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Preface and Acknowledgments

The true West differs from the East in one great, pervasive, influential, and awesome way: space. . . . It’s that apparent emptiness which makes matter look alone, exiled, and unconnected. Those spaces diminish man and reduce his blindness to the immensity of the universe; they push him toward a greater reliance on himself, and, at the same time, to a greater awareness of others and what they do. But, as space diminishes man and his constructions in a material fashion, it also—paradoxically—makes them more noticeable. Things show up out here. No one, not even the sojourner can escape the expanses. You can’t get away from them by rolling up the safety-glass and speeding through, because the terrible distances eat up the speed. . . . Still, drivers race along; but when you get down to it, they are people uneasy about space.
—William Least Heat Moon, Blue Highways

So you are crossing Kansas on Interstate 70. Early pioneers heading west hesitated at the edge of the eastern forests, mustering their courage as if the prairies were a lonely ocean or dangerous desert to be conquered. You will soon experience the vastness of the Great Plains and seemingly endless open spaces as you proceed across the state.

Some travelers still find the prospect of crossing the Plains daunting, even in climate-controlled cars cruising along at 70 miles per hour. Today as in the past, for many travelers, the Plains are an obstacle to be overcome on the way to a better place—the Rocky Mountains or maybe California. For eastbound travelers, the great eastern cities or Atlantic beaches beckon. Perhaps hometowns with family and friends are the ultimate destination.

Least Heat Moon wrote of the “apparent emptiness” of the Plains and the “terrible distances that eat up speed.” Ian Frazier, in his book Great Plains, noted that interstate highways seem designed to get people across the Plains “in the least time possible, as if this were an awkward point in a conversation.”

This book’s purpose is to guide travelers through the apparent empti-
ness, to interpret things that show up out here in Kansas, and to break
the silence in the awkward conversation. Rather than having sojourn-
ers escaping the expanses and being uneasy about the space, our goal is
to have travelers revel in the spaciousness; sail under spectacular skies;
perceive the beauty in subtle, understated, earth-toned landscapes; ap-
preciate the buried treasures of rich soils; and discover compassion and
courage in the tales of others who crossed these lands. Our hope is that
this book will make travel across the immense space of Kansas an enjoy-
able and enriching experience.

As you drive through Kansas using this guide, you will glimpse
what the state was in days past and what it is today. You will be intro-
duced to prehistoric animals; vast herds of bison and antelope; Native
Americans, French trappers, and Spanish explorers; and European set-
tlers—all of which have impacted the landscape and natural resources
of Kansas. You will see that the Great Plains are more than they appear
at first glance. These lands played a pivotal role in westward expan-
sion and in shaping our American heritage. The vast open spaces not
only influenced our past but also continue to affect the lives of Ameri-
cans from coast to coast, particularly at the dinner table. As you travel
across Kansas, you may come to agree with Ian Frazier, who wrote, “The
beauty of the plains is not just in themselves but in the sky, in what you
think when you look at them, and in what they are not.”

We wish to thank the many individuals we interviewed along the route
of I-70; their names appear in the references. We also offer our thanks
to the many anonymous people who so generously volunteered infor-
mation about sites or provided us with directions. In addition, the fol-
lowing people offered valuable information or other assistance: Kelley
Blankley, LuAnn Cadden, Mike Chaneske, Robin Grumm, Hank Ernst,
Keith Lynch, Elaine Marshall, Mike Rader, Scott Seltman, Jeff Sheets,
Joan Shull, and Kasey Windhorst. We are especially grateful to Lowell
Johnson for allowing us to use his excellent bird photos.

Most of all, we would like to thank our wives, Marianne Maley and
Diane Cable, who served as drivers and readers as we developed and
road-tested this book.
Introduction

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.
—Saint Augustine

The state of Kansas was named after a tribe of Indians called Kansa or Kaw, meaning “People of the South Wind.” This tribe arrived in what is now Kansas around 1720 and settled in temporary villages near the current cities of Leavenworth and Atchison. Later, to be closer to the best bison-hunting grounds, they established their principal village where the Big Blue River joins the Kansas River, near the present city of Manhattan.

From 1492 to 1845, land that became Kansas was at various times claimed by six different countries. The first European to see this land was the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, who explored the area in search of the Seven Cities of Gold in 1541. French trappers and explorers came to this land in the late 1600s and early 1700s. The United States bought the land that is now Kansas from the French in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase.

Although the state’s name honors the Kaw people, the first explorers to this region found it occupied by the Indians of Quivira, most likely the Wichita tribe and the Pawnee people. However, the Wichita spent most of their time in what is now Oklahoma and Texas. In an era when Spain ruled much of North and South America, Kansas was commonly called Harahey. The people of Harahey were probably Pawnee. Native Americans played a prominent role in the history of Kansas: their heritage and influence will be apparent at many locations along I-70.

As you travel along I-70, you will also see the influence of the trails and rails that carried settlers, cattle, and supplies to the West. Moreover, you will see how the issue of whether Kansas would be a free state or a slave state resulted in the violent “Bleeding Kansas” period that shaped the history of the eastern portion of the state.

Kansas is not crowded. It ranks thirteenth among the states in size but only thirty-fourth in population. That leaves plenty of space for
nature. In fact, the state is home to almost 800 kinds of vertebrates, including 141 species of fish, 32 kinds of amphibians, 14 types of turtles, 53 different reptiles, and 87 kinds of mammals. More than 475 different bird species have been seen in Kansas, and more than 2,000 kinds of plants grow wild here, including 200 types of grasses. You will no doubt notice many of these plants and animals along I-70.

Traveling I-70 will be a trip through time as well as a tour across bountiful and beautiful lands. You will be driving along an east-west transportation corridor that has existed since presettlement times. Early pioneers followed the major river systems westward from Kansas City because they provided water for people and livestock and because the river valleys were relatively flat compared with the surrounding hills. I-70 parallels one such trail—the Smoky Hill Trail, which was noteworthy as the quickest route to the Denver goldfields that were discovered in 1858. Nine years later, railroads expanded westward and followed these routes to be close to water and to the wood needed for the ties. You will be paralleling the Rock Island and Union Pacific Railroad lines, which were built in the late 1800s.

Federal highways were constructed along the railroad lines to link the towns that sprang up near the rails and rivers. From Kansas City west to Oakley, I-70 follows—and at some points is—historic US 40. From Colby to the Colorado line, I-70 follows old US 24, a federal highway linking Kansas City to Denver. Completed in 1926, US 40 was the nation’s first federally funded coast-to-coast highway. Its original 3,022-mile route connected Atlantic City with San Francisco. Unlike the more famous Route 66, US 40 still is formally designated across the country. In the mid-1900s, interstates such as I-70 replaced many state and federal highways. In this case, beginning in 1956, some segments of US 40 were transferred to I-70.

So, you will notice on your map that lots of highways and railroads follow routes parallel to one another, often adjacent to rivers—and I-70 is no exception. As you drive along, you will be following trails used by Native Americans and pioneers, rails used by early settlers, and highways used by drivers of the first automobile generation in the early 1900s. You undoubtedly will be moving down the route faster and more comfortably than any of your traveling predecessors, and we hope you’ll be enjoying the trip at least as much as they did. Horace Greeley, the New York newspaperman who encouraged westward travel with the exhortation “Go west young man,” claimed, “I like Kansas... better than
I expected to.” We think if you slow down and look closely, you, like Horace, will be pleasantly surprised by Kansas too.

THE KANSAS STATE FLAG

The Kansas flag will be waving in the wind at points along the highway (we can almost guarantee the wind). In the center of the dark-blue flag is the state seal, which paints a picture of Kansas history. The thirty-four stars represent the fact that Kansas was the thirty-fourth state admitted to the Union. The rolling hills depict those rising near historic Fort Riley, hills you will see along I-70. Scenes on the seal—Native Americans hunting bison, wagon trains heading west, and steamships carrying supplies up the Kansas River—all represent important aspects of Kansas history that will be presented as you travel across the state. The farmer plowing fields near his cabin reflects the fact that agriculture has always dominated the Kansas economy and landscape. Agricultural stories dominate in this book as well. The state motto, Ad astra per aspera,
meaning “To the stars through difficulties,” is included in the state seal. We hope you won’t experience any difficulties as you travel across Kansas.

![Kansas state seal](image)

**USING THIS BOOK**

In this guide, the I-70 mile markers identify the location of features being described. Of course, a mention of a sight may not come precisely at the mile marker listed. Rather, the intent is to encourage a look ahead. Thus, eastbound and westbound references for the same feature may be given at different mileposts. Moreover, because some stories are too long to read about in the short time it takes to speed by a given location, we have cross-referenced multiple stories about the same place. To help you find more information about a topic, we direct you using the mile marker number combined with an E or a W for the eastbound or westbound texts.

Miles on all interstate highways are measured from the westernmost or southernmost point in the state. At Kansas City, you enter Kansas on I-70 at mile marker 423, meaning you are 423 miles from the westernmost point of the highway, at the Colorado state line. Thus, when you
are heading west, the green mileage marker signs will be decreasing as you proceed toward Colorado. For travelers driving east, the mile markers will be increasing as they indicate the number of miles you have traveled from the Colorado line. On a section of I-70 in eastern Kansas that is part of the Kansas tollway system, the green mile markers measure the distance from the Oklahoma line south of Wichita.

**OF COWS AND CLOUDS**

If you are traveling with young children, you might want to engage them in the fun activity of cow and cloud identification to make the trip more fun.

**Cows**

Not all cattle are cows. Cattle are cows only if they are adult females that have given birth. Ranchers and “cowboys” call males **bulls**. They call young females **heifers** until they have their first babies called **calves**. If a bull has been castrated it is called a **steer**. Technically all of these cow-like creatures are **bovines**. Dozens of varieties exist, but see if you can find these common bovines on your trip along I-70:

- **Angus** — All black; famous for producing high quality beef. Look for these in the Flint Hills.
- **Holsteins** — Black and white patches like the familiar Chick-Fil-A cows; produce milk and other dairy products.
- **Herefords** — Brown cattle with white faces; if crossed with Angus you can get “Black Baldies,” black cattle with white faces.
- **Charolais** — All-white cattle raised for meat; originally from the area surrounding Charolles in Burgundy in eastern France.
- **Belted Galloways** — Black and white, but instead of patches they are black at both ends and white in the middle, like the pattern of an Oreo cookie.
- **Texas Longhorns** — Cattle with horns that can be almost seven feet across from tip to tip. Texas Longhorns are descendants of cattle first brought to the New World by Christopher Columbus and the Spanish colonists. They do well in dry, drought-prone climates like western Kansas.

**Clouds**

If counting cows is not your thing, you might turn your eyes skyward and enjoy the clouds that grace the wide Kansas skies. Clouds are made
from tiny water droplets or, if it is cold enough, ice crystals. The air is
colder at higher altitudes so ice crystals can exist within a cloud even
in summer. If clouds have fuzzy edges they have ice crystals. If clouds
have sharp edges they have water droplets. If these water droplets get
too heavy they drop as rain. Although the Kansas state song “Home on
the Range” speaks of “skies that are not cloudy all day,” see if you can
find these clouds as you travel across Kansas:

- **Cirrus** — High, (above 18,000 feet) wispy clouds. *Cirrus* comes from the Latin
  for lock of hair. Generally indicate fair weather for the next twenty-four hours.
  They can sail on the jet streams at more than 100 miles per hour.
- **Stratus** — Layer of clouds covering the whole sky. When stratus clouds are
touching the earth we call them fog. When this blanket of clouds is very high in
the sky, it is called cirrostratus. Usually the sun and moon can be seen through
this thin layer of cirrostratus clouds.
- **Cumulus** — Pretty, fluffy clouds that look like cotton and are often thought of
  as fair weather “nice day” clouds. Their bottoms are flat and they grow upward
  from the top, sometimes looking like a head of cauliflower.
- **Cumulonimbus** — Majestic, powerful, tall storm clouds that produce lightning,
  thunder, and sometimes hail or tornados. If they have a green tint to them, it
  probably means the presence of hail. High winds can flatten the top into an anvil
  shape. These clouds travel at 30—40 miles per hour, usually in the direction that
  the anvil is pointing. Cumulonimbus thunderheads are awe-inspiring, and their
  lightning and tops can be seen up to 300 miles away!
- **Contrails** — White lines crisscrossing the sky made by the many jets flying
  over Kansas. These clouds form when the hot humid air from the jet engine
  enters the cold dry air at high altitudes causing the moisture in the exhaust to
  condense and form a cloud trail.

We hope cirrus and cumulus clouds float above you on your journey,
dreary stratus clouds are seldom seen, and that cumulonimbus clouds
are only seen from a safe distance.