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Kansas marvels

BY BECCY TANNER
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What do you treasure most about Kansas? Prairie sunsets? A drive in the Flint Hills?

A burger at the Cozy Inn in Salina?

The Kansas Sampler Foundation is asking Kansans -- all 2.7 million of us -- to submit nominations for the Eight Wonders of Kansas.

"We are trying to do two things: get people to talking about Kansas places and next hope they will travel around to see these places," said Marci Penner, director of the sampler foundation in Inman.

State officials applaud the effort and hope it helps drive tourism. It's all about creating adventures and exploring, said Caleb Asher, spokesman for the Kansas Department of Commerce.

Some of Kansas' top draws are casinos, the Kansas Speedway, theme parks, lakes and state parks. But officials hope this contest also will expose Kansans to the state's quiriness -- Big Brutus in Cherokee County, the giant ball of twine in Cawker City or the Garden of Eden in Lucas.

"The best places you can find are in those small towns, in some of those family-owned restaurants that fix fried chicken and fresh-baked pies," Asher said. "Those hidden treasures are something we are lucky to have."

Wonders -- Kansas style

The idea is a spin-off from the Seven Wonders of the World -- only Kansas style. It is not limited to the top eight things to do. Rather, it encompasses the eight elements of rural culture the sampler foundation uses to promote communities: architecture, art, commerce, cuisine, customs, geography, history and people.

Penner, who is working to help preserve rural culture and heritage, says far too many native Kansans take their state and its history for granted.

"Kansas has these amazing layers, like in its history," she said. "Do Santa Fe Trail buffs know about the Bleeding Kansas layer? Do those people know about the railroad history layer? I love the understated, subtle statements that make Kansas. We want people to search through their own pathways."

Since the contest was launched during a rural economic conference in Salina last week, Penner said, she has been flooded by suggestions.

Some good.

Some uniquely Kansan.

"One guy said there were no wonders in Kansas," Penner said. "Another said the fact we are spoiling our groundwater is truly a wonder."

Passion for Kansas

Native Kansan Steve Coen used to live in Washington, D.C. He worked as legislative assistant to Sen. Bob Dole and as state director of Dole's four Kansas offices. He came back to Kansas, he said, because he missed it.

"I realized how much this place called Kansas had a hold on my soul," said Coen, now vice president for administration at the Kansas Health Foundation. "I missed the sunny days with big, blue skies and the white cumulus clouds. I missed our sunrises and sunsets, the topography of all the regions of our state - yes, even the plains of western Kansas. Most of all I missed the people."

Coen says his list of wonders would include the Gypsum Hills west of Medicine Lodge, the Flint Hills, the Old Town district in Wichita and the architecture of Exploration Place.

Virgil Dean, historian at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka, would list the revolving seasons in the Flint

Hills and his hometown museum in Franklin County. As for people, he would love to talk with Emporia journalist William Allen White, who died decades ago.

"I am attracted to the whole range of issues and events that have made Kansas history," Dean said. "But the period I find most interesting is right after the turn of the 20th century when Kansas leaders were in a lot of areas of national reform. There was a willingness to experiment. To make things better on all fronts."

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius will announce the winning eight wonders on Jan. 29, 2008 -- Kansas Day.

Jay Price, associate professor of history at Wichita State University, is on the selection committee.

"There is a real creativity to it," Price said. "This is uniquely Kansan. When it comes to customs, will we list: When there is a tornado warning, we go out to look at it. This process will tell us as much about ourselves as any historical paths we deal with. It is an intriguing bellwether on what we are thinking."

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