

Susie Haver – Cloud County Tourism

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

Where is the longest sculpted brick mural in the United States? Would you believe, in Cloud County, Kansas? Today we'll learn about this remarkable rural tourism attraction. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Cloud Ceramics, a brick manufacturer in Concordia. Not only does this company produce bricks for construction across the nation, it also provided bricks for an amazing artistic mural which depicts landmarks in the company's home county.

Susie Haver is director of Cloud County Convention and Tourism. She grew up on a wheat farm west of Concordia where she lives today. "It's a beautiful setting," Susie said. "I love it there." She went to Cloud County Community College and then K-State. She and her husband lived in Missouri for a time before she came back to Cloud County.

Susie worked in retail and in newspaper and radio advertising before becoming manager of the historic Brown Grand Theatre in downtown Concordia. Throughout her career, she worked to promote tourism in Cloud County, including having a booth at the annual Kansas Sampler Festival. After participating in the festival for years, she had the audacious idea to host it in Concordia – and it happened.

In 2008 and 2009, Concordia successfully hosted the festival. The community recognized a need to support such tourism and Susie Haver was hired full-time as tourism director.

Susie told us about many attractions in Cloud County, but one of the most visible is the Whole Wall Mural. This was a creation of the Cloud County Historical Society Museum.

The society operates a large, interesting museum near downtown Concordia. The society also purchased a nearby vacant building along Highway 81, and that space is now rented by the Cloud County tourism office. When the adjoining filling station was torn down, it left an ugly, blank wall on the building.

"Some of the Cloud County Historical Society board members had the idea of covering that wall with a brick mural, as towns in Nebraska have done," Susie said. It was another audacious idea. Cloud Ceramics stepped up and agreed to donate the bricks. Artists Catharine Magel of St. Louis and Mara Smith of Seattle were selected as the sculptors. Cloud County Community College provided studio space.

A large design was created which incorporated landmarks from across the county. The mural was carved into 6,400 green bricks which then had to be numbered, fired, and laid into place. An estimated 90 thousand pounds of clay was used.

The mural was dedicated in 2009. It is 140 feet long, making it the longest in the U.S. The mural has five sections 15 feet high and two sections 20 feet high. The design includes at least 24 current and historical elements, from the Republican River to a large passenger train. There is a gorgeous representation of a field of sunflowers with a pioneer man and woman. There are images of the orphans who arrived by train from the east in the 1800s and German prisoners-of-war who were housed at the nearby POW camp during World War II. There are buildings, fields, churches, windmills, and people.

Every town in the county is represented by some image on the mural, either by a specific historic building or by the crops which are found throughout the county. This includes the county seat of Concordia plus rural towns such as Glasco, Miltonvale, and Jamestown, population 390 people. Now, that's rural.

It is a sweeping design with remarkable detail. For example, close observation shows that one of the passengers on the train is Cloud County favorite son Frank Carlson, the former governor and senator.

"People from all over the world have seen it," Susie said. "If not for the vision of the Cloud County Historical Society members, this wouldn't be here."

For more information, see www.cloudcountytourism.com.

It is time to leave the longest sculpted brick mural in the United States, as found in Concordia. We salute the Cloud County Historical Society and Susie Haver of Cloud County Convention and Tourism for making a difference by creating and promoting this unusual work of art. They are building tourism, one brick at a time.

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