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## The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument

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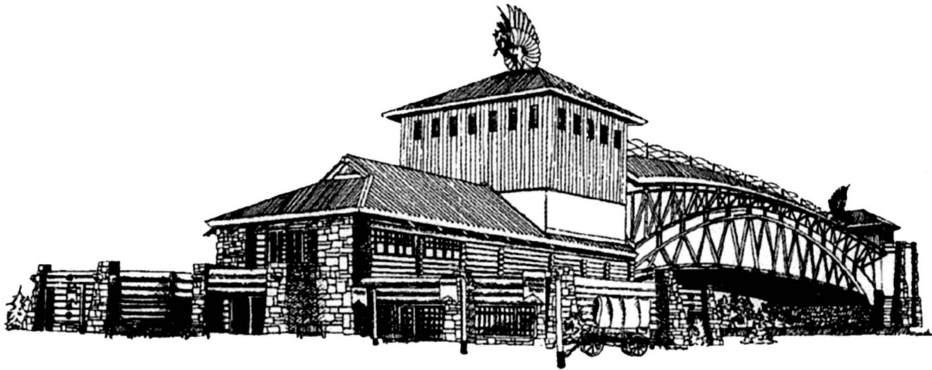
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## REVIEW ESSAY



THE GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD ARCHWAY MONUMENT

The summer of 2000 marked the grand opening of the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument just east of Kearney, Nebraska, on Interstate 80. Costing approximately \$60 million the site features exhibits on the history of the American West in the first and only “museum” to straddle an interstate highway. At the 16 July grand opening, former Nebraska Governor Frank Morrison, a spry ninety-five years, reminisced before an audience of over six hundred, including both of Nebraska’s US senators and its current governor, about having realized his dream of honoring the nation’s westward movement.

Coverage of the event in the state’s two leading newspapers was generally positive. The *Lincoln Journal Star* noted that “while the design and concept of the archway have been criticized by some, supporters hope the structure entices some of an estimated 12 million motorists who cross Nebraska on I-80 each year.”<sup>1</sup> Nebraska’s reputation as the drive-across state or fly-over land is always a concern to the region’s tourist interests. The *Omaha World-Herald* used the occasion to praise the city of Kearney’s boosterism with a color photo of the Arch at sunset gracing its front page article, “Kearney Always Looking Ahead.” A second page article, “At Arch Dedi-

cation: Honors, a Few Laughs,” focused on economic development. Said a local development official and member of the board of the private foundation that built the thirty-foot-high arch, “It’s going to serve as a big welcome mat for the state.”<sup>2</sup> Even discounting debatable geography, Kearney being nearly halfway across Nebraska in the center of the Great Plains, entrance fees—\$8.50 per adult, \$7 per child 3 to 11 and seniors 65 or over—may prove to be a deterrent.

Absent from the general hoopla surrounding the opening was any substantial attention to the Monument’s themes. Are the exhibits intellectually sound? Are they intelligible? How historically accurate are the presentations? Moreover, how might the Archway become a major educational site for the state’s and the region’s students and general public? How easily will teachers find the exhibits lending themselves to classroom use? Such queries deserve exploration before we can venture to assess the overall value of Nebraska’s newest attraction.

### HISTORY AT THE ARCHWAY

Rounding a bend heading west on Interstate 80 west of Gibbon just north of Fort

Kearny and two miles from the one and only city of Kearney exit, one is startled by a first glimpse of the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument. Eight stories tall and 308 feet long, the building looks in some ways more like a stockade from seventeenth-century Massachusetts than a Great Plains fort. There is also a resemblance to a covered bridge; perhaps those of Madison County, Iowa, were factored into the design. Fort or bridge, it is a traffic stopper, this first museum monument permitted to lease air space over an interstate highway. Indeed, it has stopped so much traffic that warning signs now appear on both sides of the interstate imploring motorists to pay attention and not drive off the road or stop under penalty of fine.

Exiting Interstate 80 and following the signs to ample parking spaces, one encounters a number of psychedelic tipis situated several hundred yards from the Monument. No explanation for their appearance or placement is offered. Visitors' first impressions may be puzzlement. Billed as a place to experience history, not as South Dakota's Wall Drug or Corn Palace, the Archway needs to make up for these initial oddities quickly. It does.

Upon entering the Monument and buying tickets, visitors are immediately struck by a huge escalator moving skyward about to carry them into what looks like the opening of a covered wagon. Touring the building involves wearing electronic headphones that transmit a script coordinated to each exhibit wherever one is inside the Monument. The West awaits.<sup>3</sup>

At the top of the escalator, the sounds of a typical Plains rain storm, replete with thunder and flashing light, can be heard. Jim Bridger, the fur trapper and mountain man, is our historic guide. We meet a young girl who kept an Oregon Trail journal; we learn that Indians inhabited the Platte Valley; we are told this region was well-traveled by many seeking land in Oregon, religious freedom in Utah, and gold in California. Initial maps in the first exhibit are minuscule, but better maps will appear later in the tour. We hear that Indians showed Jedidiah Smith where South Pass could be

found and that oxen were the best animals to draw a wagon. A videotaped bison stampede quickly takes over our journey.

Thus far this exhibit of the nineteenth-century West is carefully represented, seeming to place viewers at the scene visually and literally. Treatments of the Oregon Trail, the Mormon migration, and the Gold Rush are given modern, not mythic, renderings. Even the hazards of the Oregon Trail are historically accurate. We learn that one out of every seventeen travelers died from accidents or cholera, the two greatest killers on the Trail, and that Indians suffered severely from the diseases overlanders introduced. From 1841 to 1866, 350,000 people traveled the Platte River roads.

Five murals dominate the view as we move further into the structure. There are mountain men, featuring African American fur trader Jim Beckwourth, Jim Bridger again, and the rendezvous. There is "Golden Country," representing John Sutter's discovery, the diversity of the throng that responded, and the impact of the Gold Rush upon California's Native peoples. Then we meet the Mormons, with Brigham Young—announcing "This is the place!" to signify Utah—and Emmeline Wells, Mormon women's rights advocate. A fourth mural, ironically titled "The Land of Milk and Honey," depicts the doom that befell the Donner Party. Here we hear the words of Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding, spouses of missionaries who traveled the Platte River Road, and Bridget Mason, a black woman journeying to the Pacific Northwest. The last mural, "Winds of Change," successfully illustrates the diversity of the indigenous presence in the West, the problems migrants and settlers caused them, and the continuity modern Indians represent today, with quotes from Cheyenne River Sioux bison rancher Fred Dubray and Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday.

Generally, the Monument builders have gotten the story right, despite a few sins of omission. There is an assumption, for example, that white immigration was monolithic; there is no attention to linguistic diversity, both

among Indian nations and European emigrants. But at the Archway the typical sins of commission, the misrepresentations of history too many museums and historic sites offer their visitors, are rare.

At the Monument's next attraction we are introduced to the Pony Express, the railroad, and the overland stage. Particularly arresting is the video reenactment of express riders moving the mail. The railroad exhibits are thoroughly developed, an appropriate acknowledgment of the presence of the Union Pacific in Nebraska and the Plains. Once the golden spike is driven into the last railroad tie at Promontory Point by Leland Stanford, however, the viewer is in for some startling leaps of faith. Transitions are rickety, suggesting the Archway designers themselves sensed a missed opportunity to enlarge upon the American epic.

From 1869 we jump to 1912 and the construction of the Lincoln Highway. The transitional theme, the transcontinental driver, while engaging, needs greater development. Saying the prairie schooner wagon was replaced by an auto prairie schooner does not in itself make it seem so. Still the Lincoln Highway exhibit is effectively done, down to the accurate license plates on old cars. Tourism, an apposite theme to develop here, also has roots in the nineteenth-century West, though this link too is unexplored. But no sooner do we end the Lincoln Highway than we are driving on the Interstate and entering the 1950s, the age of Eisenhower (native son of the Plains one state south), of drive-in movies and coffee pot-shaped diners. A Gene Autry movie is playing at the drive-in, a curious anomaly. From a reconstructed 1950s highway diner, we can look down on the cars passing underneath the Archway and monitor their speeds with a radar gun. From 1950 to the present, it appears, not much happened on the Great Platte River Road.<sup>4</sup> The exhibit ends with a huge map of the United States on which each of the various roads electronically blinks its path through the Platte Valley.

At this point the audio blares our first dramatic patriotic theme. What the Platte River Road is all about is "freedom"—the freedom to travel. "The Great Platte River Road helped build a country." We learn that the drive-through land "fed the restless spirit of a pioneer nation on the move." We hear Woody Guthrie singing about this land for you and me. There is a crescendo of patriotic music. We hear John F. Kennedy talking about how "man cannot be deterred," a reference to the moon landing. There is talk of the Internet—the modern information highway—and the construction of the first transcontinental fiberoptic cable along the Great Platte River Road. And then we hear Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and a few words from Neil Armstrong. "The freedom to go anywhere," the narrator intones, "is imbedded in our nation." The pioneer spirit endures into the present.

Now we hear powwow music. Indians remain Indians though we are not told that during part of the twentieth century they were not free to travel off their reservations. And we are not told that traveling the Oregon Trail required resources, a situation those wishing to see the Archway may appreciate. Nor are we told about George Washington Bush, a free-born African American who sought land in Oregon but once arriving in the Willamette Valley was forced to flee north with his wagon train to avoid imprisonment. Oregon did not like slavery, but it also prohibited black Americans from settling in the territory.

Exiting the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument, one ruminates on the sounds and sights that have only recently been ingested. Much has been set on the table, but the meal seems incomplete. Perhaps the Archway's directors felt the need to open without everything quite in place, like a cathedral never to be completed. Monument officials, however, say that it is finished. On the whole, this is an exhibition hall—a monument—that has a chance to make its mark. Its treatment of the nineteenth-century West is historically accurate and done with great care. Its rush

through the twentieth century lacks the same richness, but some revisions here and additions there could make a qualitative difference.

#### LEARNING AT THE ARCHWAY

The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument lends itself to both informal and formal learning. Many who come to the Monument will be traveling with family and friends, not taking a school trip; yet even an unplanned stop is apt to be educational. Students will likely visit the Monument in classes with their teachers, usually in conjunction with related history lessons. Such visits could become part of a long-standing tradition in Nebraska—the annual day trip to the State Capitol, the Museum of Nebraska History, and the University of Nebraska State Museum (fondly known as Elephant Hall), especially during fourth grade when state studies are emphasized.

Research and experience tell us that such field trips engender the most memorable learning when preceded by classroom activities related to the sites to be visited. Students can then scaffold the information they encounter during their visit on an already-established knowledge base. Similarly, post-visit discussions and lessons necessarily help students interpret, retain, and make sense of their experience. Many historic sites and museums prepare such pre- and post-visit materials for teachers to use with their students. According to a Monument foundation official, an Archway educational advisory commission, chaired by University of Nebraska at Kearney Chancellor Gladys Styles Johnston, is in the process of preparing classroom materials related to the site. A set of four lesson plans designed for use in Nebraska fourth grade classrooms was proposed for fall of 2000. The commission is also looking ahead to preparing additional materials for older students at a later date.<sup>5</sup>

Studies have also shown that students learn facts and develop an understanding of history

when inquiry is key to their studies. When given opportunities to construct relevant questions and seek out answers, students not only learn factual information, but also develop complex concepts about understanding the past. Primary documents and artifacts are particularly potent stimuli for such historical inquiry, and the Archway is generous in its use of quotes from such documents authored by a wide variety of individuals associated with the Great Platte River Road. Excerpts from diaries (including that of the young girl on the Oregon Trail) and other original sources enhance the taped narrative. Including fuller versions of these journals, speeches, and songs in the educational materials could only augment the potential for learning.

No artifacts are available for hands-on examination at the Archway. Visitors are told by staff at the entrance not to touch anything. While each display is carefully and realistically recreated (Mormons shown dragging a wagon from a river have ice on their fingers), and while preservation and protection of displays is certainly understandable, visitors miss out on any opportunity for tactile involvement. Preparation of traveling kits that include authentic or replicated artifacts would be a valuable project for the educational advisory commission to consider.

Adaptable technology, particularly in the form of CD-ROMs and other software, would also be fruitful. With so many students already technologically sophisticated, interacting with computers would allow them to inquire more deeply into the lives of people and events featured on the tour. Only one opportunity currently exists for visitors to interact with a display—a three-button panel affording choices about a journey West. Auditory and visual stimuli, however, will no doubt engage and delight young visitors as well as adults. Teachers will notice quickly how difficult it is to listen to the taped narration, observe the displays, and read the written material simultaneously and will need to allow sufficient time for students to tend to and process all that is happening.

Groups are asked to give the Archway advance notice of upcoming visits, and a reduction in admission is offered those with fifteen or more members. No additional personnel or services, however, are available to school or other groups visiting for a formal educational experience.

## CONCLUSION

A recent national survey found that Americans frequently identify with the past because they believe they “uncover ‘real’ or ‘true’ history at museums and historic sites.”<sup>6</sup> The same study determined that the majority of Americans are not only interested in the past, but also actively involved in learning, uncovering, or re-creating it from such materials as photographs, books, and movies. Indeed, 57% of Americans surveyed have visited a history museum or historic site during the previous twelve months; and of those, 56% indicated they felt highly connected to the past when they did so. The same respondents ranked museums the highest in trustworthiness of sources from a list including personal accounts, college and high school history instructors, nonfiction books, and movies and television. Visitors to the Archway will find their trust well-placed in the historical content of the exhibits.

History at the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument is generally accurate, inclusive, and of educational value. The material is presented through stimulating and engaging sights and sounds. Nevertheless, in addition to wishing for hands-on displays, one is also left wondering about two obvious voids. We learn nothing about the Great Platte River itself along which the multiple pathways grew. All visitors, be they students or traveling adults, would surely have their understanding enlarged by vital information on this waterway commonly known for being “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Visitors may also leave with the sense that this place celebrated by the Archway was important only in the past. An overview of what has happened and con-

tinues to happen in Kearney, in Nebraska, and in the Great Plains region would imply a vibrant place surviving and thriving beyond the construction of Interstate 80 in the 1950s and 1960s. School children and other visitors could be offered reasons why locals have stayed. While the inclusion of the fiberoptic network hints at the present and the possible future contribution of the Great Platte River Road, the Monument’s essential message suggests that this was and continues to be a place to travel across.

The promotional card announcing the opening of the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument refers to it as “America’s Great Trailblazing Adventure!” It may soon no longer be the only interstate-spanning historical monument, however. Recently announced are plans to build a Great Texas Trails Monument across Interstate 35 in Hillsboro, Texas, near Dallas,<sup>7</sup> to honor the Chisholm Trail and longhorn cattle drives in a facility in the shape of a monumental longhorn. Already facing imitation, the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument is special, a Kearney Chamber of Commerce officer hastened to remind prospective visitors, because it is located at the convergence of several trails. Greg Smith, a former Nebraska tourism official, reassured Archway enthusiasts by characterizing this unique Plains phenomenon as “the absolute pinnacle in impulse tourism marketing.”<sup>8</sup>

Although no attendance figures have been released by Monument management, at least one visitor came away impressed. Wrote President Bill Clinton in the Archway guest register during his only visit to Nebraska as chief executive, “This is a fantastic place.”<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

1. *Lincoln Journal Star*, 17 July 2000, p. 3B.
2. *Omaha World-Herald*, 17 July 2000, pp. 1-2. The height from the bottom of the Archway to I-80 is thirty feet. The Archway's highest point is eighty feet above the highway.
3. The pamphlet handed out with tickets at the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument implores visitors to "hitch up your wagons, be a forty niner, get caught in a buffalo stampede, ride with the pony express, [and] link up with the Lincoln Highway."
4. The poster, "Great Moments on the Great Platte River Road," copyrighted by the Great Platte River Road Memorial Foundation, 2000, lists eighteen "great moments" in a timeline, fourteen in the nineteenth century, but only four in the twentieth, including 1915—Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway, follows the pioneer's route; 1960—Construction of Interstate 80 in Nebraska begins; 1985—the first transcontinental fiberoptic

cable follows the Great Platte River Road; and 2000—Opening the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument.

5. Telephone interview with Jeff Smith, Great Platte River Road Memorial Foundation, Omaha, Nebraska, by Susan Anderson Wunder, 25 July 2000.

6. Roy Rosenweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 32.

7. "Next arch may wear longhorns," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 21 December 2000.

8. Paul Hammel, "Arch Rival in Texas Bigger—but Not First," *Omaha World-Herald*, 21 December 2000.

9. Nancy Hicks, "Clinton's Archway Visit 'like Christmas morning,'" *Lincoln Journal Star*, 9 December 2000. See also "No. 50 for the 42nd president," *Daily Nebraskan*, 11 December 2000, and Tara Deering, "Nebraskans Turn Out to Hail the Chief," *Omaha World-Herald*, 9 December 2000.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

The illustration is courtesy of The Great Platte River Road Memorial Foundation. For more information about The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument, contact the ticket office at Archway Monument, One Archway Parkway, Kearney, NE 68847; phone: (308) 237-1000 or toll free at (877) 511-ARCH; website: <<http://www.archway.org>>.