

St. Joseph News-Press, Fri., April 18, 1913

WHERE PONY STARTED

Tobias Mitchell writes of  
Johnny Frye's first getaway

Says start was not made from  
Patee Park, but from Russell-  
Majors Wells-Fargo offices.

The News-Press is in receipt of a communication from Tobias Mitchell, formerly connected with the press of this city, and for thirteen years city editor of the St. Louis Globe Democrat, touching the first pony express out of St. Joseph. Mr. Mitchell was reared in this city and there are many of the old residents who will remember him and the family of Walter Mitchell of which he was one. He is now located at Seattle, Washington. His contribution is entirely at variance with the supposed facts upon which the recent commemorative unveiling ceremonies were based and he gives names dates and incidents to substantiate his statement which follows in full.

Editor News Press:

A copy of your paper, April 3, 1913, containing an account of the unveiling of the monument commemorating the pony express, has come under my observation. It was interesting to me. I was on the spot when the first pony express started from St. Joseph, April 3, 1860, and the features and facts are as fresh in my mind as if the event had occurred but yesterday.

I was surprised and amazed that there was not one single individual present at the unveiling who seemed to have any knowledge whatever of the actual circumstances in connection with the somewhat historical event. Most of them, however, are doubtless gone to their final account, and that I am a survivor may be attributed not to longevity, but to the fact that I was quite a youngster, about thirteen years of age, when the first pony express made its exit from St. Joseph.

At that time I possessed the instinct for finding out and knowing everything which caused me to drift into journalism in St. Joseph and then to the East, the South and the West, making it almost a lifetime work.

The Pony Express never started from Patee Park, which in the early 60's was hardly known. The old office of the Russell and Major Wells-Fargo companies was located on Third St., west side, four doors south of Felix St. The Garlischs drug store was on the corner, the Hammond leather store next, the Beattie bank third and the express companies fourth.

The starting of the Pony Express was an event of considerable importance. M. Jeff Thompson was mayor of the city and made the speech on the occasion. It was near six o'clock in evening when the crowd gathered in front of the express office at the Russell-Major and Wells-Fargo companies. A splendid bay pony, sleek of dress and strong of sinew, stood in the middle of an admiring crowd. John Frye, his rider, the first man to ever mount a pony for the express company, stood at his head.

Jeff Thompson, famous at that time, as he was afterwards in the war of secession, on the Southern side, as a man of

nerve and brawn and brain, was the most conspicuous man in the crowd. He bore a closer resemblance to pictures I have seen of Marshall Ney, Napoleon's great general, than any man I have ever seen. Anyone who ever cast eyes on Jeff Thompson for one moment would never forget him. Among others present I recall were John J. Abell, the hotel man; Mr. O'Neill, cashier of the Western Bank, located at that time on the northwest corner of Second and Francis, O'Neill was the father of Mrs. Milton Tootle, Mrs. Olive Farleigh and Mrs. T. B. Weekley; H. M. Garlischs, a well known citizen of positive convictions and emphatic expressions; I. G. Hammond, leather dealer, a man of few words, but well defined ideas; Abraham Nave, founder of the firm of Nave & McCord; Col. A. W. Slaybock, the lawyer who was afterwards killed in St. Louis by Col. John A. Cockrell, editor of the Post Dispatch. There were others whose names I do not remember. I think that Maj. John L. Bittinger was among them, but of this I am not positive, as I was not so well acquainted with him then as I was in later years.

When six oclock came John Frye mounted the pony, which was restless and anxious to go. The only burden which he had to carry was a pair of saddle bags in which were stored the precious letters written on tissue paper and paid for at the rate of \$10 per quarter ounce through to San Francisco. Frye wore a pair of buckskin pants, flannel shirt and a cowboy hat.

Mayor Thompson standing by his side, said: "Frye you are starting on a journey fraught with momentous importance. Who can tell but what this is the inception, the first spark of a gigantic scheme which will lead to the building of a great transcontinental iron highway, ultimately making the Pacific Coast and the Middle West touch elbows. Benton said there is the East and there is the West and the murmurs of the waves of the two oceans should make music for each other. I bid you Godspeed in your first journey, and now I say go."

With that he struck the pony on the hip and it dashed away with the speed of the wind.

The old ferry, which plied between Elwood and St. Joseph, made its landing at the foot of Second Street. It was named the Ebenezer and Capt. E. Blackstone was its owner and commander. The boat was in waiting for the first pony and Frye was no sooner on board that it pulled out for the Kansas shore and the first trip of the Pony Express, so far as the east end was concerned, was auspiciously inaugurated.

St. Joseph, of course, has changed greatly since then. The Herald had its office on Second Street in the old Howard building, midway between Francis & Jule. It was there that I was initiated into the science of journalistic drudgery and where I first served as city editor. The post-office was just opposite the Herald, and William Fowler, father-in-law of Gen. B. F. Loan, who represented that district in Congress during the Civil War, was the postmaster. The leading firm of the city, Bailey, Kay and Wood, was located at the southeast corner of Second and Francis and most of the business houses were lined up along Second street.

The Pacific Hotel was not completed and the boys had fine times wading around in the cellar which was then being excavated.

Patee Town, at that time a suburb of St. Joseph, did not have a half dozen houses and had no park or livery stable or store. It was inaccessible, there being no public conveyance, and the pet scheme of old Elijah Patee, to pull the town down to where he had large holdings, was regarded as visionary. Fifty-three years, however, have brought about changes that would have surprised him, could he have looked that far ahead.

Tobias Mitchell  
Seattle, Washington,  
April 10, 1913

