

Kansas Symbols

by Lorrie Beck

On January 29, 1861, Kansas became the 34th state admitted to the Union. With a recorded history stretching back to the early 16th century, the state - and its people – has seen many changes over the years. From Francisco Vasquez de Coronado exploring southwestern and southcentral portions of the territory on horseback in 1541, to the aircraft industry in Wichita that typifies the 21st century, Kansas is a state with a rich and diverse history.

The state motto, “Ad Astra per Aspera,” means “To the stars through difficulties.” According to the Office of the Governor of Kansas: “This motto refers not only to the pioneering spirit of the early settlers, but also the difficult times Kansas went through before becoming a state. The anti-slavery forces and slavery proponents waged battles in the electoral process as well as on the battlefield. Kansas earned the nickname “Bloody Kansas” because of the war regarding slavery, much of which was fought on Kansas’ soil.”

Kansas nicknames include the Wheat State, Jayhawker State and Sunflower State. “Kansas” is derived from the Dakota Sioux word “Kansa” which means “people of the south wind.” Wind is a constant in Kansas, and it is wind that pollinates the prairie grasses which dominate the landscape. Grasslands in Kansas stretch east to west and north to south. From the tallgrass prairies in the east through the mixed grasses in the central section, to short grass prairies in the western portion of the state, Kansas epitomizes the spirit of the Great Plains.

Many famous Americans have hailed from Kansas. This list of “Who’s Who” includes: politicians such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower, U.S. Senators Bob Dole and Arlen Specter and Vice President Charles Curtis; aviatrix Amelia Earhart; inventor George Washington Carver; auto industry executive Walter Chrysler; athletes Wilt Chamberlin, Maurice Greene, Billy Mills, John Riggins, Jim Ryun, Barry Sanders, Gale Sayers, Tom Watson and Lynette Woodard; actors Ed Asner, Kirstie Alley, Annette Bening, Dennis Hopper, Don Johnson, Buster Keaton, Emmett Kelly, Hattie McDaniel, Milburn Stone and Vivian Vance; journalist William Allen White; poet Langston Hughes and photographer Gordon Parks.

For much of its 150-year history, Kansas has had a rural economy based on agriculture, supplemented by oil, railroads and aircraft manufacturing. Modern cities with up-to-date businesses dot the state; however, landscapes of yesterday still exist here that allow us to imagine the days of the Wild West, pioneers and Native Americans who first called Kansas home. In 1807, Zebulon Pike compared the area that would someday become Kansas to the sandy deserts of Africa, while explorer Major Stephen H. Long in 1820 described the region as the Great American Desert. But for those who know Kansas, there is nothing further from the truth. Dorothy could attest to this as she and her little dog, Toto, made their way through many difficulties in the fictional Land of Oz before finally deciding to return to Kansas because “There’s no place like home!”

The Kansas symbols featured on this poster embody the spirit of our state. Enjoy this poster as we celebrate the sesquicentennial of Kansas: 1861-2011.

Profiles

By Amanda Alessi and Kevan Boss

STATE BIRD — WESTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella neglecta*) — In 1925, Kansas school children selected the Western Meadowlark to represent their state. It was not until 1937, however, that the bird was officially adopted by the state legislature. Found throughout Kansas, except for the southeastern portion of the state, the Western Meadowlark is a common, but not ordinary, bird of the prairie. It is a large songbird with a yellow throat, chest and belly and a black “V” on the chest. Visually, it is difficult to distinguish from the Eastern Meadowlark; however, their songs are very distinct. A watery and fluty song is often heard from Western Meadowlark males perched atop fence posts along prairie roadsides. Nests are built on the ground, woven within large clumps of grass and occasionally topped with a grass roof. Females lay three to six eggs which are white with dark spots. Upon hatching, the young are blind, helpless and covered with sparse down feathers. Females are the primary incubators and caretakers of the brood. Males are territorial and may have up to three females within an area of three to fifteen acres. As year-round residents, Western Meadowlarks are ground foragers feeding primarily on insects and small invertebrates during the warm months and grain and seeds in the winter. Found in open country including native grasslands, pastures, agricultural fields and roadsides, Western Meadowlarks often form flocks in open fields.

STATE AMPHIBIAN — BARRED TIGER SALAMANDER (*Ambystoma mavortium*) — This critter was adopted as the Kansas state amphibian in 1994 through the efforts of second grade students in Wichita. The Barred Tiger Salamander is found across the state and is the largest terrestrial salamander in the world. They range from the northern Great Plains to northern Mexico and from Idaho to Florida, excluding the Appalachian Mountains. They are recognized by a dark brown to black body with yellow spots and bars that give it a “tiger” look. Their front feet sport four toes while their back feet feature five. These secretive, nocturnal amphibians usually inhabit burrows made by other animals. They are most active during late winter and early spring when they are looking for suitable wetland habitat for breeding and laying eggs. The female will lay her eggs in a small pool of water that is not large enough to support predatory fish. The larvae, which look like adults with external gills, usually lose their gills and become adults by late summer. Barred Tiger Salamanders eat earthworms, insects and small amphibians and small mammals.

STATE TREE — EASTERN COTTONWOOD (*Populus deltoides*) — Appropriately called ‘the pioneer tree of Kansas’, the Eastern Cottonwood was a valuable resource for early settlers. Offering shade, fuel and often the hope of finding water, the silhouette of a tall cottonwood tree was a welcomed sight. The Eastern Cottonwood is recognized by its shimmering leaves that shake at even the slightest breeze. Before dropping from the tree in the fall, leaves turn bright yellow. Cottonwoods are dioecious. The tiny cotton-like seeds are produced by the female, dispersed by the wind and give the tree its name. Cottonwoods up to one hundred feet tall and five feet in diameter are not unusual. A long-lived tree, cottonwoods may live 50 to 200 years. The heartwood of cottonwoods is relatively soft, rots easily and the resulting hollows provide shelter for squirrels, raccoons, opossums, owls and other cavity-dwelling critters. A fast growing tree, the successful growth of cottonwoods on a homestead often convinced homesteaders to remain on their claim. The strong influence of the Eastern Cottonwood on Kansas history earned its placement as the state tree in 1937.

STATE ANIMAL — AMERICAN BISON (*Bos bison*) — Characterized by an extremely large head, shoulder hump and small hind quarters, the American Bison is an icon of the Great Plains. Both males and females have two curved sharp horns and a thick brown coat. Weighing up to one ton, they are the heaviest land animal in North America. Despite their massive size, bison are quick and agile, running up to 40 miles per hour and leaping higher than 36 inches. Bison are grazers, feeding on grasses, herbs, sedges and shrubs. Declared the official animal of the state in 1955, the American Bison has a rich history on the plains. Bison once roamed from southern Canada to northern Mexico and from the Continental Divide to the Alleghany Mountains in Pennsylvania. A vital resource for the Plains Indians, bison provided food, clothing, shelter and fuel. Prior to 1800, 40-60 million bison were estimated to have inhabited the Great Plains. By the late 1880s, less than 1,000 remained. The last wild bison in Kansas was killed north of Elkhart, at Point of Rocks, in 1879. Presently, the population is secure in public and privately held herds. The best viewing opportunities exist at Maxwell Wildlife Refuge near Canton and Finney Game Refuge near Garden City.

STATE GRASS — LITTLE BLUESTEM (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) — This native perennial was once the most common grass in the Great Plains and is still found in every county in Kansas. It is tolerant of droughts with a dense root system extending five to eight feet into the soil. Young, greenish-blue to purplish shoots begin growing in early April, reaching two to five feet in height. Flowers bloom from July to September; later, fuzzy white seed heads appear. After the first frost reaches the prairie, the stems of this grass turn coppery red. Little Bluestem is especially nutritious and is a favorite among grazers on the Great Plains. This bunchgrass also provides food for caterpillars of some butterfly species and safe cover for ground-nesting birds. Representing the prairie ecosystems across Kansas, Little Bluestem was adopted as the state grass in 2010.

STATE INSECT — HONEYBEE (*Apis mellifera*) — Brightly colored to frighten predators and deter honey thieves, honeybees are social insects. In the wild, a hive may have 20,000 individuals consisting of three types of bees. The most commonly seen bee is the worker bee, which is a sterile female. The main responsibilities of the worker bees include foraging for food, water and resources for the colony; hive building and maintenance; and caring for larvae. When worker bees return to the hive with a nectar sample, they convey information about the location and type of food by doing a specialized dance. Drones are the only males in the colony. Their only job is to mate with the queen. The queen bee is larger than other bees, and her job is to lay the eggs that will become the hives' next generation of workers. The queen is able to lay 1,500 eggs per day, and usually live less than two years. Honeybees create honey from collected nectar. During the winter, they use the honey as an energy source thus allowing them to remain active during the cold, harsh Kansas winters. A Honeybee's stinger is a modified egg-laying tube; therefore, only female bees (worker and queen bees) have the ability to sting. Worker bees have a barbed stinger that can only be used once; the queen's is not barbed and can be used multiple times. Honeybees play an essential role as pollinators and fertilize many wild and cultivated plants. This, along with their honey-making abilities, has earned the Honeybee the award of state insect in 16 states, including Kansas in 1976.

STATE REPTILE — ORNATE BOX TURTLE (*Terrapene ornate*) — In 1986, celebrations of the 125th birthday of Kansas included the adoption of the Ornate Box Turtle as the state reptile. One of only two terrestrial turtles found on the Great Plains, it is easily distinguished from the Eastern Box Turtle by a pattern of yellow lines radiating on their dark brown scutes. This pattern can be seen on both the carapace and the hinged plastron. This hinge enables the turtle to pull inside and tightly close its shell, protecting all limbs, head and tail from hungry raccoons, coyotes and other predators. Ornate Box Turtles are active from April to October and prefer prairie habitats over woodlands. Although they are omnivorous, young growing turtles primarily eat meat and adults eat less meat and more vegetation. With their red eyes, male Ornate Box Turtles are easy to distinguish from females who have yellow-brownish eyes. Female Ornate Box Turtles tend to be slightly larger than the males, and both sexes are long lived, often living up to thirty years. In early summer, female Ornate Box Turtles dig a hole in loamy soil with their strong hind claws into which they lay two to eight leathery-shelled eggs. Letting nature take its course, the young turtles hatch in approximately two months. The size of a quarter when they emerge, the young lack parental protection as turtles are terrible mothers!

STATE FLOWER — WILD NATIVE SUNFLOWER (*Helianthus annuus*) — The 1903 bill adopting the Wild Native Sunflower as the State Flower and State Floral Emblem describes the significance of the flower stating, “This flower has to all Kansans a historic symbolism which speaks of frontier days, winding trails, pathless prairie and is full of the life and glory of the past, the pride of the present and richly emblematic of the majesty of the golden future, and is a flower which has given Kansas the world-wide name, ‘The Sunflower State.’” While traveling through the Great Plains between July and October, they are a familiar sight in prairies, fields and along roadsides. These hardy annuals grow up to eight feet tall and have multiple flower heads which are composed of two types of flowers. The outer ring of flowers consists of ray flowers which are sterile and can range in color from yellow to orange and maroon. The inner circle holds 1,000 to 2,000 disc flowers which will develop into seeds. The seeds are arranged in two spirals which run in opposite directions, an impressive and efficient design for filling the flower head with seeds. The wide, open flower head provides a large landing pad for butterflies searching for nectar and seeds provide food for birds in the fall.

STATE SOIL — HARNEY SILT LOAM (Not illustrated on this poster) The word “Harney” is an adaptation of an ancient Wichita Indian word “harahey,” meaning “people” – a reference to the Pawnee Indians. Kansas has more acres of prairie soil than any other state. This soil was crucial in establishing agriculture as the states’ primary industry. High quality prairie soil takes over 500 years to build up one inch of topsoil, yet in one year, erosion can cause the loss of one inch of topsoil from an exposed crop field. The designation of Harney Silt Loam as the state soil in 1990 serves to commemorate its significance to Kansas agriculture. This ideal prairie soil covers nearly four million acres in western Kansas and has distinctive physical and chemical properties that produce high yielding cash crops and nutritious pastureland for feeding livestock. Because of this quality and highly productive soil, Kansas ranks as one of the top producers of wheat, grain, sorghum and silage in the nation. Some consider this fertile soil to be one of Kansas’ most valuable resources.

Glossary

annuals – plants that live only one year or season

brood - a group of offspring

bunchgrass - a grass that grows in distinct, separated clumps

carapace – the upper part of a turtle shell

colony - a group of organisms of the same type living or growing together

dioecious - having separate male and female plants

erosion - condition in which the earth's surface is worn away by the action of water and wind

grazers – herbivores who feed on small portions of food throughout the day

omnivorous – uses both plants and animals for food

perennial - a plant that lives more than one year

plastron – the lower part of a turtle shell

scutes - bony plates or scales on turtles' shells

terrestrial - lives predominantly or entirely on land

topsoil - rich, upper layer of soil, with highest concentration of organic matter

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS: Big Well, Greensburg * Castle Rock & Monument Rocks, Gove County * Cheyenne Bottoms & Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Barton & Stafford counties * Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene * Kansas Cosmosphere & Space Center, Hutchinson * Kansas Underground Salt Museum, Hutchinson * St. Fidelis Church, Victoria * Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve/Flint Hills, Chase County *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – ARCHITECTURE: Chase County Courthouse, Cottonwood Falls * Cooper Barn, Colby * Fromme-Birney Round Barn, Mullinville * Holy Cross Church, Pfeifer * Kansas State Capitol, Topeka * Lebold Mansion, Abilene * Ness County Bank, Ness City * Seelye Mansion, Abilene *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – ART: Blue Sky Sculpture, Newton * Buffalo Bill Bronze Sculpture, Oakley * John Steuart Curry Murals, State Capitol, Topeka * Garden of Eden/Lucas, Grassroots Art Mecca * Keeper of the Plains, Wichita * Gordon Parks, Fort Scott * St. Mary's Catholic Church, St. Benedict * Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – COMMERCE: * Big Brutus, West Mineral * Brant's Meat Market, Lucas * Frontenac Bakery, Frontenac * Hemslojd, Inc., Lindsborg * MarCon Pies, Washington * Moon Marble Company, Bonner Springs * Stafford County Flour Mills, Hudson * Vonada Stone Company, Sylvan Grove *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – CUISINE: * Bobo's Drive In, Topeka * Brookville Hotel, Abilene * Cozy Inn, Salina * Crawford County Fried Chicken * Free State Brewing Company, Lawrence * Guy & Mae's Tavern, Williamsburg * Hays House 1857 Restaurant & Tavern, Council Grove * Wheat Field's Bakery, Lawrence *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – GEOGRAPHY: * Alcove Spring, near Blue Rapids * Coronado Heights, near Lindsborg * Four-State Lookout, White Cloud * Gyp Hills Scenic Drive & Gypsum Hills Scenic Byway, Barber & Comanche counties * Konza Prairie, Manhattan * Maxwell Wildlife Refuge, Canton * Mushroom Rock State Park, Ellsworth County & Rock City, near Minneapolis * Pillsbury Crossing Wildlife Area, near Manhattan *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – HISTORY: * 1930s Dust Bowl to Gas Exploration, Historic Adobe Museum, Ulysses * Boot Hill Museum/Historic Dodge City * Council Grove, Santa Fe Trail National Historic Landmark * Fort Scott National Historic Site, Fort Scott * Historic Fort Leavenworth, Leavenworth * Historic Fort Riley, Junction City * Kansas Museum of History, Topeka * Kanza Tribe and Lewis & Clark's Independence Creek, Atchison *

THE 8 WONDERS OF KANSAS – PEOPLE: * Amelia Earhart, Atchison * Buffalo Soldiers, Fort Leavenworth * Carry A. Nation, Medicine Lodge, Kiowa * Emil J. Kapaun, Pilsen * George Washington Carver, Minneapolis, Beeler * James Naismith, Lawrence * Martin & Osa Johnson, Chanute * William Allen White, Emporia *