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Discover Kansas’ Parks During National Park Service’s 100th Birthday

Join the party in 2016 when Kansas parks celebrate the National Park Service’s 100th birthday with some centennial carrying-on of their own. Throughout the year, visitors to the Sunflower State’s five national parks—Fort Larned, Fort Scott, Nicodemus and Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Sites and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve—will discover a full slate of festivities and, just maybe, some national treasures they didn’t know about in their own backyards!

At one of those gems, Fort Larned National Historic Site in south-central Kansas, park ranger Ellen Jones said visitors often admit, “I didn’t know this was here.” But then, the nine original buildings, historical exhibits and living-history demonstrations at the authentic 1859-1878 frontier fort leave them amazed and coming back for more.

“Our hope this year is that our centennial events bring as many people as possible to our fort,” Jones said. “If they know it’s a big celebration that only comes about once in a lifetime, then hopefully they’ll go the extra mile to see what we’re all about.”

Some 160 miles east at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near Strong City, Chief of Interpretation Heather Brown has the same goal for these 11,000 acres of wide-open spaces. “I’m really hoping the centennial encourages more visitation at all parks. That’s really important for the next 100 years, and it’s especially important to instill a sense of pride and stewardship in the next generation. The parks belong to everyone.”

With the centennial year under way, Kansas parks have a full calendar of special salutes planned, starting with the traveling theater production, “Lift Every Voice: The Black Experience in the Heartland,” at four sites. Scripted and performed by Asheville, North Carolina’s Bright Star Touring Theatre, the original play celebrates African American history in Kansas and the Midwest. “Lift Every Voice” will be performed March 5 at Emporia Arts Center (hosted by Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve), March 7 at State Street Elementary School in Topeka (in partnership with Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site), March 8 at Fort Scott National Historic Site and July 30 at Nicodemus National Historic Site. (The sites are scheduling both public and school group performances, so check ahead).

The partying continues with annual events that have a centennial spin, paired with some new events just for the occasion. Several of the parks will celebrate the National Park Service’s actual 100th birthday August 25 with a Picnic in the Park and other vintage fun. Another reason to check out Kansas parks this year or any time: admission is always free.

Here’s just a sampling of what’s ahead at each site:

--At Fort Scott National Historic Site, an 1840s military post with 20 historic structures and parade grounds, plan to troop in for the town-wide Good Ol’ Days June 4, Vintage Baseball and Picnic in the Park August 27, Native American dancing and music at the Native Neighbors event October 21-22 and the annual Candlelight Tour December 2-3.

--Fort Larned National Historic Site, an authentically-preserved Army fort from the Indian Wars era, will host a battery of events, ranging from its annual Memorial Day Weekend May 28-30 and Picnic in the Park Centennial Celebration August 27 to its Candlelight Tours October 8 and Christmas Open House December 10.

--In honor of the centennial, the 1,800-mile American Solar Challenge solar-car race through seven states will stop at nine national parks, including Brown v. Board National Historic Site in Topeka on August 3. Visitors can come by the checkpoint to view and learn about the unique-looking solar cars, and visit with the park rangers about Brown v. Board. Located at Monroe Elementary School, once a segregated school in Topeka, the interactive museum documents the landmark decision that ended legal segregation in America’s public schools.

--At Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near Strong City, visitors can experience the 11,000 acres of sweeping vistas on guided bus tours through the prairie (offered daily May – October), tours of the 1880s limestone mansion, three-story limestone barn and one-room schoolhouse, and hikes on 40 miles of trails. Add a centennial twist to your visit at the Cowboy Holiday on July 2, Picnic in the Park August 25 and the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve’s own 20th birthday celebration November 12.

--Nicodemus National Historic Site in northwest Kansas and its five historic buildings preserve the oldest and only remaining all-black settlement west of the Mississippi River. Learn more about this tiny community, established in 1877, at the Visitor Center in the historic Nicodemus Township Hall. Then join in the settlement’s annual Nicodemus Homecoming Celebration on July 28-31, which this year marks not only the National Park Service centennial, but also the 150th anniversary of the Buffalo Soldiers and 20th anniversary of the Nicodemus National Historic Site.

Lauren Blacik, assistant centennial coordinator for the National Park Service Midwest Region, explained “The whole goal of the centennial is to help people find their parks, become more aware of them and care about them.”

People like Ann Arbor, Michigan, resident Lia De Biasi are doing just that—discovering Kansas’ parks for the first time. De Biasi and a friend traveled to Kansas in January and, in two days, visited all five parks and also “climbed my way up the 297 stairs of the state capitol for a spectacular view over Topeka.”

Although it was her first trip to Kansas, she was assigned a report in fourth grade on the state, “and since then, I’ve always felt a connection with Kansas,” De Biasi said. She also credits her dad for her love of travel. “He’d take us on road trips across the country and stop at all of the national parks along the way,” she recalled.

Parks aside, De Biasi found the Kansas landscape “gorgeous” and added, “I’ve never seen so many stars in a night sky in my entire life. My friend and I even pulled over in the middle of nowhere to get out of the car and watch the stars actually twinkle!”

The parks and park rangers got similar glowing reviews: “I’ve visited a decent amount of historical forts for a 20-something-year-old and the preservation of Fort Larned was beautiful, and Brown v. Board looked untouched from the time of its prime,” De Biasi said. “Also, my friend and I ran into two amazing park rangers in Kansas that we will talk about till the day we die!”

Following her whirlwind trip across the state to see the five parks, De Biasi offered some veteran advice: “I would tell people to just get out and explore. There is nothing more rewarding than putting down the history books and actually experiencing the sights first hand.”

And for those Kansans who sometimes tell Fort Scott ranger Barry Geertsen, ”We’ve been driving by this place for years and finally decided to stop,” the centennial is the perfect reason to pull in and finally discover what’s in their own backyards. “If people have wonderful, unforgettable experiences right in the state they live, then that’s a centennial success!” concludes the National Park Service’s Lauren Blacik.

Visit FindYourPark.com and nps.gov to learn about parks and centennial events in Kansas and across the country. While visiting Kansas’ National Parks be sure to use the hashtags #FindYourPark and #NoPlaceLikeKS to share your story.

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