



BYWAY LENGTH: 47.2 MILES

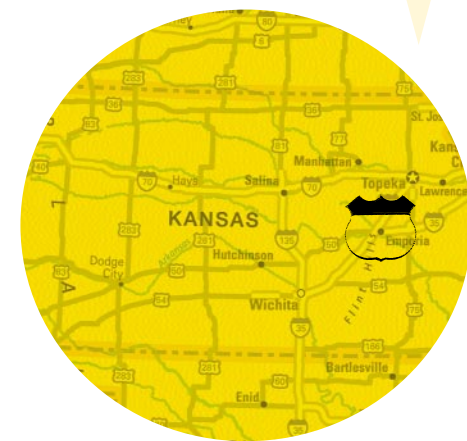


Overlook along the largest remaining tallgrass prairie system in the U.S.

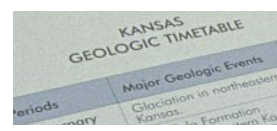
stone reminiscent of by early settlers in providing ties to the people who lived in the Flint Hills

a place for the visitor to see the sea of grass and sky and a close up view of native grasses and wildflowers.

VALUING THE RESOURCE AND EDUCATING VISITORS



IN KANSAS, LOCAL INPUT HELPED GUIDE THE DESIGN OF AN OVERLOOK THAT INVITES VISITORS TO STEP INTO THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE



PROJECT: Flint Hills Scenic Byway Overlook

BYWAY: Flint Hills Scenic Byway (K-177)

STATE: Kansas

STARTED: Discretionary grant received: February 1996
Project let for construction: October, 1999

COMPLETED: December, 2000

TOTAL COST: \$429,652.00

STATE HIGHWAY FUND: \$189,094.03

DISCRETIONARY SCENIC BYWAY GRANT: \$240,557.97

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THE FLINT HILLS SCENIC BYWAY was designated a Kansas Scenic Byway in 1995. The byway stretches across the Flint Hills of Kansas. Following Route 177 deep into the heart of the Flint Hills, the sky expands and the land begins to rise and fall through the rolling hills of the tallgrass prairie. Much of the land along the byway has remained unchanged for thousands of years. The Plains Indians, such as the Kaw and Osage, made the prairie their home using pieces of chert, or flint, found here for their tools and weapons. Early settlers crossed over the land, finding it too steep and rocky to farm.

From Council Grove to Cassoday, the Flint Hills' tawny limestone bluffs and waving seas of grass greet visitors as they journey into the history of the American West.

By listening closely to the land and the locals, designers of the Flint Hills Scenic Byway Overlook created an aesthetic design that complements the state's tallgrass prairie.



PROJECT FEATURES:

- Overlook along the largest remaining tallgrass prairie ecosystem in the U.S.
- Uses limestone reminiscent of walls built by early settlers in the area, providing ties to the land and the people who live in the Flint Hills
- Offers a place for the visitor to enjoy the seas of grass and sky and a close up view of native grasses and wildflowers



What Happened

Noted for being the largest remaining tallgrass prairie ecosystem in the United States, Flint Hills represents a significant state resource. To showcase the beauty of the area, local communities expressed their support for construction of a visitor facility during the corridor management planning process.

Initially, the design proposed for the overlook was a fairly standard wood and stone structure. During the planning process, however, community representatives from the Flint Hills Scenic Byway Management Committee asserted that such a building would be vulnerable to damage from spring prairie fires.

Intent to design an overlook that would be durable, unobtrusive and incorporate the use of native materials, the Management Committee worked diligently with local interests, the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT), and the design team to redefine the project. The result: an earthen observation mound, surrounded by a limestone retaining wall, vegetated with native wildflowers.

From the outset, the aesthetics of the project and its potential impact on the natural environment were principal concerns. The linear design of the overlook blends gracefully with the broad vistas and endless sky of the prairie. The use of local limestone for the retaining wall is reminiscent of the walls built by early settlers and mirrors the natural rock outcroppings visible along the byway. Covering the structure is a bed of native grasses and wildflowers that naturally extend the line of the overlook into the landscape.

PARTNERS

Flint Hills Scenic Byway Management Committee
Audubon Society of Kansas
Kansas Wildflower Society
Quail Unlimited
Kansas State University
Emporia State University
Kansas DOT
Kansas State Scenic Byways Committee

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Richard Ross
William Leek
Ron Klataske
Gary Weisenberger
Debbie Divine
Richard Yates

To minimize the impact of the project on the ecosystem, construction limits were identified to mitigate the destruction of native plants. During an inventory of the site, a KDOT team identified over sixty-four species of plants. To preserve the local ecotype species, the team harvested native grass and wildflower seed from the right-of-way adjoining the site and added it to the seed mix purchased to plant on the overlook.

To highlight the natural and cultural history of the area, a series of interpretive panels were developed. Considerable thought was given to the content to make the signs both informative and entertaining. Effort was also made to supplement the information being provided at other visitor attractions. The signs are both lighthearted and educational providing visitors with information ranging from how the Flint Hills got their name, to the top six reasons some of the grass on the tallgrass prairie isn't tall, to write-ups on the local flora and fauna.

To provide visitors with additional information on life in the tallgrass prairie and its natural resources, a series of complementary publications are also being developed.

Partners

Design of the overlook and the interpretive panels was a highly collaborative effort. Advice from a variety of community members and experts from local educational institutions defined the project. Partners included the Flint Hills Scenic Byway Management Committee, faculty from Kansas State University Forestry and Recreation Department, Emporia State University Biology Department, the Audubon Society of Kansas, the Kansas Wildflower Society and Quail Unlimited. Deborah Divine, Program Manager for the Kansas Scenic Byway Program, played a pivotal role by coordinating project activities and serving as a liaison between the community, KDOT and the design team.

Comprised of representatives from the four communities and three counties along the byway, the Management Committee provided valuable input during the entire design process. Members reviewed plans, made important design suggestions, and worked to address the concerns of adjacent landowners. The Committee was also instrumental in developing the themes for the interpretive panels and was active in providing background material that was later incorporated into the content of the panels.

Project Benefits

The overlook is one of the few places along the byway where travelers can pull off the roadway, park, get out of their vehicles and enjoy the tranquility and vastness of the prairie. It is also provides visitors and residents a chance to view a wide variety of native wildflowers and grasses and learn more about the history of the area.

The project has generated a lot of interest and spurred a variety of partnering opportunities. The Garden Clubs of Kansas has approached the Kansas Scenic Byways Program Manager about undertaking a project to install temporary wildflower identification markers during the peak blooming season. The Audubon Society of Kansas, Kansas Wildflower Society, Quail Unlimited and other volunteer organizations are working with KDOT and the Kansas Scenic Byways Program on the overlook site as part of demonstration project area for integrated roadside vegetation management along the byway. KDOT is also working with these organizations on the Prairie Passage Project, an interstate conservation and preservation project. The Land Institute, a nearby, internationally recognized program that researches sustainable agriculture technology, has expressed an interest in helping maintain the overlook. Additionally, The Flint Hills Scenic Byways Management Committee has investigated possible partnerships with the local schools as part of a program currently underway to teach the importance of place in the high school curriculum.

Key Consideration

Listen to the Land and the Locals - The Flint Hills Scenic Byway Overlook Project reflects a creative design partnership solution. It demonstrates the importance of involving the local community early on in design decisions. The Byway Management Committee changed the thinking on the project by pointing out that a wood structure would be prone to damage from spring prairie fires and recommended that native limestone be used. The result is a context sensitive design solution that sits lightly on the land and complements the horizontal landscape.

