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Pioneer Past

Nebraska's prairie heritage is showcased in evocative venues throughout the state

BY MARIA LENHART

A steady stream of 19th century pioneers—most of them just passing through as they headed West—forged their way in wagons across the prairies of Nebraska. Their stories, as well as those of the people who stayed and put down roots, are told throughout the state in historic villages, forts, farm museums and other sites.

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, Denton
http://springcreekprairie.audubon.org

Near Lincoln, Spring Creek Prairie is an 880-acre sanctuary where walking trails meander through native tallgrass prairie, wetlands and woodlands that are home to great blue herons, egrets, red-headed woodpeckers and other birdlife.

"Less than two percent of the native tallgrass prairie is left, so this is a rare chance to experience the way Nebraska was before farming," says Jamie Kelly, community education director. "You can also get a good sense of how the countryside looked when the wagon trains were coming through here."

Groups can take guided hikes and hold events for up to 100 in the education building.

General Crook House Museum, Omaha
www.omahahistory.org

Part of historic Fort Omaha, the General Crook House is an Italianate Victorian mansion that was once home to George Crook, a Civil War general who was posted to the fort in 1875. During his tenure there, Crook was famously involved in an incident involving Standing Bear, a Ponca chief, who was arrested and forced to stand trial for defying orders to relocate with his tribe to a reservation in Oklahoma. Crook's support of Standing Bear, whose son was among those who died during the forced evacuation, is credited with helping free the chief and his followers.

Groups can arrange tours and hold receptions and dinners in the ornate dining room, which seats 18 people. Tours of Fort Omaha are also available.

Great Platte River Road Archway, Kearney
www.archway.org

An architectural marvel unlike any other, the Great Platte River Road Archway is suspended above Interstate 80 outside Kearney, resembling a covered bridge strung between two towers. The archway tells the story of 150 years of transportation along the highway it spans, once known as the Great Platte River Road. Interactive exhibits use sculptured figures, murals, recordings and video to depict eras ranging from the days of the pioneer wagon trains on up to the advent of car travel and roadside cafes.

"People are always intrigued with the structure, especially if they have driven underneath it, and then are amazed with the show that we present inside," says Jace Robinson, director of marketing.

Available for evening events, the archway accommodates about 150 people for a tour and catered reception or banquet.

Wessels Living History Farm, York
www.livinghistoryfarm.org

With family farms struggling to survive even in Heartland America, Wessels Living History Farm offers a glimpse into a vanishing world. Life on a 1920s Nebraska farm is interpreted at this 145-acre site that includes a farmhouse, a red post-and-beam barn, a granary, a poultry house and vintage tractors.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, Denton; Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island; Great Platte River Road Archway, Kearney; Wessels Living History Farm, York

ON THE SCENE

Crane Central

Nebraska's birdlife is a sight to behold

By Maria Lenhart

From late February to early April each year, central Nebraska is the scene of one of the world's great wildlife migrations, a time when an estimated 500,000 sandhill cranes converge on the Platte River Valley to feed in the dormant cornfields before continuing on to their nesting grounds in Alaska, Canada and Siberia. At dawn and sunset, legions of these magnificent birds prance and dance in the shallow waters of the Platte, providing a spectacle for viewers quietly observing them from blinds along the shore.

For groups meeting in Kearney or Grand Island, an outing to witness this extraordinary occurrence can easily be arranged, a fact I discovered on a central Nebraska fam trip last spring. Our group arrived at the **Iain Nicholson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary** (www.rowe.audubon.org) outside Kearney in the pre-dawn hours, making a short walk in the dark to a blind perched along the river. The sanctuary offers several blinds that can hold 32 people in each.



Iain Nicholson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary

Keeping quiet so the birds would not sense our presence, we listened to the chatter of thousands of cranes as the skies lightened. Then, as the sun rose, there was a great rustling of wings as clusters of birds took off in V-shaped formations on their daily quest to find sustenance in the surrounding fields.

The following day, we enjoyed another avian spectacle at the **Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center** (www.nebraskanature.org) near Grand Island, first talking with Brad Mellema, director of the Grand Island-Hall County CVB and the former director of the Crane Trust center.

Both dawn and sunset viewings of the cranes are frequently arranged for groups, he explained, along with receptions for up to 300 people in the visitors center, which offers banquet and conference space overlooking the river.

"Groups of about 20 can reserve an entire blind, but you need to do it some months in advance," Mellema says. "Larger groups can congregate on a footbridge spanning the river, which is a really awesome experience at sunset."

Teambuilding activities and catered events can be held outside or in the barn, which hosts up to 100 people, says Dale Clark, executive director. A recently added venue is a 1905 Lutheran church that was rescued from demolition, moved to the site and restored.

"The church is great for company parties, especially during the Christmas holidays," Clark says. "You can have a party for up to 125 people in the church basement and then come up into the church for a concert on the pipe organ."

Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island

www.stuhrmuseum.org

One of the nation's most important outdoor living history museums, the Stuhr Museum has historic structures from around Nebraska that were moved to its 200-acre site in Grand Island. Its most iconic structure is the magnificent Stuhr Building, which was designed by Edward Durrell Stone, who also designed the Kennedy Center for the Arts in Washington,

D.C. Currently under renovation, the mid-20th century landmark will reopen as an art museum and event space in mid-2015.

Reflecting different eras of prairie settlement, the complex includes Railroad Town, which depicts life in an 1894 Nebraska community, complete with a printing press, a jailhouse, stables, a bank, stores and residences. Other highlights include a Pawnee earth lodge, a log cabin settlement, Victorian mansions, farmsteads, Henry Fonda's boyhood home, gardens and galleries filled with Plains Indian and early settler artifacts and memorabilia.

"We host a lot of groups here—small groups as well as those of 2,000 or more," says Michael Bockoven, director of marketing. "We've had dinners in the historic homes and teambuilding events in Railroad Town."

MARIA LENHART *is a frequent contributor to* Meetings Focus.

ONLINE EXTRA! Check out the Nebraska section of MeetingsFocus.com this month for several other intriguing, group-friendly historic sites in Nebraska.

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