

“Platte County’s Legacy: What Best Defines Our History?”

Why We Are The Way We Are

Look carefully at the past of Platte County and you will find elements of our history that have lingered and prospered here along the banks of the Missouri River. In the mid-19th century, the United States was a country in motion, then as it is today. Exploration of the west and then the desire of the growing citizenry of the United States for more wilderness to tame, gave the region which became Platte County an identity reflected in the settlers who came here to explore new territory, provide provisions for the trek west and to facilitate their transportation needs. Transportation of goods and people by wagons, steamboat and then rail dominated the lives of the restless pioneers and immigrants whose destinations lay to the west. On the banks of the Missouri River, they stopped to contemplate the crossing and the unknown territory beyond. Many stayed, seeing opportunities for themselves in farming the rich Platte County soil and becoming tradesmen, merchants and facilitators of those continuing their journeys. Little towns like Parkville, Weston and Iatan became industrious river ports of call, necessary to the traveling public and outstripping early Kansas City in size. Have we here in Platte County not continued this tradition of travel and transport? We soon became the heart of America, the hub of a circle of expansion reaching border to border and coast to coast. One part of that early pattern has continued, a legacy of movement of goods and people. The Trans World Airlines hub which dominated the area for decades, employed hundreds of Platte County citizens at the Overhaul Base and Training Center facility and opened the way to nationwide and international travel for them and their families. Curiosity and interest in the world outside the county could be indulged by a population which otherwise might have felt landlocked and provincial. Kansas City International Airport survives in Platte County, connecting both us and the entire Kansas City Metropolitan area to the world.

Our location in the center of the country put us on a path crisscrossed from many directions and we benefitted from a variety of travelers seeking their fortunes. Many found Platte County a good place to stop and settle down and our current population reflects those same family names, giving our present citizenry a shared heritage with their founding fathers. Many families moved here from Kentucky where they had farmed tobacco and they found the soil and climate here amenable to their crop of choice and continued successfully growing burley tobacco to this day, dotting the county with its distinctive slatted barns. The bottom land replenished yearly by the muddy Missouri River was ideal for row crops and became another of the ready-made assets which prevail. We have had agriculture at our heart since the beginning.

Early on, the thirst for spirits arrived in Platte County and has since been richly slaked through a variety of industries. McCormick Distilling, founded by Ben Holladay in 1856 is the oldest continuously operating distillery in the United States. The Weston Brewing Company was established in 1842 by a German immigrant. In 1901 it became the Royal Brewing Company and actually sponsored the first Kansas City Royals baseball team. German settlers planted vineyards in the mid-1800s that provided stock sturdy enough to save the French wine industry when disease ravaged their vineyards. Platte County boasts several excellent wineries and the agreeable soil supports a variety of grapes. There exist many plentiful and enjoyable venues for liquid refreshment in Platte County today as residents and visitors enjoy the bounty.

Platte County has cultivated the arts and this may be the result of the devotion and the encouragement of the women's clubs and ladies' auxiliaries that insisted on music lessons and performance, choirs and choral groups and the organizations like the Chautauqua Circuits that proliferated and were welcomed here in the early twentieth century. We have seen Community Theater introduced throughout the county over the years and enthusiastically supported for decades by the residents. We enjoy theater arts at Park University, established in Parkville as Park College early in Platte County history, its student-built MacKay Hall is an historic landmark in Parkville. Park has grown into an expansive educational institution that has gracefully adapted to changing times, while visibly retaining its legacy. We marvel at the virtuosity displayed by the students at the International Center for Music there, and we enjoy concerts by the Northland Symphony. Our town festivals are dotted with musical performances of many varieties. Platte County excels in its fine public educational opportunities, our well cared for neighborhoods, our fine museums and historic homes, preserved and celebrated by our citizenry and shared with the public. We value our parks and camp grounds and other public venues and the appeal we have for tourists and visitors. Platte is a family-oriented county with many opportunities for nurturing and enriching our children's lives. We Platte Countians appreciate the physical beauty of our surroundings. The vista of the wide Missouri River and the surrounding bluffs (our lush little mountains) replete with natural springs and streams have provided inspiration for outdoor recreation that draws us outside and prompts us to consider carefully our zoning and planning with an eye towards the future. We value the presence of the indigenous wildlife and try to preserve habitat for its sake and for ours. Our county is well-off by Missouri standards and the disparities of income are generally compensated for by the availability of church and charitable generosity. The incidence of criminal activity is handled well by law enforcement and adjudicated by an efficient court system. The lawlessness of the frontier years has been leavened by remorse and reason.

The citizens of Platte County have resisted change in personal ways that depend on circumstance and opportunity. Natural events, like the unpredictable course of our river boundary have changed the complexion of our landscape and the personalities of the towns that suffer the indignities of flooding. The increasing demands for energy have caused development and dissension over the sources and solutions of electric power usage. We have learned to compromise and, grudgingly or cordially, agree to disagree.

The history of Platte County is fraught with many aspects of our national dramas and traumas. The Native American tragedies of exploitation by the white man echoed the incidence of their originally tricking us by selling us territory they didn't own in the Platte County region. The impact of slavery, the divisive years of the Civil War, the Mormon expulsions from the region, the Border Wars with Kansas; all these events had their influences in and on Platte County. We were bequeathed a legacy of tense and fractious partisanship that pitted North against South and those differences have insinuated themselves into our politics today. As the allegiances of the political parties in America realigned as times changed their roles, the North/South identities, the Feds and the Rebs, the abolitionists and the bushwhackers have sharpened and renamed themselves and each other as Conservatives and Liberals, Right wingers and Progressives, Socialists and Tea-Partiers, Tree-Huggers and Red-Necks. These hard-drawn lines of different points of view are undeniably part of our legacy, bubbling up in less violent clashes than in the past, but always threatening to disrupt our civic discourse. Yet we usually pull together when the chips are down. Our patriotism is amply and appropriately displayed and we serve our county and our country through volunteerism and service. The sense of community, the appreciation of each other's contributions and the desire for peaceful co-existence compel us to urge ourselves to stand together for the common good. We could not have achieved this stature had it not been that we have been influenced by the lessons of our history, and our adherence to the codes of behavior insisted upon by the well-intentioned citizens who taught and raised us. Perfect civic harmony can be elusive, but we strive, as our forebears did, to represent our parcel of Missouri with honor.