

MINUTES OF THE HOUSE TOURISM AND PARKS COMMITTEE

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Becky Hutchins at 3:30 p.m. on March 3, 2004 in Room 241-N of the Capitol.

All members were present except:

Representative Candy Ruff- excused
Representative Margaret Long- excused

Committee staff present:

Hank Avila, Legislative Research Department
Lura Attig, Committee Secretary

Conferees appearing before the committee: none

Others attending:

See Attached List.

Mr. Thomas Etheredge, owner of The Prairie Rose Chuckwagon gave a presentation on tourism in Kansas.

The Etheredge family has lived on a working cattle ranch in Butler County for five generations. In 1999, he decided to “think outside the box.” The price of his cattle at auction was around 85 cents a pound. The price of buying steaks at the supermarket was close to \$8.50 a pound. This was quite a price discrepancy for a rancher trying to make a living. His thought was to remove the “middle men” and get a higher profit on beef.

The concept of Prairie Rose was to go back to family values. The goal was to recreate the Roy Rogers, Gene Autry era, to serve a barbeque dinner made of their own beef, subsequently turning the 85 cents a pound beef into \$6 or \$7 a pound for their beef. Along with the barbeque, they would have great cowboy music. Thus, was the dream of Thomas Etheredge.

The family had never been involved in food service or entertainment. Indeed, Mr. Etheredge’s background was in business, banking and ranching.

The next order of business was a loan of \$50,000. He purchased picnic tables, built an outdoor stage under some walnut trees and built a cook shack. In May 1999, The Prairie Rose Chuckwagon Supper began. That year they were open from May through August with the entire operation being outdoors. They served more than 3,500 people. It was a crude outdoor operation with no special roads or parking. People were shuttled from the pasture where they parked to the picnic area by way of a hay wagon.

In 2000, they built a \$500,000 opera house and a parking lot. They were in operation from April to December of that year. More than 17,000 were served. In 2001, more than 30,000 visitors from all over the world visited the Prairie Rose. In 2002, more than 45,000, in 2003, nearly 60,000 were served. This year it is estimated that 70,000 people will be served. It is now a multimillion dollar enterprise. This is being done in the middle of a pasture in Butler County, Kansas. This proves that tourism is alive and well in Kansas.

Frequently the Kansas printed media questions why anyone would try to promote Kansas. After all, what does it have to offer? Thomas Etheredge believes agritourism is the future of Kansas.

There was an economic summit in Los Angeles last year. At the end of the conference, the representatives from the various countries were asked by the leaders of the summit to rank the top five tourist attractions in America. The number one destination recognized by the Japanese and German delegates was “The American Cowboy” experience. Kansas sits in the heart of it all, where the cowboy phenomenon began and tourists from these countries are excited at the prospect of visiting these places.

The Government of China has asked the Prairie Rose to spend ten days in China, starting with an all-cowboy concert in Tiananmen Square and then onto a major concert on the Great Wall of China. There has not been an American delegation in China since President Nixon. Kansas is rich and open for

CONTINUATION SHEET

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tourism. This trip is still in the planning stages.

Mr. Etheredge related the experiences of obtaining the necessary permits and licenses, the difficulties of obtaining insurance, the requirements of KDOT regarding the access road (Parallel Road), and dealing with various county and state agencies.

The Prairie Rose Chuckwagon has grown tremendously since its inception in 1999. Mr. Etheredge believes that this Committee has the ability to change the direction of tourism for 2004 just as he has changed it on his pasture in Butler County.

Committee questions followed.

Representative Osborne asked Mr. Etheredge, the access road that leads into your property, what is it's name? Mr. Etheredge replied, Parallel Road. What about the road leading to Parallel Road, is it built to KDOT's standards? Mr. Etheredge replied no, it is an old road. Our road (Parallel Road) needed to be built to today's standards, actually making it better than the road (Butler Road) to which it connects.

Chairperson Hutchins asked Mr. Etheredge about his liability insurance premiums. Have your premiums changed? Yes, replied Mr. Etheredge, we now pay \$20,000 per month.

Representative Merrick asked are you familiar with the agritourism bill that we passed last year and that Governor Sebelius vetoed? Do you think the Governor has a better idea? Mr. Etheredge replied that he is familiar with the bill but does not know the Governor's intentions.

Representative Kauffman asked do you think gambling will effect your operation? Mr. Etheredge stated, "I believe that gambling and anything dealing with casinos is a death threat on Kansas and future tourism. It will not bring in dollars it will spend dollars that should not be spent. Huge amounts of public dollars will be spent as a fallout from gambling. It takes away family values, nothing good will come from it. People will not be coming to Kansas to gamble, they will be going to big places like Vegas."

Chairperson Hutchins asked, where did Prairie Rose get its name? Mr. Etheredge answered, from the wild roses that grow on the property.

Representative Novascone asked, what are your future plans? Mr. Etheredge answered, we are currently planning a new theater in Branson, Missouri, although the final decision has not been made. We wish to continue to grow at our current Prairie Rose site, near Wichita.

Chairman Hutchins remarked that Missouri has designated funding for tourism but Kansas does not.

Thomas Etheredge commented, if we can be of assistance to this committee or any other legislative body, please let me know. We love this state and support Kansas tourism all over the country.

Next week's agenda will be announced.

Meeting adjourned at 4:50 P.M.