

Marci Penner - Big Kansas Road Trip

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

It is great to bring a bunch of community representatives together to publicize their communities' assets and attractions. It would be even better to go see and actually experience those attractions first-hand. That's the type of thinking which has led to a brand new initiative in 2018. It's the first-ever Big Kansas Road Trip. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Marci Penner is director of the Kansas Sampler Foundation and founder of the Kansas Explorers club. WenDee Rowe is assistant director. For 28 years, their foundation organized the Kansas Sampler Festival. The purpose of the festival was to provide the public a sample of what there is to see, do, hear, taste, buy, and learn in the state.

The festival started on the Penner farm near Inman. As it grew, it rotated among various host communities around Kansas and was held on the first weekend of May each year. May 2017 was scheduled to be the last such festival.

In April 2017, a group of tourism leaders and members of the Kansas Explorers came together to talk about what event might follow the last Sampler Festival. The idea which surfaced became the Big Kansas Road Trip. The concept was that visitors would be invited to a certain area on the first weekend in May to experience the region's attractions and community life first-hand.

On May 3-6, 2018, the first Big Kansas Road Trip will visit Barber, Comanche, and Kiowa counties. Anyone and everyone is invited to descend on these three counties during this time and visit the various attractions at their own pace. People are encouraged to drive and/or caravan and to bring their own lawn chairs.

"This is a new concept, yet three people stepped up to support and help form this event from the very beginning," said Marci Penner. "I'd like to thank Stacy Barnes, Kiowa county; Andi Dale, Comanche county; and Pake McNally, Barber county, for their ability to see the possibilities and to help forge a plan," she said.

The Sampler Foundation is facilitating the event, but it is grass-roots leadership which is, shall we say, driving the Big Kansas Road Trip.

What is there to see and do in Barber, Comanche, and Kiowa counties? For starters, this region includes High Plains, Red Hills, and the Gypsum Hills Scenic Byway.

In this region, there are multiple museums, monuments, historic barns and other buildings, parks, farms, ranches, gardens, arts centers, unique stores, activities, buffalo and cattle herds, good places to eat, and adventures waiting to happen. There's the botanical garden and lake in Coldwater, the Carry Nation House in Medicine Lodge, the world's largest hand-dug well in Greensburg, meteorites in Haviland, the Stan Herd Art Gallery in his hometown of Protection, Martina McBride Park in her hometown of Sharon, and much more.

Each county seat will have an information center. Some events and tours are scheduled, but travelers can visit at their own pace. The organizers emphasize that these are kid- and family-friendly attractions.

This is a scenic and truly rural part of Kansas. Every town in these three counties has attractions listed in the visitors guide. The towns range in size from Medicine Lodge,

population 2,009, to Isabel, population 88, Wilmore, population 53, and Sun City, population 52 people. Now, that's rural.

"In some ways, the Big Kansas Road Trip is about pie," the visitors guide states. You can hear talk about the delicious, sugary-crust homemade cherry pie at Don's Place in Protection, but there is nothing like actually tasting it....That's what the Big Kansas Road Trip is all about: First-hand experiences. Getting to know rural Kansas."

"Many other people have joined the effort to make this happen, and I couldn't be more delighted with the enthusiasm and interest," Marci Penner said.

For more information, go to www.bigkansasroadtrip.com.

It's great to have communities together sharing their assets, but even better to experience their attractions first-hand. We salute Marci Penner, WenDee Rowe, Stacy Barnes, Andi Dale, Pake McNally, and the many other volunteers who are making a difference by sharing their communities and bringing this concept to life. Let's go road-tripping!

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