



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Great Plains Parks and Museums Road Trip (R25A-1)

To Iowa and then On to Bismarck

For this year's annual trip out to see my dad, I planned on a route heavy on Great Plains parks and museums. I had passed through the Kansas City area several times over the years without stopping, so I spent a few nights in the Kansas City/St. Joseph, Missouri area, I spent two nights in Bismarck, North Dakota as part of visiting a number of sites in the state, three nights in Montana, and a handful of other stops.

I visited three National Park Service units, including Knife River National Historic Site, one of a handful of Plains Indians sites I visited (and home of Sacagawea of Lewis and Clark Expedition fame), a return to Theodore Roosevelt National Park, and because the weather held, I returned to Yellowstone National Park (I was there just last year, but surprisingly large late September crowds last year prevented me from finding parking at some of the sites I wanted to see). Due to the federal government shutdown, visitor centers were closed, but I brought old park brochures (and toilet paper) with me, and had no problem with my sightseeing plans.

I also toured more than 30 museums, including very good ones focused on World War I, the Pony Express, Great Plains dinosaur finds, and computing technology, as well as the state history museums of both Iowa and North Dakota. Art, cowboys, BBQ, the Negro Baseball Leagues, Jesse James, Hallmark Cards and life on the western frontier were other museum subjects.

Most of my route was on interstate highways, rather unusual for me. Only the drive from Bozeman, Montana to central Utah was a long stretch that generally avoided the interstates.

And that was how the trip started. From Las Vegas to Topeka, Kansas was about 1300 miles of solid interstate driving. From Topeka, I took a state highway route through Atchison, Kansas to St. Joseph, Missouri. I got there by mid-afternoon on my third day, so I was able to get a head start on my sightseeing plans there.



The St. Joseph campus of Missouri Western State University is home to the Walter Cronkite Memorial, a museum centered on St. Joseph native former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite. Cronkite during his career earned the nickname “the most trusted man in America” in the days before everyone started dismissing the news stations they didn’t watch as “fake news”. Established with the cooperation of his family, the museum has several Cronkite artifacts and memorabilia, including his Emmys, on display.

The school is also home to the Kansas City Chiefs football team’s summer training camp.

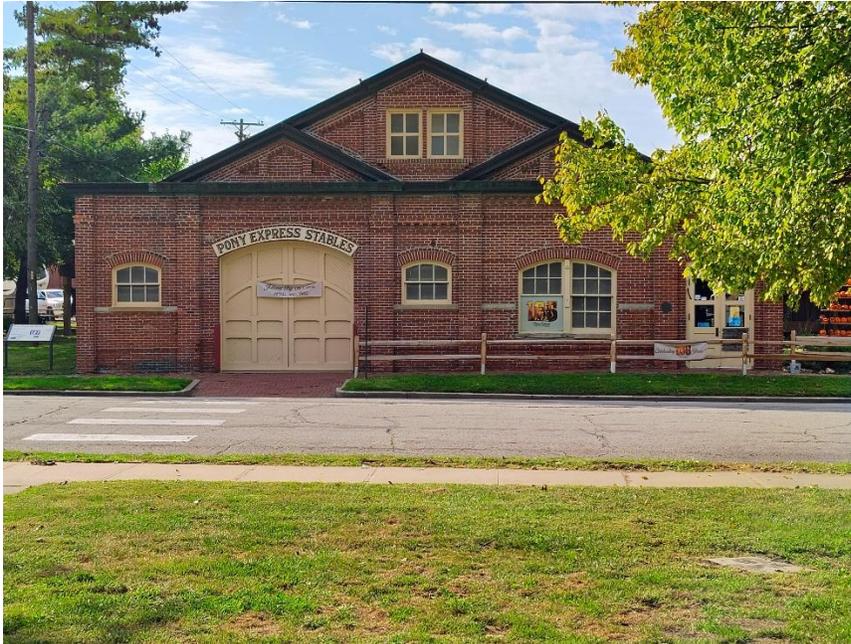
Bust of former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite

St. Joseph is famous as the origin of the Pony Express. It was created in an office in the Patee House Hotel by three local businessmen. St. Joseph was selected as it was about as far west as railroads and the telegraph reached in those days, and it was easy to cross the Missouri River at that point.



The Pony Express headquarters office has been recreated inside Patee House, now a very good local history museum. The hotel even had an entrance to this room that Pony Express riders rode their horses through to pick up a batch of mail at the start of their journeys.

Just a couple blocks down the street was the building that once stabled the Pony Express horses. Today, that building is home to the excellent Pony Express National Museum. These buildings mark the start of the Pony Express National Historic Trail.



The former Pony Express stables, now the Pony Express National Museum



Johnny Fry was the first Pony Express rider to leave St. Joseph with mail. Ten days later, he was the first to return to St. Joseph with mail from California.

With the completion of a cross-country telegraph connection, the Pony Express lost its relevance, and it shut down only 1 ½ years after it started, a bit surprising given its prominence in American western lore. Fry, who went on to fight for the Union in the Civil War, was killed in an ambush two years later.



The Patee House Museum features the usual assortment of 1800s and early 1900s artifacts, but it was a huge hotel, so now it is a huge museum that also features trains, cars, a town-favorite old carousel, several “stores” set up to look like they did in the olden days, the long bar from an old saloon, Native American artifacts, Civil War history, hotel rooms and bathrooms restored to their 1880s glory, and some silly things, like this 1000 lbs ball of twine (although I’ve seen bigger at Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin and Cawker City, Kansas). It is one of the best “local history” museums that I’ve come across.



While touring the museum, among other things, I learned that actress Jane Wyman – Ronald Reagan’s first wife – was born in St. Joseph. And Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix was invented here, rather surprisingly by a local newspaper editor.



Relocated to the grounds of the Patee House Museum from a couple blocks away was this second museum at the site, the house where Robert Ford killed outlaw Jesse James. James was born near nearby Kearney, Missouri, and after starting his outlaw career, he moved his family into this St. Joseph home. He'd sneak into town to see his family now and then. After he was killed, his wife, kids and mother were moved into the Patee House hotel while the investigation into his death was underway.



I capped off my St. Joseph visit with a late lunch and a walk around downtown. Among my finds there were two architecturally interesting movie theaters, a fondness of mine. Here is the Missouri Theater.

Then I headed south to Kansas City for a two-night stay. And now I can vouch for the fact that ev'rythin's indeed up to date in Kansas City!

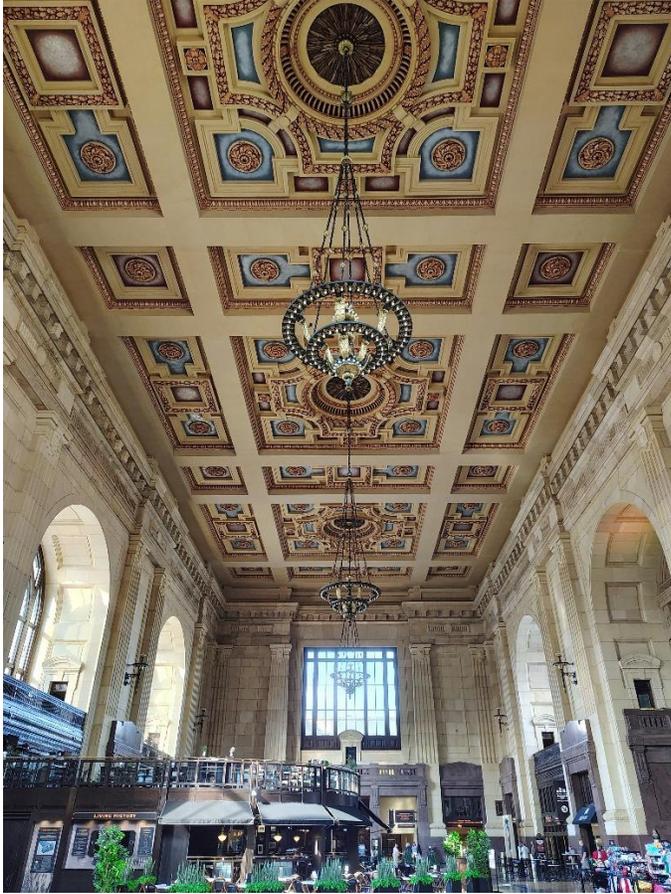


I got to Kansas City with enough time to visit one museum that afternoon – the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. It did a great job of introducing visitors to the history, culture and importance of the Negro Leagues not just to baseball but more broadly to American culture. Why is this in Kansas City? The Kansas City Monarchs were the longest-running franchise in the history of the Negro leagues, and they won the first Negro World Series. Satchel Paige, Ernie Banks and Jackie Robinson all spent part of their baseball careers with the Monarchs.

The museum is located in the city's 18th & Vine District, one of a handful of key places in the origin and evolution of jazz music. A jazz museum is next door, but I didn't have time for that.



Union Station and the Kansas City downtown skyline, seen the next morning from the Liberty Memorial at the National World War I Museum and Memorial site



On my walk from my hotel to the National World War I Museum, I stopped along the way to tour Union Station. Today, the station mostly is home to museums and exhibits, although it does serve Amtrak.



An upcoming *Titanic* exhibit at Union Station is described as “an immersive experience”. I’m sure that more than a few of the Titanic’s passengers thought so.

The excellent National World War I Museum was one of the top highlights of the trip. It told the story of World War I with countless artifacts from all sides of the war, letters, signage, personal accounts, and audio/visual features.



The first of two large exhibit spaces focused on the circumstances of the time and the origins of the war, the parties involved, and the first few years of the war before the U.S. joined in.



The second exhibit space focused on the final years of the war, including the events in the U.S. that led up to the U.S. joining the fight and the ultimate defeat of Germany and its allies.

I liked this museum more than the National World War II Museum that I visited in New Orleans in 2019 because it was more complete, especially in how it handled the subject for the years before the U.S. joined the fight, something I found generally lacking in the otherwise very good World War II museum.



After finishing at the museum, I checked out the Liberty Memorial Tower and then found a place for a late lunch. After lunch I visited Sea Life Kansas City, the city's unfortunately overpriced and underwhelming aquarium. In fact, when I first reached the exit, I turned around thinking that I must have missed a big chunk of the aquarium. Heck, usually by the time I finish up at an aquarium, I have a hankering for seafood, but this visit was so short that I was still tasting the barbeque sauce from lunch.



Hallmark headquarters is located in the same complex, and its visitor center is a museum focused on the company's founding and history. Although it could have just been one big commercial for Hallmark's greeting cards, Christmas ornaments and TV movies, it actually proved to be more interesting than that, with a lot of emphasis on the evolution of greeting cards and card-sending aspects of our culture (something that now seems to be fading). It was a story about entrepreneurship as much as anything.

Not so the nearby Museum of BBQ. Kansas City is one of a number of cities and states famous for its barbeque. The Museum of BBQ told the story of barbeque mostly with just a number of signs, but it did say something about the origins and regional variations of barbeque sauce and barbequing.



I learned that molasses and tomato sauce are key components of authentic Kansas City barbeque sauce. Which probably explains why I didn't care for it as much, as it struck me as a little too sweet.



It also featured an exhibit on baked beans as a perfect accompaniment to barbeque, sponsored by Bush's Beans. Bush's has its own museum in eastern Tennessee, which I toured back in 2014.

As informative as the signs were, though, they really are intended to lead you into a store where all sorts of BBQ sauce and rub varieties were being sold.



I had Kansas City barbeque for dinner my first night and for lunch between museums, and like I said, I wasn't impressed by the sauce. For dinner my second night, I had planned to dine at an Austrian restaurant I came across (wiener schnitzel!), but when I got there, I found it was closed for the evening as it was hosting a private event.

After leaving Kansas City, I headed north to Des Moines, Iowa, although I stopped along the way in Kearney, Missouri early in the drive.

Jesse James was born to minister Robert James and his wife Zerelda on a farm just outside Kearney, although Robert left his family a few years later to minister to gold seekers in California and died not long after his arrival there.



The house where Jesse James was born

Jesse James joined his brother Frank in supporting the Confederacy during the Civil War. The brothers turned to a life of crime afterwards, but Jesse kept his ties to the farm. Jesse and his wife, also named Zerelda, had four kids. After he was killed in St. Joseph, he was buried near the house, which his mom turned into a bit of a tourist attraction. Later, his body was moved to the family plot in the Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Kearney.



The graves of Jesse James and his wife Zerelda are flanked by those of his mother and step-father.



Iowa Flag, 1967

The state flag has served as a symbol of home for many soldiers. U.S. Marine Sergeant Larry J. Brown flew this flag outside his tent in Danang during the Vietnam War.

In Des Moines, I visited the State Historical Museum of Iowa. The large museum generally did a good job of covering the states history from post-Ice Age wildlife and pre-contact Native American cultures up through modern times, and was well worth a few hours. But while it featured a large exhibit on Iowa's ties to the movies/entertainment industry (think *Field of Dreams*, *The Straight Story*, and *The Music Man*), there was little about agriculture – Iowa's top industry – and education, which the state is arguably tops in the country.



My attempts to visit some of Iowa's prehistoric mounds sites didn't really pan out due to the lack of signage, but I did get some pretty views of the Mississippi River valley near Balltown, Iowa as I finished my drive to Decorah, where my dad lives.

After five days in Decorah, I started my drive home, heading northwest across Minnesota to Moorhead, just across the Red River from Fargo, North Dakota.

Moorhead is home to Hjemkomst Center, a museum primarily focused on the area's Norwegian culture. And specifically, *Hjemkomst*, a Viking ship replica housed there. Robert Asp, a local junior high guidance counselor, got the idea of building a replica Viking ship and sailing it from Duluth, Minnesota to Norway. However, he was diagnosed with leukemia the same year. But he lived long enough to oversee the completion of the ship – whose name translates to *Homecoming*. In May 1982, a crew of a dozen family members and friends set off on their voyage, arriving in Bergen, Norway on July 19 and then Oslo on August 9.

Then in the 1990s, another area resident, Guy Paulson, built a replica of Vik, Norway's Hopperstad Stave Church, which stands outside the center now.

In addition to exhibits on the ship and the stave church replica, Hjemkomst Center had exhibits on local history and artifacts that Norwegian immigrants to the area brought with them from Norway, and a temporary exhibit on art quilting.



The Hjemkomst ship (left) and Hopperstad Stave Church replica (right)



A lefse griddle, lefse rolling pins and lefse flipper. If you don't know what lefse is, you don't know what you're missing. Think of it as kind of a potato-based Norwegian tortilla. Ole! Er, Olé!

Heading northwest across Minnesota, you pass a number of small farming communities. But in North Dakota, once you get west of Fargo, you soon reach the open range. A place where cattle graze freely and buffalo still roam the land.



The open range



Dakota Thunder, the world's largest buffalo, Jamestown, North Dakota

Jamestown is home to the North American Bison Discovery Center, a museum focused on bison – what we routinely call buffalo. It covered the species from the Ice Age, to Native American uses, from how the species were hunted almost to extinction to the buffalo population’s current recovery.



A 10,000-year-old bison skull. Bison back then were quite a bit bigger than those that survive today (although certainly not Dakota Thunder’s size), but today’s bison remain the largest native animals in North America.



Countless millions of bison roamed the open range until they were hunted to near extinction by the 1880s, with only 325 known bison left by 1884. The museum houses the National Bison Foundation Hall of Fame, which honors those who have helped the species recover to today’s sustainable population of more than 350,000 animals.

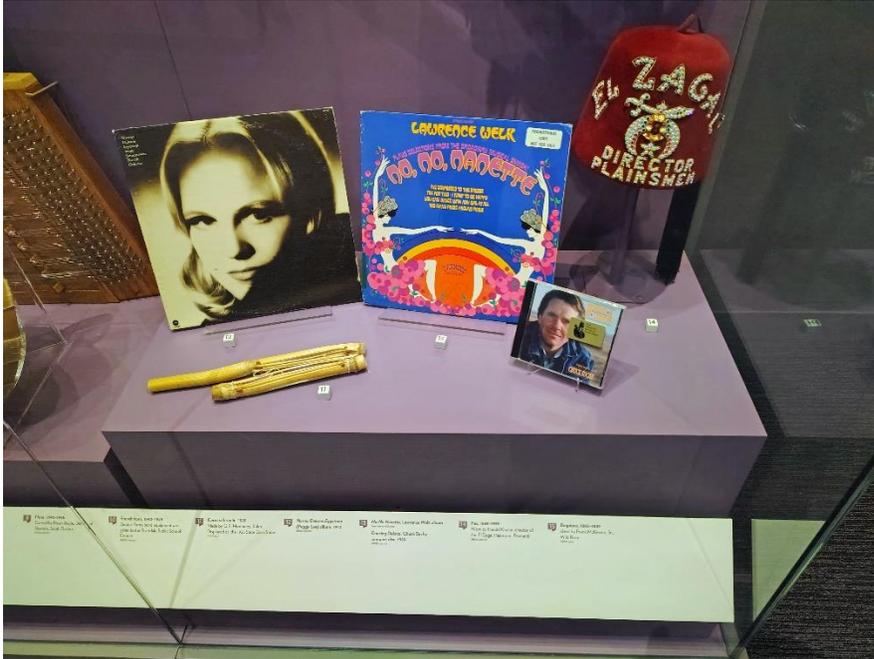
I got to Bismarck, North Dakota by early afternoon, giving me time to check out its state capitol and the North Dakota Heritage Center and State Museum, as well as a few minor sites in town.



The 21-story state capitol is the tallest habitable building in North Dakota



The state museum's largest exhibit hall focused on North Dakota history and culture from pioneer settlement times through the present day. Although this hall was smaller than the Iowa museum, I actually thought it was more well-rounded than what I saw in Des Moines



Peggy Lee and Lawrence Welk were both born in North Dakota



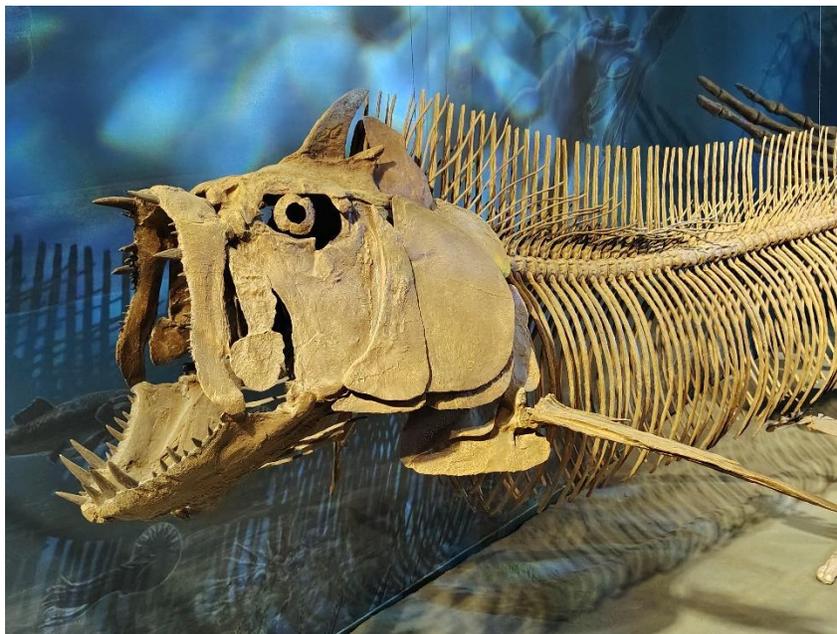
Welk was born on a farm outside of Strasburg, North Dakota, which I visited back in 2003 while driving from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. (Welk and my maternal grandmother studied music at the MacPhail Music School in Minneapolis at the same time, but they focused on different instruments, so their paths may not have ever crossed in any memorable way.)

The museum also had two smaller-but-still-large exhibit halls, these focused on North Dakota's Native American history and dinosaur/fossil history.



A display of Native American artifacts recovered from an ancient Mandan village now preserved at Double Ditch State Historic Site

During much of the Age of Dinosaurs, North Dakota was underwater, covered by an inland sea. It wasn't until just a few million years before the asteroid hit that wiped out non-avian dinosaurs that the sea receded enough for the western part of the state to emerge, and dinosaurs moved in.



The Xiphactinus, up to 20 feet long and with its three-foot-wide mouth, was swimming in the waters that covered North Dakota

A small exhibit space was reserved for temporary exhibits, at this time focused on Medora de Morés, an heiress married to the Marquis de Morés, who settled in southwest North Dakota where the town of Medora was established and named after her. I stayed in Medora a couple days later.



In addition to raising the kids, funding her husband's business ventures, helping run those ventures, hunting, and so on, Medora was famous for her watercolor paintings of the area, several of which were displayed at the museum in this exhibit.

The trip continues with more time spent at outdoors sites in part 2.