



# BIG STUFF

*in Kansas*



PHOTOGRAPHS Justin Lister

Story by Lisa Waterman-Gray

# Dream big, Kansans. Go big or go home, for we are a vast land of sunsets and sunrises, rich farmland and rolling prairie.

Our land is where character is carved and chiseled across the open horizons. Others may scoff, no real mountains to gaze at, they say. But here in Kansas, we create our own landmarks.

Big landmarks.

Cawker City's massive ball of twine is unashamedly a big deal. The ball of twine, built with a farmer's make-do-save-it-if-you-can-use-it-later-for-something-else mentality, was featured in *The Atlantic* in 2014, when it then measured 41.42 feet in circumference and was nearly 11 feet tall.

That was then.

Now, Linda Clover, the belle of the ball in Cawker City, who shows visitors the ball and keeps track of its growing dimensions, says it currently measures 46 feet in circumference. She estimates more than 8,591,891 feet of twine have been used throughout its creation.

The twine ball is a national phenomenon.

Nearly 15,000 people make pilgrimages to the ball each year, holding up cameras and cellphones to document their arrival. It has been featured as a question on *Jeopardy* and is listed as one of the top 10 places to visit by Destination America TV channel.

Which all goes to say we are a land of big things.

Take the newest, biggest of the big things in Kansas—the World's Largest Belt Buckle, unveiled December 21, 2022, in Abilene. Oooh, Lordy, is it big—measuring 19 feet, 10.5 inches wide by 13 feet, 11.25 inches tall.

So, why the fascination with big stuff?

Because, out here, size matters.

"I think it is because we are competing with a giant sky and giant landscapes," says Erika Nelson, creator of the World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things in Lucas. By the way, she strategically bought

the 100th—and last available—regular-sized replica buckle of the World's Largest Belt Buckle that Abilene tourism sold to promote the buckle.

"In Texas, they have giant skies and landscapes too—which is part of their way to build big things—but out here on the plains—you don't want to build smaller, or you will miss it."

There is also that monumental bronze sculpture in Oakley of Buffalo Bill on horseback shooting a buffalo, all 16 feet in height.

"It has to be gigantic because, otherwise, it would get lost in our prairie horizons," Nelson says.

But it may be more than that.

We Kansans, Nelson surmises, are also known for our humble brags. She has a theory ...

"Because we are Midwesterners, we don't generally interrupt people," she says. "When they are talking, we don't talk about ourselves a whole lot."

Just picture about all those people who travel Kansas highways thinking about how flat and boring Kansas is—as if they are in a hurry to go somewhere else. Think about the many signs of world bigness that dot Kansas, one of the largest electric coal shovels in the world—Big Brutus in West Mineral; a sisal ball of twine in Cawker City; the largest hairball in Garden City or a huge hand-decorated fiberglass and steel Czech egg in Wilson.

"If we can show somebody and it becomes obvious we have the World's Largest Belt Buckle, then you can go, 'Oh yeah, that old thing? Umm-hmm,'" Nelson says. "It's this beautiful Midwestern way of saying, 'Yeah, we're really good at this. We can't say it, but we sure can show it.'"

So, carry on Kansans.

Let's show them how big we really are.

—Beccy Tanner

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## World's Largest Mural Painted by a Single Artist WICHITA

Long before work ended on the Beachner Grain Elevator Mural in December 2018, this was one of North Wichita's largest structures. Then, Colombian street artist GLeo completed her gorgeous multicolored artwork across its face. Depicting ethnic backgrounds associated with nearby historic Black and Latinx neighborhoods, the mural is part of the larger art-focused Horizontes Project, created to improve quality of life in this area. This massive mural named *El Sueño Original* (*The Original Dream*) depicts people of color from the NorthEnd as they look hopefully toward the horizon. Individual images include Indigenous peoples and immigrant families, from migrant workers to meat packers and feedlot laborers. And, at 50,000 square feet, the mural bested the previous Guinness World Record holder by approximately 12,000 square feet. Horizontes funding has come from multiple sources, among them Fidelity Bank, Humanities Kansas, and the Knight Foundation, with an additional \$15,000 raised through crowdsourcing.

316.265.2800

PHOTOGRAPHS Justin Lister

## Nation's Northernmost Pueblo Ruins SCOTT CITY

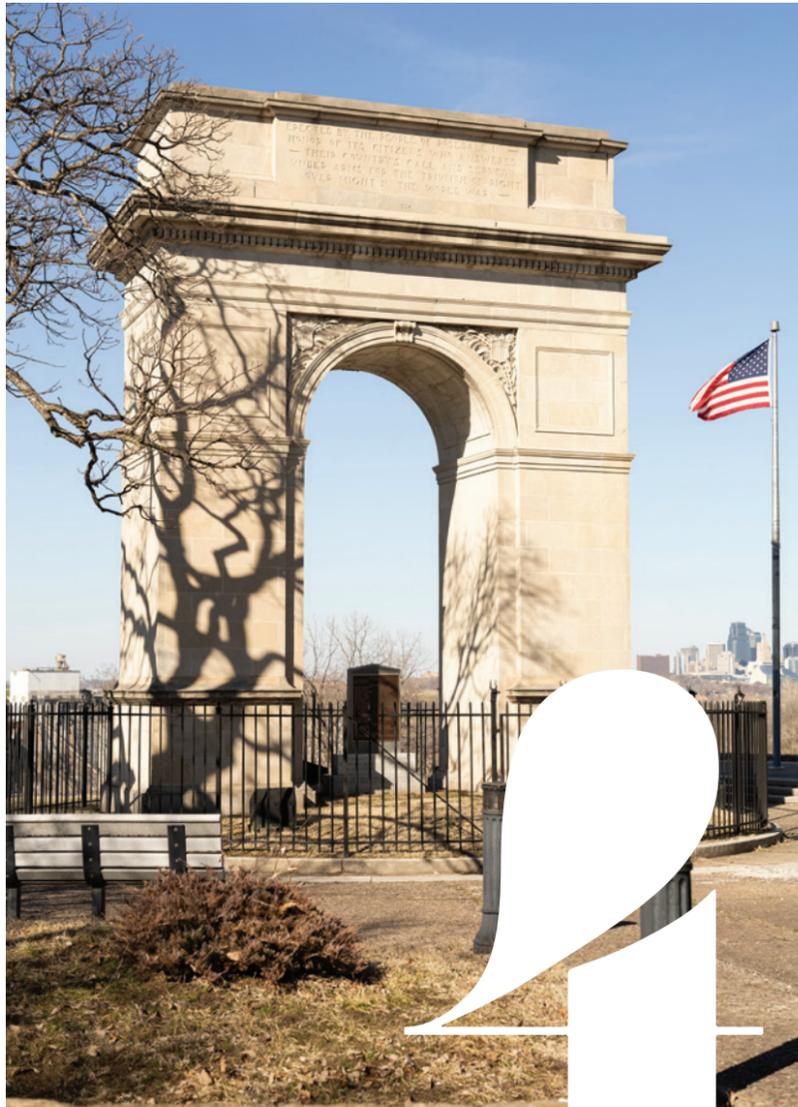
Many Kansans would be surprised to know that Indigenous people from modern-day Taos, New Mexico, once lived inside the current Lake Scott State Park in Scott City. A visit to this site reveals restored rock foundations from the 17th-century pueblo known as El Cuartejeo—the only pueblo built in Kansas. Taos Indians built El Cuartejeo as they fled Spanish rule in 1664. Spaniards compelled these resident to return to New Mexico before the Picuris Indians settled here. By the early 1700s these tribal members were also returned to New Mexico. Decades of conflict between various Indian tribes and European explorers plagued the area until it was abandoned. Archaeologists finally excavated the site by the late 1800s. In 1964, El Cuartejeo became a National Historic Landmark, and restored ruins and interpretive markers now greet visitors. Nearby, El Cuartejeo Museum offers additional history regarding the Scott City area.

620.872.5912

## Nation's Largest Salt Mine Museum HUTCHINSON

Previously the Kansas Underground Salt Museum, not-for-profit Strataca lies deep inside one of the world's largest rock salt deposits. A 90-second hoist (elevator) ride deposits guests from the visitors center into a world full of salt walls, 650 feet below ground level and 275 million years old. The underground museum houses a 25-million-year-old live bacteria found inside a salt crystal. There's also an incredible collection of prized Hollywood screenplays, film reels, and memorabilia stored by Underground Vaults & Storage because of the mine's consistent temperature and humidity. Two-hour tours through miles of tunnels include underground admission and a 30-minute educational Dark Ride through lit areas, plus a Salt Mine Express Train Ride—where time stopped 50 years ago. Adventure seekers enjoy Salt Safaris that provide a closer view of unique salt formations while other guests participate in events such as Murder in the Mine, or the 5K Underground Zombie Run.

620.662.1425



## Midwest's Largest 'Arc de Triomphe'

### KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

On a tall hilltop near Interstate I-35, the 34.5-foot-tall Rosedale Memorial Arch commemorates World War I veterans from the town of Rosedale, which Kansas City, Kansas, later absorbed. This scaled-down version of France's Arc de Triomphe reflects sketches by 29-year-old World War I soldier John Leroy Marshall. Part of the 42nd (Rainbow) Division, the Rosedale resident, architect, and engineer envisioned minimally embellished limestone atop brick. Though planned by Rosedale, the structure was completed by Kansas City, Kansas, in 1924. It was placed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places and National Register of Historic Places in 1977, with Kansas City, Kansas, Historic Landmark designation in 1982. Five years later, city council funds and donations financed restoration and a 65th anniversary celebration of the groundbreaking. Local businesses made additional improvements. New spotlights, streetlights, and a flagpole arrived later. By 1993, a smaller monument was added to honor soldiers from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

913.573.8327

## Midwest's Mini 'Grand Canyon' of the High Plains

ST. FRANCIS

At 36 miles long and two miles wide, Arikaree Breaks, near St. Francis, is mostly in northwestern Kansas (Small portions of this rugged terrain extend into corners of Nebraska and Colorado). Some people consider this the state's 'Grand Canyon.' Though nowhere near as expansive as Arizona's Grand Canyon, Arikaree Breaks is full of deep ravines and gullies. Initially formed as wind-deposited sand, silt, and clay particles in the area—also known as loess—the rocky terrain was further shaped by the Arikaree and Republican rivers. Native grasses and other vegetation create favorable pastureland, and rancher-built dams provide access to water for raising livestock. Public roads traverse this stark, naturally beautiful area. Signage and cell service can be sparse, so this is a good time to also carry a map, available from the St. Francis Area Chamber of Commerce or the Cheyenne County Museum.

785.332.3508

PHOTOGRAPHS (from left) Kalli Jo Smith, Kansas Department of Tourism, David Mayes



## World's Largest Collection of Oz Memorabilia

WAMEGO

Home to Oz-inspired dolls, movie posters, and even an eight-foot-tall Tin Man, this wheelchair-friendly downtown museum houses the world's largest collection of Oz memorabilia. See the Wicked Witch's legs beneath Dorothy's house plus photos signed by Judy Garland. The legendary movie also runs continuously in a small screening room. Visitors can view the earliest L. Frank Baum books and Oz Parker Brothers board games. And the museum store is a perfect place to find a collectible souvenir. A major state grant, plus thousands of hours of volunteer time from residents, created this remarkable museum, and funding from loyal fans and donors still plays a key role in continued operations. For a truly 'Oz-some' experience, plan your visit during the museum's annual OZtoberfest. It's full of live music, food, arts, crafts, and costume contests, drawing Oz fans, from avid collectors to inspired authors.

866.458.TOTO (8686)



## Nation's Largest Church Collection of Tiffany Windows

TOPEKA

Louis Comfort Tiffany stood in First Presbyterian Church's sanctuary so he could learn light patterns in the space before designing favrile glass windows to decorate the entire room. Unveiled in October 1911, the Thomas and Stormont Memorial Tiffany Windows commemorated service to the church by the late Jonathan Thomas and his wife, Josephine Brooks Thomas, who gave them to the church. Having his own furnaces allowed Tiffany to create designs that reflected his signature style, such as use of iridescent colors and molten glass that adapted to many forms of drapery. The Rose Window above the chancel incorporates the only non-favrile Tiffany glass throughout the sanctuary, while The Ascension is one of the largest examples of a Tiffany church window, measuring approximately 13.25 feet by 18 feet. Today, guests may visit this exquisite, one-of-a-kind Tiffany glass collection at no charge, with phone reservations. Groups may schedule docent-led tours.

785.233.9601



## Midwest's Largest Smithsonian-Affiliated Space Museum

HUTCHINSON

In 2022, the Cosmosphere celebrated 60 years since its inception. It all started when a woman named Patty Carey set up folding chairs and a used planetarium projector in a building on the Kansas State Fair Grounds, creating one of the first public planetariums in the Midwest. Four years later, the planetarium opened at Hutchinson Community College. By 1980, a new 35,000-square-foot facility featured a planetarium, classrooms, and an early IMAX dome theater. A 1997 expansion added 70,000 square feet and a lobby that houses a flown SR-71 Blackbird. The next year, the Cosmosphere became one of the earliest Smithsonian Institution affiliates, formalizing its long-term relationship with the National Air & Space Museum. Today there's a movie theater, planetarium, and a 1930s rocket lab experience. The impressive Hall of Space Museum includes the world's largest combined collection of U.S. and Russian space objects, and Apollo artifacts include a command module and a moon rock.

PHOTOGRAPHS (from left) Nick Krug, Justin Lister, Bill Stephens

800.397.0330



## World's Largest Ball of Twine

CAWKER CITY



Gifted to Cawker City in 1961, this giant ball of twine was created in 1953 by Frank Stoeber on his farm just outside of town. What started as an easy and efficient way to roll up his leftover sisal twine soon led to a historical moment for the community of Cawker City. Considered to be the largest ball of sisal twine built by a community, the ball currently measures 46 feet in circumference and includes 8,591,891 feet of twine. Those interested in adding to the ball can attend the twine-a-thon held each August, though the ball is available for viewing year round.

785.781.4713



## World's Largest Van Gogh Painting Replica

GOODLAND



The massive easel that displays this giant reproduction of Van Gogh's *Three Sunflowers in a Vase* ranked as the world's largest when it was erected in 2001. At 80 feet tall and more than 40,000 pounds, the easel and 24-foot by 32-foot painting stand near Goodland's downtown and Business Highway 24. Canadian painter Cameron Cross created Van Gogh painting replicas in locales that have a close connection to sunflower agriculture—such as Goodland—while trying to break a Guinness World Record. Other sites he chose with sunflower and/or Van Gogh connections include Australia, the Netherlands, Japan, South Africa, and Argentina. The 10 layers of acrylic urethane enamel paint that Cross used for the project are inherently long-lasting while providing ultraviolet protection.

785.296.2009



## Nation's Oldest and Only Remaining Black Settlement West of the Mississippi River NICODEMUS

Named for biblical figure Nicodemus, this town emerged in 1877 when 300 previously enslaved settlers from Kentucky arrived in the "Promised Land" of Kansas. Their move was part of the country's westward expansion during post-Civil War Reconstruction. In 1996, Nicodemus became a National Historic Site, and five historic buildings became a unit of the National Park System. They include the St. Francis Hotel/Switzer Residence, the historic First Baptist Church (still active), the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the School District Number 1 building and the Township Hall, which houses displays regarding the community's history. These buildings are open Thursday through Monday, from 9 to 5, but the grounds are always open. Hear the personal story of one family's connection to Nicodemus when you take a tour with LueCreasea Horn, a sixth-generation descendant of the community's founders. No matter when you visit, remember that Nicodemus remains a living, breathing community where people still live.

785.839.4233

## Go Feel Nicodemus

By Jordan E. Brooks

As I walked along the streets of the "Promised Land," a community built in 1877 by formerly enslaved people, I could feel the Black homesteaders' energy rising under my feet. A Black African American Kansan, I was awed by the challenges Nicodemus' founders must have faced as they started their lives over in the rural Wild West.

In 1996, the remaining five original structures—the schoolhouse, the A.M.E. Church, St. Francis Hotel, Township Hall and the historic First Baptist Church—plus residents' homes were declared units of the Nicodemus National Historic Site by the National Park Service. Nicodemus, according to the NPS, is the "oldest and only remaining all-Black settlement west of the Mississippi River."

In the short two days I spent immersed in Nicodemus, I ran into tourists from across the country, from Olympia, Washington, to New Jersey. I spent time with park rangers Ms. LueCreasea and Mr. William, who shared their vast knowledge of and experiences with this historic town. Seeing the settlement firsthand and listening to their stories made the experience hit home. Defining this Black American settlement is one main core American ideal, the freedom to pursue life and liberty in a time when Jim Crow laws were codifying racism and segregation for Black populations in both the North and South. Migration of Exodusters, largely from the Georgetown, Kentucky, area, drew 300 such dreamers fueled by grit and determination.

I couldn't help but think about Nicodemus' founders in terms of the ways we follow our dreams today; these settlers built an entire thriving community without the tools we now have—networking and social media promotions, vast resources of information and communication at our fingertips. This community designed and set a new standard for working toward your dreams. Predating early 20th-century Black movements and communities, such as the Harlem Renaissance or Oklahoma's Black Wall Street, Nicodemus became a Midwestern Black mecca.

I was moved by the community's strong faith and ability to do exactly what they needed not just to survive but to thrive and grow. I wondered, though, does Nicodemus retain that magic generated by the early settlers' dreams and hard work? I was inspired to draw a few images and encountered Timothy L. Wellington, a descendant of those early founders and member of first Baptist Church in Nicodemus. Wellington was born in California but lived in Nicodemus until, as a preteen, his desire for an education became more important than remaining on the peaceful farmlands of Nicodemus. He later returned to Nicodemus, and, today, Mr. Wellington radiates his infectious love and pride in his family and community history.

Nicodemus' population may be small these days, but low numbers can't distort or minimize the beautiful stories of the people who escaped a legacy of bondage to reach a place they could call their own, a place to raise their own. I felt a little of that magic as I walked down the main roads, watching the late afternoon light fade into an orange and pink sunset.

Was Nicodemus successful? It's one of the greatest stories of an American community. Nicodemus proves that transformation and progress are possible, not just for Black communities but for all communities when residents work toward common goals. After 145 years, the descendants of Nicodemus still gather at the end of July for an annual weekend celebration highlighting their heritage, reconnecting to the land, and inviting others to learn about their proud history. I hope you make the visit no matter your background. I hope you, too, feel the magic as you walk this land that still whispers the love that gave these people a chance. KM

PHOTOGRAPH courtesy Jordan E. Brooks

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