

Casey Cagle – Prairie Earth tours

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

The young man was feeling homesick. He was browsing through a used bookstore in Georgia when he came across a book about his home area in the Flint Hills of Kansas. The book gave him a lift. Years later, he would create his own tour company to share the beauty of the Flint Hills with others. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Casey Cagle is the founder and owner of Prairie Earth Tours in Emporia. He grew up on a farm near the rural community of Oswego, population 1,829 people. Now, that's rural.

Casey went to Emporia State and got involved in the community, helping with the restoration work on the Granada Theatre. He did similar work at the Midland Theatre in Kansas City.

But what Casey really wanted to do was travel. In 2009, he set out to travel across the country in his camper. After lots of sight-seeing, he became a tour guide in California. "That's the one type of business where this kind of experience looks good on a resume," Casey said with a smile.

He led lots of tours, in settings ranging from wilderness camping to luxury lodging across the U.S. and Canada. One day, while browsing through a used bookstore in Georgia, he came across the book *Prairie Earth* by William Least-Heat Moon. This lengthy tome is about Chase County in the heart of the Kansas Flint Hills. Such a reminder of home lifted Casey's spirits. He was already a fan of another of Least-Heat Moon's books, *Blue Highways*, which celebrates travel around the back roads of America.

Casey then went to Australia where he guided tours in the outback. In the back of his mind, he was thinking about his home state.

"Emporia was becoming a community that supports entrepreneurs," Casey said. "I decided to take the leap and move back to Kansas." His goal was to create his own tour business in the Flint Hills.

He enrolled in a Start Your Own Business class at Flint Hills Technical College. "I met with the Small Business Development Center which was extremely beneficial," Casey said. By being in the class, he qualified for Emporia State University's Entrepreneurship Challenge. Some 40 business ideas were part of that challenge, where entrepreneurs pitched their ideas to outside evaluators.

Casey won first place. He later won third in the statewide competition at K-State. These awards encouraged him and provided some capital to advance his business idea. He also received a zero-interest loan from Emporia Main Street.

In 2016, he launched his new business. Fittingly, he named it Prairie Earth Tours. His goal is to provide a closer and deeper look at the Flint Hills rather than a mass market model. "I'm not just doing a tour, I try to provide an experience," Casey said. "The small group model enables me to do that, while protecting the integrity of the places we visit," he said.

Instead of a mega-tour coach, he uses a 15 passenger shuttle bus. "This lets us have access to little cafes and get permission to visit private property and see the hidden

gems of Kansas,” Casey said. “We have something really special here. What Kansas has to offer is authenticity,” Casey said.

Tours include wildflower tours or photography clinics in the spring, sunset horseback rides in summer, or a craft brewer’s tour in the winter. Every Tuesday, he hosts lunch tours to special locations. “My regulars know where to find the best pie, the best salad bar, and the best chicken fried steak anywhere,” he said.

He can provide custom private tours or simply provide transportation. “One time I took a bunch of girls wedding dress shopping in Wichita and El Dorado,” he said. “I want to help people explore and enjoy Kansas while benefitting the local economy,” Casey said.

For more information, see www.prairieearthtours.com.

Perhaps that book *PrairieEarth* inspired this homesick young man to celebrate Kansas with his own kind of tours. We commend Casey Cagle of Prairie Earth Tours for making a difference by providing his guests a deeper look at the Flint Hills. I’m glad this young man found his way back home.

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