



Introduction

If you've ever had the pleasure of driving around a new place with a native who knows it well and loves it, you already know the kind of guidebook we have attempted to present here. We want you to be able to take this book on day trips and feel as though you have a tour guide sitting beside you, pointing out sites where events big and small have occurred, regaling you with stories, and explaining the unfamiliar features of the landscape. We hope that you will deepen your understanding of the land and its inhabitants. Mostly, we hope that you will learn to see the Kansas River Valley with new eyes, to appreciate its beauty and heritage, and to cherish this place we call home.

We refer to the Kansas River Valley, or Kaw Valley, in the title and throughout this book, but we realize that many people think of the Kaw Valley as the little strip of bottomland along the river. We might be more correct to refer to the Kansas River Watershed, but we were afraid the word "watershed" in the title might dilute our audience, if you'll pardon the pun.

A watershed is an area of land drained by a river and its tributaries. It is a scientific concept rather than a way we normally define "place." Instead, we tend to identify with political divisions—our city, our county, our state. But those divisions are more or less arbitrary, determined long ago by political issues. Kansas is a big rectangle whose borders were drawn by Congress. Only the little squiggle in the northeast corner—the Missouri River—reflects any natural features. The same is true with most counties. They are, essentially, just lines on a map.



A watershed is a natural way to divide up places. We are tied together by the rivers that run through our land. Our drinking water, the source of all life, comes from our watershed. Our businesses and industries, sources of livelihoods, depend on water. Heavy rain in the upper reaches of the river may cause flooding far downstream. Drought in the west can cause water rationing in the east. Pollution upstream can ruin a family picnic downstream. Rural or urban, we all belong to the same community of water.

The Kansas River watershed, which includes the river itself plus all its tributaries, is a huge drainage area—60,000 square miles of land in Kansas and Nebraska. The Kansas River itself is 170 miles long, beginning at the confluence of the Smoky Hill and Republican Rivers in Junction City, and ending where the Kansas River pours into the Missouri River in Kansas City, Kansas. The counties on both sides of the river are what we call the Kaw Valley. More than half the state's population lives in those 10 counties, making the Kaw Valley a very important region.

We created this tour guide as part of our work for the Kaw Valley Heritage Alliance, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting greater awareness, appreciation, and stewardship of the cultural and natural resources of the Kaw Valley. The KVHA is made up of many partner groups interested in the quality of life in this region. Partners include schools and colleges, government agencies, businesses, economic development groups, and agricultural, arts, civic, conservation, cultural, historical, and recreational organizations. All these groups understand that our quality of life depends on taking a holistic approach to our region, on recognizing that all parts of our society must work together and in balance to make the most of the many resources we have here in eastern Kansas.

Committees of the KVHA worked for months to identify all the important historical, recreational, ecological, and cultural sites in the Kaw Valley. They also created a list of concepts that they wanted to include in the book—features that apply to the land in general rather than one site in particular. We compiled all those sites and concepts, plotted them on a map, and broke



them into segments that can be visited in a half-day or so.

Aldo Leopold wrote this remark in *A Sand County Almanac*: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

The Kaw Valley is our community. And it is a land of great natural beauty, awesome biological diversity, and fascinating human history. We hope that this guidebook will help you get out there and enjoy it.

Lynn Byczynski, author

Teresa Rasmussen, president, Kaw Valley Heritage Alliance

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How to use this book

The tours in this book are designed to introduce you to important cultural, historical, and natural resources in the Kansas River Valley. The tours begin at the east, along the Missouri River, and move west toward Junction City, where the Kaw begins. You will be following the river, weaving north and south about 30 miles in each direction through the watershed.

The trips range from those where you will mostly drive through the countryside to tours where you will spend most of your time on foot. Each tour is designed to take about four hours, not including travel time to the tour’s starting point. You may spend more or less time on each trip, depending on whether you linger or breeze through.

The chapters cover one tour apiece, and, at the beginning of each chapter, you will find a map of the complete itinerary. Although each tour was created with some attempt at a cohesive pro-