

Travel:

KANSAS...

REDISCOVERING REAL AMERICA

by Don Woodland

If you're searching for what makes America great, it may be time to plan next year's vacation in the nation's heartland: Kansas. Flying into Kansas City, you can see real Americana, meet genuinely friendly people, and find out a lot you didn't know about history--and all no more than three hours drive from Kansas City airport. You'll also discover that at a time when folks are watching their money, a Midwest vacation is much less expensive than any place you can name on the East coast. Plus



The childhood home of Amelia Earhart is in Achison, Ka.

there is a tremendous sense of discovery driving from one town to the next, each having a rich history, beautiful homes, classic downtowns, and the kind of unique attractions that aren't found back east.

Located north of Kansas City, **Atchison** is a Norman Rockwell painting--one of Kansas' most charming cities. Here you can visit the childhood home of Amelia Earhart, which has become a museum, and can retrace the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, who celebrated the first Independence Day in the West there. The town's Visitor's Center, Rail Museum and the County Historical Museum are all housed in the former 1880 Sante Fe Freight Depot. There's a narrated trolley tour available--one that points out the towns beautiful Victorian homes and



Tourists size up the Tallgrass Prairie

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other historic sights, including the beautiful St. Benedict's Abbey, and the riverfront Lewis and Clark site. (www.kansasmonks.org). (www.atchisonkansanet.org)

Located on the Kansas River, **Lawrence**--population 81,000--adds the excitement to a vacation one can only find in a cosmopolitan University town; it's the home of the University of Kansas. Shopping includes galleries, specialty shops and cafes. There are live performances of major talent at least 2-3 times a week here

(during the school year). The town also has nationally recognized golf courses and a recreational lake. And the Dole Institute of Politics has a most interesting, albeit self-effacing museum devoted to Senator Bob Dole. Check their website for speakers and events: www.doleinstitute.org. Also watch for concerts at the Lied Center of Kansas: www.lied.ku.edu.

While staying in Lawrence, many enjoy the downtown convenience of The Eldridge--a 48-suite, fully-refurbished, full-service downtown hotel, dating from 1925, and located right on the main drag--Massachusetts Ave. (www.eldridgehotel.com). Those who prefer a Bed and Breakfast will enjoy the Halcyon House (www.thehalcyonhouse.com). Outside of town there's a "country alternative"--the Circle S Ranch & Country Inn (www.circlesranch.com).

Bread lovers won't want to miss Wheatfield's Bakery Café. It's gained a national reputation for artisan breads, which are baked in a 25-ton, wood fired oven (www.wheatfieldbakery.com).

Teller's Restaurant is an area favorite, along with La Familia, for Mexican food, and the Free State Brewing Company is great fun. (www.visitlawrence.com)

Kansas is the only place in America where you can see a remnant of the Tallgrass Prairie that once occupied most of America. The 11,000-acre Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, located near Strong City, is the only National Park dedicated to the preservation of the most endangered biome on our continent--the tall grass prairie, the home of 10 million insects per acre... and no trees. Of the 400,000 square miles of tallgrass prairie that once covered North America, less than 4 percent remains--primarily in the Flint Hills of Kansas, which survived because the flint rock on the surface made the land impossible to cultivate, so it was passed over by early farmers. At the same time, cattlemen found the Flint

Hills of Kansas to be some of the best grazing land in America. To this day, cattle are brought to the area during May, June and July, and by eating the grass on these hills, gain 2-3 lbs. a day.

One of the most unique events in America will take place on this expansive tallgrass prairie in June 2006. The hills will come alive with symphonic music performed by the 85-member Kansas City Symphony and a hundred-voice choir in the middle of the prairie, as part of an all day event filled with various activities. A paying audience of around 5,000 is expected. (www.symphonynintheflindhills.org)

When in this area, try to route part of your trip along Rt. 177, which runs north and south. This magnificent stretch is now a federal Scenic Byway.

Cottonwood Falls is a traditional Midwestern small town with its stately Chase County Courthouse gazing down upon stores on Main Street. There are quaint shops, an inn that is the only 4-Diamond Inn in Kansas--the Grand Central Hotel. This 19th century hotel was bought at auction for \$40 back taxes and completely gutted and restored--making it a real showcase, and just about the only place in the area to dine if you want a really great steak. Also there's the Emma Chase Café, which invites acoustical musicians far and wide to play for diners every Friday night. It's



The Dole Institute of Politics

great fun; and the food is home-cooked and quite inexpensive. The \$2-a-portion, flaky-crust, homemade pies won't break your wallet.

With a 580,000 population, **Wichita** is the largest city in Kansas, and one that offers many surprises. The Museum of World Treasures has room after room of rare and one-of-a-kind antiquities from around the world. There are dinosaurs, two royal Egyptian mummies, military collections from major wars, a hall of celebrities, and a sports museum. (www.worldtreasures.com) There's also a top-ranked zoo

and 17-acre Old Cowtown Museum, with 26 original buildings from Wichita's early days. There are also wonderful day spas in Wichita. (www.visitwichita.com)

Fifteen miles north of Wichita, there's the National Hopalong Cassidy Museum and the Prairie Rose Chuckwagon Supper. These are both on the same complex. And while it may sound corny, for those who enjoy BBQ and western nostalgia, this place is hog...make that...cow-heaven. Prairie Rose is an all-you-can-eat BBQ dinner that the N.Y. Times called "the 3rd best BBQ in America." They served 70,000 in the past year. They also hold the record for the fastest serving time we've ever seen. With everyone seated at picnic style tables packed tightly into the "Opera House"--laid end-to-end--and with a caveat to moms to keep their children seated, the servers get everyone in the place served in under 11 minutes. We're talking all-you-can-eat BBQ beef brisket, beef sausage, potato salad, cole slaw, muffins; and the seconds are generous. Nobody leaves hungry. Following dinner, there's entertainment in the form of Western Music (not to be confused with "Country Music"). The house band is the Prairie Rose Wranglers, whose beautiful, mellow vocal blending makes one reminiscent of the Mills Brothers' blendings 60 years ago. Plus, they intersperse great comedy with their music.

Before dinner, you can enjoy free popcorn in the theater as they play authentic serials from both the Hopalong Cassidy series and the Roy Rogers/Dale Evans series. There's a miniature train ride for young and old and also a museum and gift shop on the grounds.

Independence is a special place for those who loved movies like "Picnic" or "Busstop," as these William Inge classics are based on this very special town. There's a William Inge Theater Festival April 26-29, 2006 to celebrate this legacy. The town also has a log cabin replica of the



The Chase County Courthouse and the downtown of Cottonwood Falls



The Prairie Rose Wranglers perform at the Prairie Rose Chuckwagon Supper, attended by thousands monthly



Museum of World Treasures in Wichita Little House on the Prairie. (www.indks-chamber.org)

Hutchinson offers the remarkable Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center—the only Smithsonian-affiliated air and space museum, and home to the original Apollo 11 space capsule. The museum also features a SR-71 Blackbird spyplane, a life-size mockup of the Space Shuttle, and German V-1 and V-2 rockets. The Cosmo also boasts the largest collection of space artifacts outside the Smithsonian, and the largest collection of Soviet space hardware in the Western world. There's also a Planetarium and an Imax Theater. An Elderhostel Astronaut Training Program is offered for those aged 55 and over. (www.cosmo.org)

And as Hutchinson lies over the biggest salt deposit in the U.S., there's also the soon-to-be-opened Kansas Underground Salt Museum, located 650 feet below ground. This museum will be totally unique in the western world. (www.undergroundmuseum.org)

Hutchinson is also the home of the 2006 U.S. Senior Open at Prairie Dunes Country Club, which is to be held July 3-9, 2006. (www.2006usso.com) (Those interested in volunteering for the event—and they'll need lots of volunteers—should go to <http://tinyurl.com/a4m4m>). The town is



Downtown Manhattan, Kansas

also home to the Kansas State Fair every September. (www.visithutch.com)

Abilene is the home of Dwight Eisenhower. The complex consists of five buildings located on 22 acres. They include the family home where the Eisenhowers lived from 1898 to 1946, museum, library, visitors center, and place of meditation (the burial site of President and Mrs. Eisenhower and their first-born son Doud Dwight). The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library & Museum is not to be missed, especially if you were unaware that he was quite the amateur artist. Many of his oils and drawings are at the museum. Plus there are many exhibits that make one mindful of the 50's. There's an interesting exhibit on Mamie Eisenhower's wardrobe that really shows how styles can change in 50 years. Also on the grounds is the Eisenhower home, a very modest one. But its Eisenhower's ambivalence to war that really stands out, a stunning irony. One finds oneself drinking in his memorable quotes, which are on



One of many of Dwight Eisenhower's oils at the Eisenhower Museum in Abilene, this one showing John Foster Dulles, George Humphrey and George Wilson

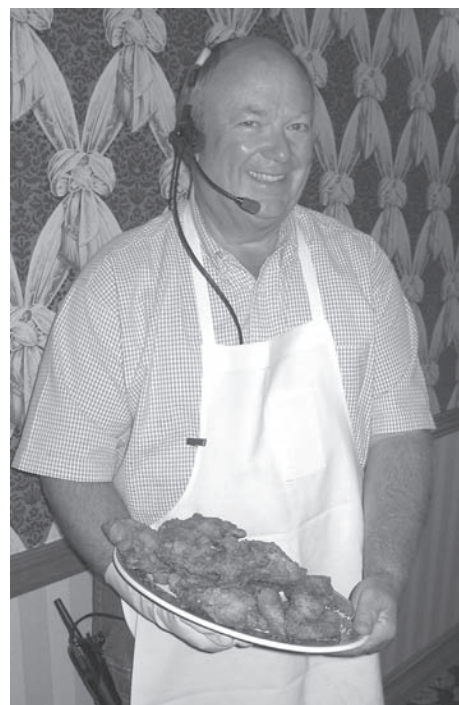
display in both the museum and the Hall of Inspiration located on the same grounds.

One of the most memorable meals you'll ever eat is in Abilene's Brookville Hotel. The restaurant serves a fried chicken dinner that you'll think about for days after. It comes with skillet-fried chicken, mashed potatoes and chicken gravy. The biscuits are made fresh daily and served with butter and preserves, plus relishes. And you've

never had creamed corn like this in your life. Plus their Pennsylvania sweet and sour cole slaw recipe is totally unique. The food is served all-you-can-eat and family style. And what's left on the table you can doggy bag. The restaurant typically puts out 1100 meals on Mother's Day every year. (www.brookvillehotel.com)

Wamego is home to the delightful Oz Museum, a Kansas favorite, which draws 25,000 tourists a year. This museum houses the largest private collection of Oz memorabilia from the book series and the movie, and is located right on Main St. There's also a charming dinner/theater a couple of doors down—the Columbian Theatre, Museum and Art Center. Downstairs is the dining room whose walls display Judy Garland memorabilia, including many of her famous gowns. Upstairs is a very atmospheric theater used for stage plays and musicals. Just a block away from Main Street is a very charming town park, which includes an the Schonhoff Dutch mill. (www.visitwamego.com)

The capitol city of Topeka has many attractions including the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site and Museum, the Kansas Museum of History, the Kansas State Capitol, the Combat Air Museum and Old Prairie Town—a pioneer village, a working soda fountain and 2 ½ acres of botanical gardens. There are also nine public and private golf courses. The city also has wonderful, fun restaurants, including the Elan Grill, which has great steaks and seafood; the New City Café, which offers Venezuelan food, and Annie's Place, which serves all three meals daily and is famous for its homecooking. For accommodations, there are the usual chain hotels. Those who



Mark Martin of the Brookville Hotel steps out of the kitchen to show off his famous pan-fried chicken



Rocketry at Hutchinson's Cosmosphere

prefer B&B's chose the right city. Among the best are the Woodward, the Brickyard Barn and McClintock Place.

Manhattan, Kansas is another University town, population 48,000, that has a charming Old Town area, plus shopping and restaurants in the college area called "Aggie-ville." The Kansas State University campus offers a fine art museum—the Beach Museum of Art—that's open free to the public and is unique in that it only shows regionally-produced art. There's also a Botanical Garden that's also open to the public. Water recreation is offered at Tuttle Creek Lake and State Park. The area offers hiking, equestrian trails, swimming, and boating. (www.manhattan.org)

Kansas has so much to offer. Being there, the history of the western frontier becomes real. You can see some of the most unspoiled ecosystems in the country, visit acclaimed exhibits in Kansas' art centers and museums. The Kansas Getaway Guide, a 175-page full color publication, can help you plan your Kansas vacation. You can order it by calling 1-800-2KANSAS.

The flight to Kansas City is about 5 hours, with layover, from either Boston or Providence. Check web sites in each town for accommodations and special packages. And go to the Kansas web site for suggestions on trip itineraries, at www.travelKS.com.

And thanks for traveling.