

Landmarks offer piece of history Nebraska not vacant

BY MARISSA CARSTENS
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Imagine sleeping under the stars after eating prime rib cooked over a fire, real lemon pudding and bread made in a kettle.

Imagine sampling wine at a winery.

Imagine following the road the pioneers took to the promised lands of California and Oregon.

Imagine seeing the complete skeletons of ancient rhinoceroses unearthed.

Now imagine doing all of this in Nebraska.

Yes, Nebraska.

"We might not have a Mount Rushmore or a Yosemite National Park, but we do have a number of small unique historical sights," said Shirley Wichman of the Nebraska Department of Tourism.

Those planning a trip during spring break should consider exploring these activities located in their own backyard, she said.

Niobrara State Park

One of the state's top natural attractions is Niobrara State Park. Many tourists choose to visit this park because they can camp and canoe the scenic Niobrara River.

Nebraska National Forest

The lush Nebraska National Forest near Halsey is the largest hand-planted forest in the country. Here, students can hike, camp and picnic. A lookout tower also offers a panoramic view of the forest.

Spring Rancho

Near Clay City, students can find the ghost town Spring Rancho, where curiously named Nebraskans Elizabeth Taylor and her twin brother, Tom Jones, were hanged in March 1885, said Jim Potter, who works at the State Historical Society.

According to legend, after Taylor's husband died of mysterious causes, her neighbors spread rumors she had poisoned him. These rumors eventually led the whole town of Spring Rancho to lynch Taylor and her brother.

Rock Creek Station

Another popular historical site is Rock Creek Station near Fairbury, where stories of outlaw legend Wild Bill Hickok were first told. The stories, which were printed in a magazine, made Bill Hickok famous by claiming he killed 10 members of the M'Kandlas Gang with a gun and a Bowie knife.

According to the state tourism board, the legends are untrue. But Hickok was a gunfighter whose true biography is held at Rock Creek Station.

The station also was one of the first places the pioneers crossed into Nebraska. The ruts from the wagons still exist as well as one of the first Pony Express stations, Wichman said.



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN
A COWBOY BOOT adorns a barbed-wire fence post in Western Nebraska.

The Dowse Sod House

Students may travel to Comstock, more than an hour north of Kearney, to see the hard-to-find Dowse Sod House.

After successfully navigating a remote dirt road, travelers can find the tiny house with three rooms and sod walls measuring between 15 and 18 inches thick.

Carhenge

Debate continues on whether this monument is an eyesore or a landmark. But critics said the same of the Eiffel Tower.

Near Alliance, Carhenge is a replica of Stonehenge in England.

But instead of being made of stone, Carhenge is made of old cars. The monument was built in 1987 as part of a family reunion celebration.

The massive metal sculpture is now one of the state's definitive landmarks.

Chimney Rock

For centuries, Chimney Rock has remained the best-known Nebraska landmark, Wichman said.

In the past, the landmark guided western pioneers towards their destination.

Knowing they had to make it to the Rocky Mountains before mid-June, pioneers became excited when they finally saw Chimney Rock, Wichman said. The pioneers did not realize, however, they could see Chimney Rock from three days' travel away.

Over the years, Chimney Rock has lost about 7 feet in height because of lightning strikes, Wichman said. But you can still see it from 20 miles away, she said.

Once students arrive at Chimney Rock, they can join the wagon train for dinner. Here they are served bread made in a kettle, prime rib over an open fire and lemon pudding.

They can also spend the night at the foot of Chimney Rock in a cabin or in a tent beneath the stars.

Ashfall Fossil Beds

The complete, untouched remains of rhinoceroses lie at Ashfall Fossil Beds near Royal.

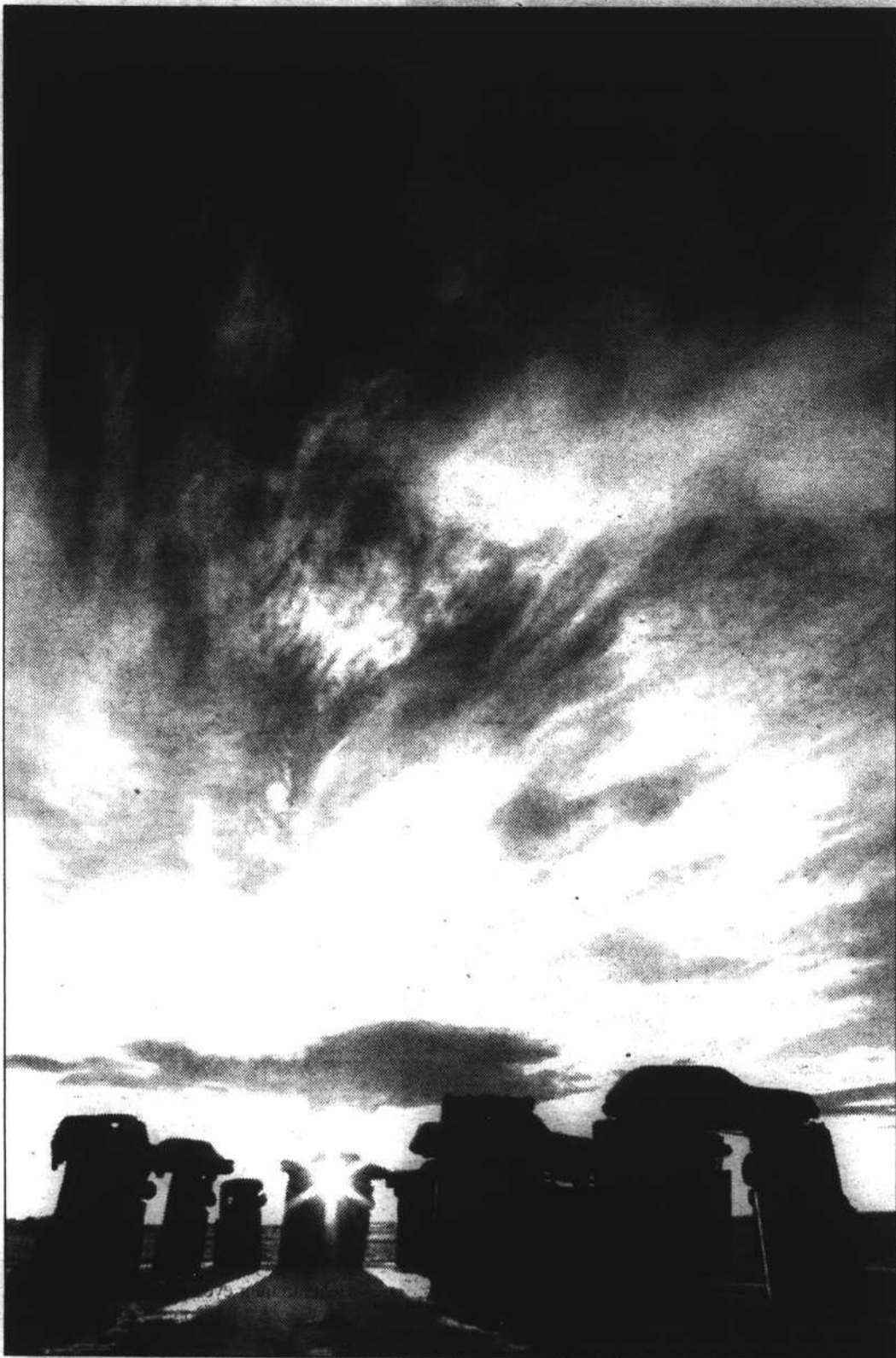
Students can see excavated, 10-million-year-old mammals that died following a catastrophic volcanic eruption.

Cuthills Vineyards

Slightly closer to Lincoln, tourists can sample the wines of Cuthills Vineyards, Nebraska's first commercial winery, in Pierce, Wichman said.

But, before students make spring break plans, they should contact the State Tourism Office for information on Nebraska's multitude of spring break destinations, said tourism office spokeswoman Twyla Witt.

The State Tourism Office is located in the Ferguson Mansion, 700 S. 16th St.



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN
ABOVE: WESTERN NEBRASKA is chock-full of historic sights, including the rural Dowse Sod House north of Kearney. Visitors like Daily Nebraskan photographer Daniel Loudert, who manage to find the house via a remote dirt road, can play pioneer.
TOP: CARHENGE TOWERS ABOVE its surrounding landscape east of Alliance. The sculpture, which resembles England's famous Stonehenge, was built during a family reunion in 1987.