Generous culture and a ‘great sense of volunteerism’ keep tourists, residents feeling pulled to Keith County

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Each year Interstate 80 is crowded with cars, campers and RVs headed for Nebraska’s largest reservoir and certainly one of the state’s premiere recreation areas. The same goes for I-76, bringing folks from the Front Range and points east in Colorado. Last year, Lake McConaughy recorded 1.4 million visits, with people enjoying boating, water skiing, fishing, wind surfing, scuba diving, and lounging on miles and miles of white sand beaches.

What a gem! But it certainly is not the only thing that makes Ogallala and the Keith County area attractive to both tourists and longtime residents. If you take exit 145 into Paxton, about 20 miles east of Ogallala, you’re probably on your way to Ole’s Big Game Steakhouse & Lounge, with more than 200 mounted trophies — a must-do for anyone traveling from the east. Folks who live in the area also frequent the library and the community center, places that are made possible through public/private partnerships, and generous contributions through the Keith County Foundation Fund.

Part of what makes Keith County such a fun place to visit is its wild and romantic Old West history. Travelers often tread up Boot Hill, the final resting place for cowboys and settlers in the late 1800s. Then they stop at the Mansion on the Hill, a magnificent 1887 home, spruced up a few years ago with help from the local historical society and Keith County Foundation Fund.

The one-of-a-kind Little Church of Keystone is a remarkable stop. The pioneer town was too small to have a Catholic church and a Protestant church. Its founders, 11 teenage girls and their sponsor, Georgia Paxton, came up with an innovative solution. They built a single church with reversible pews, with a Protestant altar at one end, and a Catholic altar at the other. It served 75 churchgoers. In 1908, Pope Leo XIII granted a dispensation for the dual faith church. Today, thanks once again to dedicated volunteers, and financial assistance from Keith County Foundation Fund, the church is in good repair and open to visitors by appointment.

Ogallala’s Wild West Soap Box Derby is considered one of the finest tracks in the nation. Kids who race on the track and families who gather in the “Bull Pen” building to learn how to construct safe and fast cars are likely unaware and that both were completed with significant support from the Keith County Foundation Fund.

Members of the Fund’s advisory committee say people in Keith County share a strong heritage based on the historic — and still incredibly significant — cattle industry, as well as today’s recreation and tourism industry. But tourists come and go with the seasons. What makes Keith County a great place to stay — to work, play and raise a family — is the community spirit.

“People are friendly and welcoming here. There’s a great sense of volunteerism with people who look toward the future,” said Mary Weber, a Keith County Foundation Fund advisory committee member.

The Fund has been an active affiliated fund of Nebraska Community Foundation since 2000. That was the year two brothers, identical twins Harvey and Howard Kenfield, donated their private collection of petrified wood, gemstones, Indian artifacts and western art to the community, with the stipulation that their Petrified Wood & Art Gallery stay in Ogallala.

Nebraska Community Foundation helped facilitate this transfer, which gave a group of local volunteer enthusiasts time to organize their own nonprofit to carry out the brothers’ wishes.

The Friends of the Gallery, a private foundation, now owns the collection. The prize-winning artwork by the Kenfield brothers depicts buildings of the Old West, birds, flowers and insects, all made from small pieces of natural-colored petrified wood collected from sites across the western states, Brazil, Turkey, Madagascar, Australia, and Europe. Visitors marvel at the music box creations — buildings or scenes made of petrified wood and mounted on polished wood music boxes.

The gallery’s curator, Kathy Zeller, says that the brothers’ personal story is as unusual as the gallery itself. In the early 1950s they were drafted and served together in the same infantry division in Korea before coming home and returning to manufacturing jobs in Ogallala. Their spare
time during the following decades was devoted to their passion of collecting petrified wood, gems and artifacts.

The brothers married later in life, to two ladies, coincidentally named Glenda and Glenva. They each purchased one acre of adjoining land south of Ogallala where they built homes for their families and their first Petrified Wood Gallery, which was included in National Geographic’s book, “Best-Out-of-the-Way Places to Visit in the U.S.”

Today the collection is displayed in a spacious gallery near Ogallala’s famous Front Street. It is open year-round and annually hosts about 14,000 visitors from around the world. Curator Kathy Zeller says that most days you will find the Kenfield twins, age 89, volunteering their time, answering questions, watching expressions of awe and admiration, and enjoying the rewards of a lifelong labor of love.

Precious assets like the Petrified Wood & Art Gallery could not exist or function without people and resources devoted to their future. This kind of stewardship often happens under the radar and out of sight.

Do visiting boaters, swimmers and campers think about volunteer emergency medical personnel — on call all the time — who are highly trained and well equipped to handle emergencies on the lake? Probably not.

However, the citizens of Keith County do. They show their appreciation by contributing to the Keith County Foundation Fund.

The Fund has awarded more than $263,000 dollars in grants for community improvements. Much of this support has been invested in the county’s four community ambulance squads and fire and rescue departments, including Lake McConaughy special operations. One recent grant purchased an LED light tower, which will assist volunteer responders by illuminating a space the size of a football field.

The people of Keith County take care of their visitors, but also they take care of their own.

Whether it is lending a helping hand to the community senior centers with health and wellness equipment, or building a brand new library with the next generation in mind, “The Keith County Foundation Fund has provided a means for us to dream,” said Mary Weber. “Since 2004, the Fund has given out more than a quarter of a million dollars. That’s amazing. The more we grow, the more we can give out each year.”

Leaders of the Keith County Foundation Fund have their sights set on building an unrestricted endowment, which will ensure funding for future community investments is readily available. An unrestricted endowment is a permanent fund whose principal remains in place. Only a portion of the investment earnings are used to make community grants each year — the remainder continues to grow.

“By having an unrestricted endowment, we can be prepared for future opportunities we can’t even imagine today,” said KCFF chair Eric Duhachek. “In the future, the next generation of fund advisors will have the flexibility to make any changes they see necessary.”

“I hope the people of Keith County will do what they’ve always done,” said Weber. “They rise to the occasion. They look to the future. They want to leave it a better place than they found it, and they’re proud of where they come from.”

No matter where you are coming from, or which direction you are headed, it is a good idea to get off Interstate 80 at Exit 126. You’ll find an amazing collection of things to do, sites to see and places to enjoy. Brought to you in large part by the people of Keith County.

The Keith County Foundation Fund is an affiliated fund of Nebraska Community Foundation. Watch a video of Keith County Foundation Fund’s achievements. For more information on this and other community stories visit NebraskaHome-town.org.