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Time on the Gravel

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Road 90
Dave Leiker

TIME ON THE GRAVEL

“We breathe the air of those who spoke languages
forgotten as the glaciers. We walk the fields
that once fed the fish of inland oceans.”

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, “Celebrate This Kansas,” in “Chasing Weather”

Gravel roads in the Flint Hills are seldom a direct route to anywhere. There are few straight roads between any two points. Therein lies the beauty of this land. And there’s certainly no shortage of beauty here.

In May, Flint Hills pastures are a tender baby green. Over the summer, that green deepens, and wildflowers appear. Add to that a postcard-blue sky with gentle storybook clouds. As you stand on this rocky soil, take time for a few slow, deep breaths. You will feel so energized, so alive, that you may think that you were born just to be in this very spot at this very moment.

Living adjacent to the Flint Hills comes with pretty good perks. A 15-minute drive from my home in Emporia (pop. 24,135) can put me on roads curving through green pastures. Within 30 minutes, I can be in my hiking boots on a trail at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

The landscape varies a bit as you travel through the Flint Hills, but it’s all gorgeous. As a writer, though, I have to say that I’m particularly fond of Wabaunsee County’s road names. Each time I’m driving in Wabaunsee County, I’m eager to see the name of the next cross road: Cloudhunter, Plowboy, Blazing Star, Bronc Rider.

Now, I don’t know how other households entertain their out-of-town guests, but my husband, Dave Leiker, and I like to take our visitors on rides through the Flint Hills.

As a landscape and nature photographer, Dave knows all the best spots. For years he's been exploring on the backroads in Lyon, Chase, Morris and Wabaunsee counties. Dave reads those yellow "minimum maintenance" warning signs as personal invitations. But really, grass growing in the center of any road is a draw for Dave.

Last September, my Alaska-based brother, Leon, and his partner, Julie, came to Emporia, and we devoted a full day of their short visit to cruising gravel roads in the Flint Hills. Dave and my mother rode in the front seat; Leon, Julie and I sat in the back seat along with their dog, a mini goldendoodle, who settled in on Julie's lap.

As we five humans and one sweet dog headed north and west from Emporia, roadside sunflowers were making their last stand of the season, weaving with the wind. It was a gorgeous day, the sky a gentle blue with high, thin clouds. The dark green grasses of summer were beginning to surrender their chlorophyll, and yellow hints of autumn were sneaking into pastures and ditches.

At the Lake Kahola spillway, Cottonwood limestone boulders, the same stone used to construct the Chase County Courthouse, served as a reminder that 85 million years ago an inland sea covered Kansas. Time was once water here. In the road cuts along

some highways, we can see the layers of Earth's story stacked in stone, an archive of what came before us.

These bony-shouldered hills are home to countless native grasses and wildflowers. Pastures have remained unplowed because of stone beneath the topsoil. However, roots of many of these grasses penetrate six feet, eight feet into the ground. They're here to stay.

West of Lake Kahola, Road DD is a series of steep hills. We stopped at a low-water bridge to take photos of plants along the stream. Wildflowers add color and texture to the Flint Hills in the summer. I'm partial to the purple ones such as woolly verbena, echinacea, spiderwort and ironweed, but it's always a joy in June when butterfly milkweed blooms – those bursts of orange scatter joy across green pastures.

After a few hours of exploring, we stopped for lunch at the Saddlerock Cafe in Council Grove (pop. 2,140). We ate at the picnic tables outdoors so Leon and Julie's dog could join us. The food is always good at the Saddlerock.

Because another form of our family's entertainment is visiting bookstores, we stopped at Flint Hills Books in the former Council Grove National Bank building. This 1887 structure is on the National Register of Historic Places. The bookstore's tall windows let in plenty of natural light, which makes the store



Anticipation
Dave Leiker

so inviting. Because of the town's rich history, Council Grove is a destination for many day-trippers. The bookstore's owner, Jennifer Kassebaum, offers those travelers a fine and curated selection of Kansas books.

Riverbank Brewing opened in 2021 in Council Grove, and many other new downtown businesses have launched over the past two years. There's a fresh energy in town, a positive vibe.

Heading southeast out of Council Grove on Dunlap Road, Dave turned on V Avenue and stopped at an access point to the Flint Hills Trail, part of the rails-to-trails system. The Flint Hills Trail is about 118 miles in length, from Herington to Osawatomie. My brother and I left the others behind, and we hiked about a half mile on the trail, noting contrails in the sky, self-healing white scars on blue skin. We had been flown over.



Gravel Grinder Roads
Dave Leiker

As contrails streaked above us, I longed to be up there too, sailing across the sky in an aircraft, flying on hope, fuel and good engineering. I'd like to peer down to the Flint Hills from 30,000 feet, to see from above the rounded hills, the tree-covered streams, the pastures that roll on forever.

A cyclist passed Leon and me as we walked along the trail. Cyclists also ride the open gravel roads, some of them

training for races. UNBOUND Gravel is the largest race in the region. Each spring, UNBOUND launches and finishes races in downtown Emporia. It draws about 4,000 riders to the Flint Hills each year with race lengths that range from 25 to 350 miles.

Leon and I grew up in central Kansas. While I stayed in Kansas, my brother has lived elsewhere, the bulk of his adulthood in Alaska. Leon is an explorer; he loves

wherever he lives. I asked him to share some thoughts on these two very different landscapes and climates.

He responded, "I was thinking about how far away from Kansas I felt in my 30 years outside Anchorage and in Fairbanks. Volcanoes burn within eyesight, and mountains are being carved out of highlands by glaciers that I can walk on; life includes the northern lights, the moon-surface cold of winter, and predators large enough and willing to eat me.

"For a Kansas-grown boy, living in Alaska has been like being present at the Creation. Julie, born in Fairbanks before statehood, often says that the people who are most in love with the idea of Alaska are the ones who moved there. By comparison, the deepest lovers of Kansas seem to be the ones born here."

Back in our car, we stopped on South 525 Road to pay tribute to the Kaw tribe, also known as Kanza, at the Allegawaho Heritage Memorial Park. A visible memorial stands atop a hill, and a

1.9-mile hiking trail circles the park. The Kaw were forcibly removed to Oklahoma around 1873.

Then we slipped through Dunlap (pop. 27), a community that became home to freed slaves in the late 1870s. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who had been born a slave in 1809, relocated here from Tennessee. We drove past the Colored Cemetery and also saw a steel sign noting the last farm of descendants of freed slaves.

It was a gorgeous day spent with my family, driving on the landscape I love. As we headed home, my eyesight stretched to the faraway horizon.

Distance is our birthright in Kansas. Our eyes land naturally on that line, miles ahead, where earth meets sky. Looking up at night, we point out constellations that shine from light years away. And by reading ancient stories left in stone, we travel back in time, millions of years, to when time was water, to when this land was an inland sea.

Cheryl Unruh grew up in Pawnee Rock, Kansas, developing a fierce love of the open land and the Kansas sky. She has twice received the Kansas Notable Book Award for her collections of Kansas essays, "Flyover People: Life on the Ground in a Rectangular State" and "Waiting on the Sky: More Flyover People Essays." Her latest book, a memoir, "Gravedigger's Daughter: Vignettes from a Small Kansas Town," received both the Martin Kansas History Book Award and the Nelson Poetry Book Award from the Kansas Authors Club. Cheryl is the editor of 105 Meadowlark Reader, a Kansas journal of creative nonfiction. She lives in Emporia, Kansas.