

# Get your kicks on Route 36

**BY JIM WINNERMAN • Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, August 7, 2011 12:10 am**

I thought Interstate 70 was the only straight, four-lane route across Missouri. I also thought most of the interesting places to visit in Missouri were alongside, or south of I-70. But while planning a trip on I-70 to Kansas City, and then north to St. Joseph, Beth Carmichael in the St. Joseph Convention and Visitors Bureau asked if I was going to take U.S. Highway 36. "It goes straight from Hannibal to St. Joseph and is four lanes all the way," she volunteered enthusiastically.

"The last segment in the Route 36 corridor was completed last summer," she added.

"Was this road built secretly?" I asked.

"It is named 'The Way of American Genius' because it passes the hometowns and museums of Mark Twain, Walt Disney, General John J. Pershing and J.C. Penney and leads to the Pony Express Museum in St. Joseph," Carmichael said, ignoring my question. "The Missouri Department of Transportation and the Missouri Highway 36 Heritage Alliance produced a CD to play in your car that gives a narrative of all the places to visit along the way. I'll mail you one."

Confused but intrigued, I asked, "MODOT made a CD? Who built the road, a record company?"

As I discovered, the dream to widen Route 36 to four lanes began in the late 1940s when discussions were started about upgrading the route. Creating an alternate four-lane route from Kansas City to Chicago would bring business and tourists to northern Missouri, it was reasoned.

The vision was slow to materialize. Various sections of the four-lane pavement were completed over almost 70 years, but the final 52-mile segment between Hannibal and Macon was not finished until July 10, 2010.

Most attractions are less than five miles off the route, although the CD includes sights as far off the route as 36 miles.

Additionally, the historic Native American and pioneer trails and roads that existed before Route 36 are discussed, as are the wildlife and geological features the road passes. Short musical interludes separate topics. Two CDs are included, one for east-to-west travel, and the other using a west-to-east itinerary.

I found it more useful to listen to the CD before my trip and plan what I wanted to see ahead of time based on the narrative. Regardless, whether you take one day or several to make the trip, there is a lot of northern Missouri to discover along the "new" four-lane Route 36.

## **HANNIBAL**

**Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum (208 Hill Street; \$9; 1-573-221-9010; [marktwainmuseum.org](http://marktwainmuseum.org))**

The genius of one of the world's most beloved authors can be discovered daily during a tour of Twain's residence, the Becky Thatcher House, the Huckleberry Finn House, J.M. Clemens Justice of the Peace Office and a museum housing Mark Twain memorabilia. To see the myriad other attractions in Hannibal, go to [visithannibal.com](http://visithannibal.com).

## **MARCELINE**

**Walt Disney Hometown Museum (120 East Santa Fe Street; \$5 for those 11 and older, open April-October; 1-660-376-3343; [waltdisneymuseum.org](http://waltdisneymuseum.org))**

Walt Disney's family moved to Marceline when he was 5, and they stepped off the train into the two-story, red brick Santa Fe Depot that today houses the Walt Disney Hometown Museum. The museum, just two miles off Route 36, commemorates Walt's life in the community that had an immense influence on his career. In fact, his first sketches of what would become Disneyland were based on downtown Marceline.

The museum opened in 2001 and recently received an unexpected bonanza of Disney memorabilia when Walt's younger sister died, leaving the museum more than 3,000 items of family memorabilia.

On the outskirts of town on land that was once the Disney family farm, a grassy walkway leads to the Dreaming Tree, where Walt would sit for hours to dream and sketch. During a return visit in 1946, Walt recalled the joy he felt after sketching a

neighbor's horse: "All the way home I walked on air squeezing the quarter so tight it hurt. A wonderful thing had happened. Someone had liked a drawing of mine well enough to buy it."

A replica of the Disney family barn is also part of the museum, and leading cartoonists from all over the world have left their signatures, sketches and tributes on the walls and beams.

"Toonfest" attracts internationally recognized cartoonists for symposiums and workshops the third Saturday each September.

Disney died in 1966, before his plans to build a Disney farm theme park in Marceline were realized.

## LACLEDE

**General John J. Pershing Boyhood Home State Historic Site (1100 Pershing; free; 1-660-963-2525; [tinyurl.com/3hem95v](http://tinyurl.com/3hem95v))**

Less than a mile off Route 36 in Laclede, Mo., is the home and museum of the man who graduated from West Point in 1886 and went on to be awarded the rank of general of the armies. One rank above five-star general, it was the highest military rank in America.

Pershing served in multiple wars and campaigns on the Western frontier and went on to lead American Expeditionary Troops in World War I. He was regarded as a mentor of World War II generals such as Patton, Eisenhower, Marshall and Bradley.

Pershing's Gothic-style home and the one-room Prairie Mound schoolhouse where he taught are on the site and open to the public. Between the buildings, a statue of Pershing is surrounded by a Wall of Honor made of granite tablets commemorating conflicts in which the United States has been involved. A veteran's name can be added to the appropriate tablet for a \$150 donation.

## HAMILTON

**The J.C. Penney Museum (312 North Davis Street; free, 1-816-583-2168; [roadsideamerica.com/story/16234](http://roadsideamerica.com/story/16234))**

Two miles off 36 in downtown Hamilton, a realistic likeness of James Cash Penney greets visitors at the front door of his museum. Among the displays are Penney's first and last desks, his last office chair (visitors can sit in it,) and display cases filled with sales literature.

A block away, the tiny 600-square foot, four-room family home sits in the shadow of a large, commercial grain silo. Visitors can tour the late-1800s home by asking the museum attendant for the key.

## ST. JOSEPH

**The Pony Express National Museum (914 Penn Street; \$5; 1-816-279-5059; [Ponvexpress.org](http://Ponvexpress.org)) and the Patee House Museum (12th and Penn; \$6; 1-816-232-8206; [ponvexpressjessejames.com](http://ponvexpressjessejames.com))**

By 1860, the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad had reached St. Joseph. But, to get mail farther west and on to California, the idea for the Pony Express was launched. Ponies left from the stable doors where the museum now stands. Horses used on the first leg of the 10-day, 2,000-mile journey to California were kept here, and the museum displays relate the history of the young men who braved the weather and harsh terrain to unite a country separated by distance.

Just up the street from the museum is the Patee House Museum, which is a National Landmark. Opened as a luxurious hotel in 1858 to serve travelers as the railroad pushed west, it functioned as the office and headquarters for the Pony Express. Riders rode their horses through an arched opening into the first floor hotel office where mail was delivered and accepted.

While the Pony Express began here, Jesse James' life ended a block away in a home that has been moved to the museum grounds. It functions as a museum crowded with Jesse James memorabilia.