



# Sandy's Travel Tips

By Sandy Bornstein  
Photos by Thetravelingbornsteins.com

## Nebraska Wild West Adventure

Family road trips cover the full range of vacation options. These outings are an ideal way to expose kids to a multitude of places and instill the love of travel. Whenever possible, it's wise to include bits and pieces of history and geography. As an educator, I know that American public schools have been slowly deemphasizing social studies content. Parents can fill in this gap by organizing trips that dabble in different segments of history and introduce different geographical areas.

Kids will naturally begin to imagine living in different times and places. Usually, they will learn more from an engaging museum or historical site than from a textbook. The key is to isolate a fascinating historical period and then visit places that help tell the story.

As Coloradoans, we are more aware of the concept of westward expansion than residents of an eastern state. But do you and your kids fully understand the implication of the Homestead Act of 1862? This law allowed people to claim up to 160 acres of federal land. Wagon trains had been leaving Independence, Missouri since 1841. After this law was enacted, settlers were even more motivated to head west.

Would you and your family have done the same if you were presented with this enticing offer? If so, your family may have asked these questions:

- Where would we find the trail?
- How would we travel?
- What type of terrain would we encounter?
- Who would we meet along the way?
- When would be the optimal time to travel?

Most of the people traveling west crossed the wide expanse of Nebraska and then veered north into Wyoming. Wagon trains, mail and freight carriers, military expeditions, stagecoaches, Pony Express riders, and a minimal number of Native Americans shared these trails.

Only a tiny segment of these emigrant trails went through the northeastern corner of Colorado near Julesburg. Traveling through Wyoming was considerably easier than crossing the Continental Divide in Colorado. Wagon Trains became obsolete after the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads were linked together in Promontory, Utah.



### PLANNING A WESTWARD HO ROAD TRIP

To get a small sampling of this “Westward Ho” adventure, I suggest driving to Ogallala, Nebraska and then finding your way back to Colorado. When traveling between Ogallala and Scottsbluff/Gering, you’ll be traveling on the Western Trails Scenic and Historic Byway.

Families with more time can spend a few additional days frolicking at nearby Lake McConaughy. This lake boasts 105 miles of shoreline with white sandy beaches and year round activities. A few days of carefree time at the beach would be a wonderful balance to this short, historical road trip.

By visiting notable points along the famous trails (Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California, and Pony Express) you’ll see places that were mentioned in the western expansion diaries. Here are a few recommended places:

### PLACES ALONG THE TRAIL

#### **Windlass Hill and Ash Hollow State Historical Park, Lewellen**

This state park is located near Lake McConaughy. First-hand accounts describe the difficulty the Oregon Trail and the California Trail wagon trains had descending down Windlass Hill into Ash Hollow. Some pioneers discussed camping along the fresh spring while their oxen grazed in the tall grasses



Consider taking the short Windlass Hill hike. After trekking up the steep incline, I reevaluated my prior understanding of Nebraska terrain. It must have been quite a feat to control the wagons

*continued on page 14...*

## SANDY'S TRAVEL TIPS

and oxen on this downhill slope. Signage designates places where the wagon's heavy iron-shod wheels caused centuries old ruts.

The onsite brochure provides a brief 6,000-year historical overview of the area. Energetic kids may want to explore another trail or take a look inside the Interpretive Center. At the center, they can look at fossils from the adjacent Ash Hollow Cave and also learn more about Native Americans and 19th century life in the region.

### **Courthouse and Jail Rocks, and Chimney Rock, Bayard**

As the wagon trains headed west into unfamiliar territory, they relied on the people who had gone before them. Notable landmarks gave them hope and provided tangible markers for how far they had traveled. Oftentimes, they would be gently teased by something off in the distance. What they saw might take days to reach.

Frequently, these natural landforms were given nicknames based on what they resembled. In the North Platte Valley between Bridgeport and Gering, modern travelers can take a dirt road on Highway 88 to see Courthouse and Jail Rocks. To get a closer look, it's necessary to walk up a steep sandy trail.

Chimney Rock National Historic Site and Visitor Center is easier to locate. It's about four miles south of Bayard. The museum's displays and short video provide background information. If you drive to the nearby cemetery, you'll have a better view of this 325- foot natural spiral made



from layers of sedentary volcanic ash, and brule clay.

### **Scotts Bluff National Monument, Gering**

The natural landmarks—Courthouse, Jail and Chimney Rocks—were an introduction to the terrain the settlers would encounter next. As they traveled further west, the people saw an abundance of formations in the distance. The current location of the Scotts Bluff National Monument is one place that caught their attention. Layers of cap rock, sandstone, volcanic ash, and siltstone created structures that looked like castles. To pass through the bluffs, these pioneers needed to locate Mitchell Pass, a gap in the Scotts Bluff ridge in the North Platte Valley.

I recommend stopping in the Visitor Center. You can watch the video and check out the exhibits that include the largest collection of sketches, paintings,

and photographs of William Henry Jackson. Near the door is a short trail that passes a few covered wagons and samples of covered wagon ruts.

A road with the only vehicle tunnels in Nebraska leads to the summit. If you don't want to drive, a free shuttle bus runs daily. At the top, there are two short, asphalt trails. North Overlook is a tad longer and provides views of the river, badlands, and the city of Scottsbluff. The South Overlook showcases Mitchell Pass, South Bluff, and the city of Gering.

The more challenging Saddle Rock Trail, which ties the Summit to the Visitor Center, is temporarily closed due to rock slides. The free shuttle bus will accommodate people who want to take the path after the rock slide is repaired. (Check inside the Visitor Center to see the status of the trail.)

### **MUSEUMS AND BOOT HILL**

Along the way, I'm also recommending a few local museums in Ogallala and Gering that will round out your "Western Ho" experience. Kids will be able to visualize 19th century life via the displays and exhibits.

### **Legacy of the Plains Museum, Gering**

Just down the road from the Scotts Bluff National Monument, on the former Oregon Trail, is a new museum that focuses on the history of the region and High Plains agriculture. A multi screen video introduces guests to the seven color coded sections of the Main Exhibit Hall. Through the voices of people, kids will

connect with numerous individuals and industries that built up the surrounding area. A conscious effort was made to include women's voices and to create wonderful interactive exhibits that will engage kids and adults.

Check the museum's website to learn more about special events and new exhibits.

### **Ogallala**

Even though Ogallala was named for a group of Lakota Sioux Indians, the town is oftentimes referred to as the Cowboy Capital. After the Chisholm Trail closed, cowboys were forced to drive their Longhorn herds westward through Dodge City via the Texas Trail to Ogallala. From 1875 to 1885, cattle were driven to this town from Texas during the summer months. The Union Pacific Railroad made it easier to transport the cattle elsewhere. Although the cattle drives stopped in the 19th century, cattle is still Keith County's number one industry.

Today, many people come to Ogallala to visit Nebraska's largest reservoir, Lake McConaughy, while others come searching for fragments of America's Old West. On Front Street, people will find Wild West entertainment and the Cowboy Museum. This small, outdated museum displays authentic cowboy and Native American artifacts.

The Keith County Historical Society has preserved a 19th century, three story, Victorian, brick home. Families can tour the Mansion on the Hill during the summer months. Kids can also walk into an authentic one-room schoolhouse built in 1902. The District #7 schoolhouse was relocated from an adjacent community. This site is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Boot Hill Cemetery is just a few blocks away. Kids will scamper up the steep steps that lead to the burial plots. Wooden and stone markers give some insight into life in a rowdy cow town that was known for its high death rate.

A pamphlet and posted signs provide scattered details of some of the people buried between 1867 and 1885. This cemetery was abandoned in 1885 when a location west of town became the official cemetery. Both unknown and unclaimed bodies remain in Boot Hill Cemetery.

For more information about the attractions in this region visit the National Park Service and WestNebraska.com websites. Keith County, Nebraska has created a coloring and activity book called All Trails Lead to *Ogallala*. To learn more about the Keith County region and kid friendly activities visit [www.ogallalatrails.com](http://www.ogallalatrails.com) and [www.explorekeithcounty.com](http://www.explorekeithcounty.com).

If you travel to any of these sites, I'd love to hear about your adventure. Send an email to [sandy@sandraborNSTein.com](mailto:sandy@sandraborNSTein.com). To learn more worldwide destinations, visit [www.sandraborNSTein.com](http://www.sandraborNSTein.com).