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Stormin' Across Eastern Kansas

Text: James T. Parks

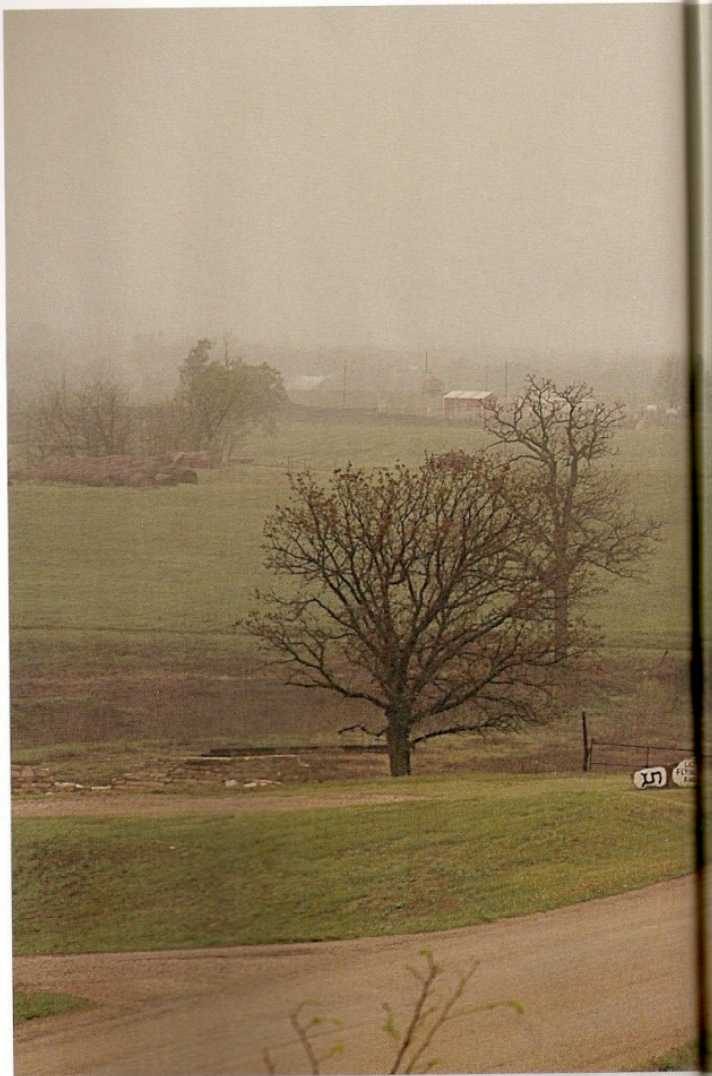
Photography: James Parks, Jeff Armitage and Roger Baugh

Although our designated route in eastern Kansas is all on-pavement, Jeff Armitage and I will take our dual-sport motorcycles off-road at every opportunity during the next five days. I'm expecting to get a few more dings on my 2006 Kawasaki KLR 650, but Jeff has never had his pristine 1990 Honda Transalp off-road, or even gotten it dusty as far as I know. So I'm wondering how he'll react if his "baby" gets a few battle scars.

Monday (200 miles): Searching for Big Brutus

Bright sunshine and warm temperatures greet our departure from Arkansas City, Kansas, as we roll east on US 166. A left turn quickly has us descending into rich bottomland, snaking our way along Grouse Creek, past farms and grazing cattle. Before long, though, we're back on US 166 and looking for another interesting diversion. We find it in Sedan and stop for an early lunch at Mel's General Store. Annually, some 50,000 visitors come here to shop in the Victorian-era stores on Main Street, and to tour the surrounding countryside, which some have dubbed the "Kansas Ozarks."

The map indicates an intriguing unpaved road (CR 89) from Chautauqua to Caney that bypasses a straight section of US 166. East from Chautauqua, one unmarked gravel road after another leads us on. After we've made several uncharted turns, guided only by instinct, it becomes obvious that we're off the intended route (some would say lost). The funny thing is, though, we don't really care, because riding up, over,



Quite a few people who haven't been to Kansas have formed their impressions of the state by watching a movie made in 1939. *The Wizard of Oz*, filmed in a Hollywood studio, portrays Kansas as hot, dry, tornado-ridden and tabletop flat. While this may be a somewhat apt description of western Kansas, the state's eastern region has a surprisingly hilly topography. And our five-day tour through this enchanting prairie landscape turns out to be anything but dry.





📍 *Though heavily laden, the KLR ably carves the curves along Grouse Creek.*

and around the rugged, rocky ridges of the Chautauqua Hills is just too much fun, and through some quirk of subliminal land navigation, the roads eventually lead to Coffeyville – just where we wanted to be all along!

The Dalton Defenders Museum looks intriguing, so we stop for a tour. The Museum chronicles how four brave Coffeyville citizens lost their lives in the 1892 shootout that brought an end to the murderous Dalton Gang. Exhibits include guns, saddles, photographs taken immediately after the raid, a full-sized

replica of the hearse used to carry the Daltons to their graves and other Coffeyville memorabilia. Hall of Fame baseball pitcher Walter Johnson was a resident of Coffeyville in his early days. I find this interesting because my daughters attended Walter Johnson High School in Rockville, Maryland, not far from Washington, DC, where the Washington Senators' famed pitcher became a baseball legend.

By late afternoon US 169 is leading us north toward our first day's destination, but we first have one intriguing place

to stop. Approaching West Mineral, we're anxious to sight the giant that reportedly lurks in these parts. Suddenly, there he is, towering well above the surrounding tree line, which is still several miles distant. Big Brutus is 16 stories high and weighs 11 million pounds. This mighty earthmover, now retired, once ran around the clock to gouge out house-sized chunks of Kansas prairie in search of coal. Decommissioned since 1974, Big Brutus is now a well-preserved museum and tourist attraction. Adventurous visitors can climb inside Big Brutus's cabin, with its aircraft



carrier-like dimensions, and then climb to the top of the shovel.

In historic Fort Scott, we meet Ed McLiney for a delicious dinner at Rusty's Restaurant. Ed, a member of the dual-sport club Backroads Touring – Kansas, has graciously volunteered to be our off-pavement tour guide on Tuesday. While strolling through the Fort Scott National Historic Site after dinner, Ed explains that Fort Scott was among nine forts originally planned to form a line from the Great Lakes to New Orleans. They were to separate proposed Native American lands from white settlements and protect settlers.

Tuesday (180 miles): To Atchison on the Missouri River

We wake to low cloud overcast and drizzling rain on Tuesday morning. Ed leads the way on his 2007 BMW 1200 GS Adventure, followed by me, Jeff, and another club member, Eric Rickel, on his KLR, for the morning segment of today's ride. Our off-pavement course roughly follows the designated on-pavement route.

Navigating up, over, down, and around the Osage Cuestas (Spanish for 'cliff,' pronounced kwesta), we sail undaunted through the rain. The *cuestas* are uplifted and eroded land with exposed rocks that form hills with a steep escarpment on one side and gentler slopes on the other sides. Composed of alternating layers of sandstone, limestone, and shale, they can rise several hundred feet above surrounding farmland. After successfully negotiating several stream crossings, we're feeling very confident on the gravel roads.

In Garnett, the rain abates while we enjoy tasty fare at Maloan's Restaurant on the town square. An avid historian of

the area, Ed tells us about the "Bleeding Kansas" years, immediately before the Civil War. Popular vote would determine whether Kansas entered the Union as a slave or a free state. Both pro- and anti-slavery forces from other states sought to influence the outcome, including the infamous abolitionist John Brown. The anti-slavery forces finally prevailed, but only after numerous armed confrontations that resulted in a surfeit of bloodshed through much of eastern Kansas. After lunch, Eric departs for home and the three of us continue on toward Atchison.

Now, late in the afternoon, the sky darkens, and it won't be long before an intense thunderstorm overtakes us. In Leavenworth, we stop in front of the famous federal penitentiary to bid Ed farewell. Outside of the towering 40-foot-high walls of the prison, guards are patrolling in trucks. One of them stops, seeming to take an interest in the three motorcyclists parked in front. The sky behind the bleached white prison walls is now completely black and lightning bolts pound the earth. A shiver runs up my spine.

Big Brutus dominates the landscape near West Mineral.





📍 *After three hours spent negotiating three miles of Kansas Gumbo, dry road at last!*

As we make a quick departure, I'm praying there isn't a super cell in this system that will spawn a tornado. Heading north on the Glacial Hills Scenic Byway, we're unable to appreciate, or even see, the scenic splendor promised by this route. When the rain and wind become too intense, we pull off on the road's shoulder for a few minutes. Proceeding at a modest pace, we finally arrive in Atchison, where, miraculously, the sky has cleared. Whew – that's enough excitement for one very long day.

Wednesday (120 miles): Following the Pony Express to Marysville

Overcast skies and a light misty rain start our day on Wednesday morning. Before leaving Atchison, we pay a visit to the birthplace of Amelia Earhart, her grandparents' home. It's now a museum, but, unfortunately, is closed today. Standing across the street on a bluff high above the Missouri River, I reflect on the enduring mystery of her disappearance some 70 years ago. A recent line of investigation suggests that she

may have successfully crash-landed her airplane on a South Pacific atoll only to suffer the fate of a doomed castaway. We may never know for sure.

Near the northern end of the Glacial Hills Scenic Byway the rain stops and the sun peeks through the clouds, if only for a short time. White Cloud, Kansas, is a hard-

scrabble-looking town situated in this north-east corner of the state. The diaries of Lewis & Clark, written during their famous expedition up the Missouri River, were the first records of the loway Indians (now spelled Iowa), who still live on in this region.

The richly endowed rolling farmland of glacial till spreads across the treeless

📍 *Downtown Ft. Scott retains its 19th-century charm.*





📍 *Ed McLiney leads the way past an abandoned site in the Osage Cuesta region.*

landscape as far as the eye can see. US 36 is known locally as “the route of the windmills,” owing to the many farms along the route still using this nineteenth-century technology for pumping groundwater to the surface. The road heads straight as an arrow west to Marysville. To make the ride a little more interesting, we go one mile north to an unpaved road that

parallels US 36. Rollicking across rolling farmlands at around 50 mph, we’re having a grand time sliding back tires this way and that.

Although Marysville has several interesting historical attractions, our first priority is touring the Pony Express Barn-Museum. Built in 1859, the barn is the only original

“home station” along the Pony Express route that’s still in its original location. The horsemen would ride back and forth along the route, between two home stations, changing horses every 10 to 15 miles at other Pony Express stations. This was dangerous work, as an advertisement for riders in those days suggests:

WANTED

Young wiry fellows
Not over eighteen.
Must be expert riders,
willing to risk death
daily. Orphans preferred.

During the 18 months the Pony Express operated, 183 young men rode sections of the almost 2,000-mile route from St. Joseph, MO, to Sacramento, CA.

Thursday (180 miles): Into the Flint Hills

Thursday morning. It’s a different day, but the same old rain story. Today, though, fog has been added to the mix. Because the ground has been soaked for several days, we forgo any off-pave-

📍 *An iconic landmark: the Pony Express Station in Marysville.*



ment aspirations. In addition to the wet weather, strong winds race across the prairie, blowing us back and forth between the yellow centerline and the shoulder's white line. The turbulent wake generated by an oncoming semi-trailer truck hits like a wall of bricks. During our long slog south, I keep mentally repeating the old aphorism: "That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

After lunch we finally pass south of I-70 and head into the Flint Hills proper. The route becomes more interesting as it twists and turns through this unique landscape. Running north and south through east-central Kansas, the Flint Hills region is one of a few large areas of native prairie grassland remaining in America. Flint is embedded in the limestone that forms these rolling hills. The tall grass provides rich nutrients for fattening up cattle, but the rocky soil is virtually impossible to farm. Away from the intrusions

📍 "Lost" in the Chautauqua Hills, but having too much fun to stop.



📍 Chase County Courthouse is a well-known landmark in the Flint Hills.

of man, the Flint Hills look much the same as they did 10,000 years ago: a rolling sea of tall grass swaying in the wind much like swells on the ocean.

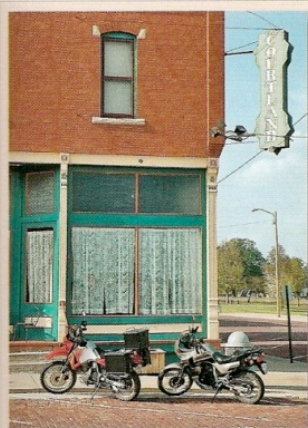
Wet and tired, we find our accommodations in Council Grove, unload, and then head to the Hays House Restaurant & Tavern for a hearty dinner. Seth Hays, Daniel Boone's great-grandson, established Hays House in 1857 when Council Grove was an important stop for freight haulers on the Santa Fe Trail.

Friday (170 miles): Surviving Kansas Gumbo

It's still raining Friday morning. After breakfast, we meet up with our second set of Kansas back-road guides: Roger Baugh, the club webmeister for Backroads Touring – Kansas, is on his green KLR; Steve Starkel rides a Husky TE610; R. D. Woolsey, a red KLR; Greg Mitchell, a Transalp; and Britt Lolley joins us on a Suzuki DL650. Roger, our fearless leader, assures us that the heavy rains shouldn't be a problem, because all of the roads have gravel bottoms, even at the stream crossings.

During the first part of the morning, the gravel roads follow ridge tops, which provide plenty of traction. Unknown to Roger and the other Kansas riders, who don't live in the immediate area, record rainfall over the last four days has washed sticky clay soil, aka Kansas Gumbo, from higher elevations down onto lower-lying creek roads.

I'm the first to have problems with deep mud on Camp Wood Road, where



The Courtland Hotel & Day Spa

121 E. 1st Street
Ft. Scott, KS 66701
(620) 223-0098
www.courtlandhotel.com

Fort Scott was a major railway hub in the early twentieth century. The Courtland Hotel, built in 1906, primarily provided the overnight accommodations needed by railroad workers awaiting their next train assignments. Acquired and lovingly restored several years ago by Frank and Cheryl Adamson, the hotel features a spacious lobby and grand stairway, Cheryl's day spa, and sixteen cozy rooms that retain the charm and ambiance of bygone days. A continental breakfast is served each morning in the lobby.

it follows the Cottonwood River. Making the mistake of trying to climb out of the ruts onto what appeared to be more solid ground, my KLR sinks deeply into the soft mud, clogging the rear and front tires. Once the sticky combo of rocks and clay binds the wheels, I begin a slow-motion demonstration, for all to see, of how gravity works when a heavily laden two-wheeled vehicle loses its forward motion.



St. Martin's Bed & Breakfast

324 Santa Fe Street
Atchison, KS 66002
(913) 367-4964
www.stmartinsbandb.com

John Settich and his wife Janet fulfilled a dream in 1993 when they returned to Atchison so that John could teach political science at Benedictine College, his alma mater. Needing a place to live, they acquired a Classic Revival home from an heir of Frederick W. Stein, Sr., an inventor and industrialist who built the house in 1948. In 2000, they converted it to a Bed and Breakfast; and in 2004 their B&B gained National Register of Historic Places status. Each of the five bedrooms is exquisitely decorated and has large windows overlooking historic Atchison. John prepares a gourmet breakfast each morning for guests, who are pampered and spoiled throughout their stays. Insisting that we park our bikes in their garage overnight, while they left one of their cars outside, John and Janet demonstrated very clearly that St. Martin's Bed & Breakfast is indeed a biker-friendly establishment.

More mudslinging follows on a low-lying stretch of Coyne Creek Road. During almost three hours we negotiate this charming three-mile stretch of Kansas Gumbo at an incredibly slow pace. Most of the riders experience at least one close encounter with "terra not so firma." We ride about a hundred yards, until the wheels lock up with clay and rocks, and then start the laborious task of dislodging the gooey, hardened mess



The Cottage House

25 North Neosho Street
Council Grove, KS 66846
(620) 767-6828
www.cottagehousehotel.com

The Cottage House is a beautifully restored Prairie Victorian Hotel located in the heart of the Flint Hills, in historic Council Grove. The hotel began as a three-room cottage and blacksmith shop in 1867. In 1871, the next owners built a two-story brick house, engulfing the cottage, and began the Cottage House's history as a boarding house. The building expanded from boarding house to hotel when a 5,000-square-foot, two-story Queen Anne style addition was completed in 1879. The hotel is on the National Register of Historic Places and its 28 rooms are decorated and furnished in keeping with the period in which they were built. Modern comforts include private baths, cable TV, high-speed broadband wireless Internet, telephones, clock radios and air conditioning. A continental breakfast is served each morning.



🌀 They're farming the wind here with at least a hundred turbines.

with sticks and tire irons. After doing this several times, I remove the over-stuffed panniers, carry them forward, and then walk back and ride or walk the lightened KLR to the panniers. It helps a little, but walking the heavy bags through the muck is exhausting. Eventually, the road becomes solid enough for me to reattach the panniers and ride out.

We finally arrive in Cottonwood Falls, the epicenter of William Least Heat-Moon's critically acclaimed book *PrairyErth*, which pays splendid homage to the land, people and history of Chase County, Kansas. We stumble into the Emma Chase Café, about an hour late, for our lunch reservations. Our guides are well known to the owner, who doesn't seem the least bit surprised by our late arrival or our muddied appearance. Excellent home cooking, including freshly baked pies for dessert, is enjoyed by all. This renews our energy and lifts our spirits.

Compared to the morning's adventures, the remainder of our ride to Arkan-

sas City is fairly tame. An interesting stop along the way, though, is the tiny town of Beaumont. The Beaumont Hotel is a favorite Sunday lunch spot for pilots of small airplanes and motorcyclists. Because the airplanes land on a grass strip just outside of town, they can be seen taxiing down Main Street and then pulling into the designated airplane parking area next to the hotel. We bid our Kansas tour guides a hearty farewell in Winfield and then traverse the last few miles to Arkansas City.

Saturday: Sun, at Last!

I wake up thinking what an interesting place eastern Kansas has been to tour. The Flint Hills, in particular, have a subtle scenic beauty that can best be appreciated on the many unpaved, gravel roads. And, although the weather was far from perfect, at least we didn't have to deal with any tornadoes.

Firing up the KLR, I say goodbye to the Sunflower State. Kansas had given us all the motorcycle touring adventure we had bargained for, and then some. **RR**

Eastern Kansas **FACTS &**

Total Mileage

The roundtrip distance of the paved route shown on the map for this tour is approximately 850 miles. Off-pavement excursions may increase the total distance traveled.

In General

Touring eastern Kansas in the early spring usually means cooler temperatures (60s and 70s), but that time of year increases the risk of wet, severe weather. The weather is usually drier in the summer, but triple-digit temperatures are common then too.

How to Get There

The most direct routes to eastern Kansas are I-35 from north and south, and I-70 from east and west.

Food & Lodging

There are numerous family-owned restaurants along the route. We particularly enjoyed the home cooking at the Emma Chase Café in Cottonwood Falls, KS. The historic hotels and B&Bs provided enjoyable accommodations, but St. Martin's Bed & Breakfast in Atchison, KS, was in a class all by itself – just excellent!

Roads & Biking

Kansas has several hundred thousand miles of roads and around 90 percent of them are dirt or gravel. The designated roads for this tour (on the accompanying map), however, are paved. Although most roads are straight, you can find several exceptions: Grouse Creek Road west of Arkansas City connecting to US-166; SR-57 between Junction City and SR-177; Skyline Mill Creek Scenic Tour (Old 10 Road) from Alta Vista to Alma; and SR-99 and SR-4 from Alma to Alta Vista.

INFORMATION

There also are many gravel and dirt roads, which are great fun on a dual-sport motorcycle. Because Kansas is laid out in one-mile-square sections, with north/south and east/west roads surrounding those sections, it takes great effort to become "hopelessly" lost. By that I mean sooner or later you're bound to intersect with a major highway that puts you back on course. Therefore, there's relatively little risk in doing some ad hoc off-pavement navigation. Another option is to contact the folks at Backroads Touring – Kansas and ask their recommendations for off-pavement routes. They may even volunteer to guide you.

The designated paved roads of this tour are perfect for cruisers and touring bikes and don't require a high level of rider skill. Although some of the gravel roads also are suitable for more experienced riders on these types of bikes, I recommend dual-sport motorcycles for anyone planning to explore off-pavement routes extensively. All riders should keep an eye on the sky and seek shelter when threatening weather develops.

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- o Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum
Atchison, KS, (913) 367-4217
- o Backroads Touring – Kansas
www.backroadstouring.org/kansas
- o Beaumont Hotel
Beaumont, KS, (620) 843-2422
- o Dalton Defenders Museum
Coffeyville, KS, (620) 251-5944
- o Emma Chase Café, 317 Broadway, Cottonwood Falls, KS
(620) 273-6020
- o Historic Hays House Restaurant & Tavern
112 W. Main St., Council Grove, KS, (620) 767-5911
- o Maloan's Restaurant
N.W. Corner of 4th and Oak on the Square
Garnett, KS 66032, (785) 115-2616
- o Mel's General Store
110 E. Main St., Sedan, KS, (620) 725-3494
- o The Old Hoof and Horn at the Riverhouse Restaurant
101 Commercial St., Atchison, KS, (913) 367-1010
- o Pony Express & Deli
718 Broadway, Marysville, KS, (785) 629-8313
- o Pony Express Museum
Marysville, KS, (785) 562-3825

- o Rusty's Restaurant
16 N. National Ave., Fort Scott, KS, (620) 223-4777
- o Super 8 Motel
3228 N. Summit, Arkansas City, KS, (620) 442-8885

Books & Maps

- o *PrairieErth* by William Least Heat-Moon, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991, ISBN 0395486025, \$19.95
- o *The Kansas Atlas & Gazetteer*, DeLorme, 1997, ISBN 0899333427, \$19.95

Motorcycle & Gear

2006 Kawasaki KLR 650

Helmet: Nolan N-Com

Jacket: Olympia Bushwhacker Air Jacket

Pants: Olympia Airglide 2 Overpants

Boots: Oxtar

Gloves: Olympia Accordian

Luggage: Hepco & Becker Panniers and Dual Star Tank Bag

Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

