a beautiful, polished bell from a Santa Fe steam locomotive that was retired in 1952. Visitors are even allowed to ring the bell, which chimes a strong, pure tone. This bell traveled nearly one-and-a-half million miles across the Midwest.

The Wileys got the bell from a man in the nearby rural community of Milan, population 136 people. Now, that's rural.

Part of the museum is the wall of clocks. Watches and clocks were vital to the safe movement of trains before the signal system was put into place. Switch locks and keys are also vital components. Display cases exhibit a remarkable diversity of railroad souvenirs, even including Santa Fe packaged foods.

In the front room of the museum over the fireplace is a fourteen foot tall painting of a Santa Fe locomotive. In front of the painting is a velocipede. I thought that sounded like some type of insect, but it is actually a human-powered transport designed like a bicycle to travel on the railroad tracks. The velocipede preceded use of the handcar.

The museum has a large counter and safe from the local railway express office. The depot and Harvey House are no longer standing in Wellington, but the copper doors from the Harvey House are on display here.

Also on display is an awesome image of the original Wellington depot and Harvey House, portrayed in wheat straw on black velvet by a couple of Kansas artists.

There are caps and uniforms of the conductors, plus a uniform from what had been the Santa Fe marching band. At one time the railroad had its own marching band which traveled up and down the route for various events. “That uniform might have been at the Rose Bowl,” Sherry Wiley said.

Outside the museum in Sellers Park is an actual steam locomotive, donated to the city of Wellington in 1956.

So do people visit a private railroad museum? Well, when I signed the guest register, on the same page where I signed I noticed that there were signatures from Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, California, Missouri, Colorado, Wyoming, and Scotland. Wow.

The Santa Fe Railroad. Yes, it played an important role in Kansas history. We commend P.H. and Sherry Wiley for making a difference by honoring this history and sharing it with others. It is helping to keep our appreciation of railroad history on track.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.