

### Marci Penner – brainstorm 3

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

Meet ERV. No, it's not short for Irving. ERV is an acronym for a creative project to explore, enjoy, and promote rural Kansas, led by the inimitable Marci Penner. This is today's Kansas Profile.

In the last two weeks we've learned about Marci Penner, author and founder of the Kansas Explorers Club, the Kansas Sampler Foundation, and the We Kan! initiative. Today, in the third and final installment of this series, we'll learn about Marci's latest creative idea.

One can say that Marci Penner wrote the book on rural Kansas tourism – and I mean that literally. In 2005, Marci published the Kansas Guidebook for Explorers. This 432-page, coil-bound book sold more than 22,000 copies within a couple of years. The book included 3,597 entries describing eateries, unique shops, and other attractions in 500 of the 627 incorporated cities in Kansas.

But of course, things change. Businesses come and go. It became clear that an updated book was needed. Yet as a practical matter, how could a person travel to do all the research necessary to produce an updated book?

The solution was ERV. That's an abbreviation for Explorer Research Voyage.

Midway Motors, a family-owned auto dealership in south central Kansas, is loaning the Kansas Sampler Foundation a 2012 GMC Terrain to drive around Kansas to conduct this research. Marci Penner, as director of the Kansas Sampler Foundation, will lead this research, accompanied by her intrepid assistant Wendee LaPlant.

Marci and Wendee are setting out to drive ERV and explore rural Kansas during the next two years as research for the new guidebook. They anticipate traveling two to four days a week, visiting every one of the incorporated towns in Kansas. It is estimated that ERV will cover some 40,000 miles by the time the project is done.

No advance notice will be given about where Marci and Wendee will be visiting, although there will be posts for people who follow the trip on Facebook. ERV does not exactly travel incognito. His presence will be obvious when he rolls into your town. The car has the Kansas Sampler sunflower logo prominently displayed on its side, along with the words Kansas Sampler Foundation and Explorer Research Voyage in huge print.

The ERV travels have already begun. For example, ERV has already been to the rural community of Windom, Kansas, population 137 people. Now, that's rural.

The targeted publication date for the book is 2015, but Marci is not waiting for the book to roll off the presses. "Our desire is to help educate the public and support communities now rather than wait until the book comes out in 2015," Marci said on her website. "The Kansas Sampler Foundation will be blogging daily and using Facebook and Twitter to share what we see and do."

Of course, ERV is only one of a number of projects which the Kansas Sampler Foundation has underway. For example, a project called "Rural Kansas: Come and Get It!" is designed to help the smaller communities collectively market and promote themselves. The state Travel and Tourism Division in what is now the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism provided a grant for the Kansas Sampler Foundation to lead this effort. A website has been created at [www.getruralkansas.org](http://www.getruralkansas.org).

Summer classes are offered for communities which want to utilize the website. Training is offered to help people learn how to research their towns, how to write entries, how to populate the website, and how to create a Facebook page. More than half of the communities that have taken summer classes in 2009 through 2011 are now online.

“The rock bottom reason to do this is to help keep rural communities viable.” Marci said. “Every part of the plan is designed with that in mind.”

For more information about ERV or Rural Kansas: Come and Get It, go to [www.kansassampler.org](http://www.kansassampler.org).

It’s time to say goodbye to ERV – no, not your uncle Irving. The Explorer Research Voyage will be making a difference by visiting every corner of Kansas. We wish safe travels to Marci Penner and Wendee LaPlant.

So remember to watch for ERV. He’s coming to your town.

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