

# Kansas Sampler Festival to be held at Leavenworth

**By Ron Wilson**  
*Director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University*

Grab your passport! No, not for some overseas travel. This is about an event inside our state's borders that one magazine has termed a Passport to Kansas - and you won't even have to go through Customs. The event is called the Kansas Sampler Festival. Special thanks to Kansas Magazine and writer Kimberly Winter Stern whose article told this remarkable story.

Marci Penner and her father Mil, whom we've profiled before, are co-founders of this event. In 1990, they hosted the first-ever Kansas Sampler Festival on the Penner farm near the rural community of Inman.

"Dad and I wrote our first book, Kansas Weekend Guide," Penner said. "We had a book signing and invited places in the book to help support the purpose, which was to stimulate travel throughout Kansas. We were in one big tent on a cold November day and 1,000 people showed up."

The following year, the farm's outbuildings and large tents were used to house exhibitors.

"The shed where my dad stored tools and oily rags became the Tin Shed Cinema where communities presented slide shows about their town's attractions," Penner said. In 1993, the duo launched the Kansas Sampler Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve, promote and maintain Kansas culture.

For years the Penners hosted the event on their farm, allowing people

to park in a spacious alfalfa field. "We rotated the crops in 1998, so took the show on the road," Penner said.

Now the opportunity to host the Kansas Sampler Festival is awarded to a different town every two years following a rigorous application process. Leavenworth County-the first county-level group to receive the honor in the festival's history-was tapped to organize and host the 2010 and 2011 events. The large and small towns in Leavenworth County come together to stage this event. That includes bigger cities like Leavenworth and Lansing, plus rural communities such as Tonganoxie, population 3,030, and Basehor, population 2,324 people. Now, that's rural.

This year's festival is Saturday and Sunday, May 7-8, at Leavenworth's Ray Miller Park. In 2010 the event drew more than 8,000 people.

The Kansas Sampler Festival is like a well-plotted GPS that gives attendees a perspective of the state's simple pleasures and treasures, plus its fascinating past and vibrant present.

Colorful exhibitor tents feature artists, authors and regional tourism and travel councils. Food and drink concessionaires sell Kansas-made artisan products, while vendors exhibit everything from soup to nuts. Entertainers perform on various stages and roam the festival grounds. Sprinkled throughout the sprawling event are some hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers who help bring the Kansas Sampler Festival to life.

Historic performers re-enact characters central to Kansas his-

tory, including Calamity Jane, Amelia Earhart, General Robert E. Lee, and Doc Holliday. Each year an all-star cast from the Kansas Alliance of Professional Historical Performers shares thrilling tales of the colorful characters who helped write history.

Marc Ferguson, an award-winning historic performer, is one of those who portrays multiple characters. Ferguson, a Kansas farmer and former wedding photographer, is an avid history buff who enjoys performing for audiences across the state. He's even appeared as a movie extra and on the History Channel. He delivers riveting monologues about the trials and tribulations of characters who weren't necessarily model citizens in a fledgling Kansas but capture the Old West's flavor.

Ferguson is President of the Gray County Historical Society and manager/curator at the Dalton Gang Hideout in Meade. In the late 1990s, he saw Joyce Thierer performing as Calamity Jane and wanted to try it himself. He attended some workshops and gave it a try. The rest is, um, history.

For more information, go to [www.kansassampler.org/festival](http://www.kansassampler.org/festival).

Grab your passport! No, not for travel overseas. This event doesn't need a passport at all. All one has to do is come to Leavenworth for the annual Kansas Sampler Festival to learn about the best that Kansas has to offer. We salute Marci and Mil Penner for making a difference by promoting our rural culture in this way. This passport will take you to one place where you can sample our entire state.

## Eagle Scout project



Goodland High School Junior Seth Stramel (far right) talked about his Eagle Scout project of building a kiosk to house the system that allows people to find graves to Cemetery Board President Richard Hayden (second on the left) on Monday afternoon at the cemetery. Richard Stramel (far left), Seth's dad and scout leader was among those present along with Cemetery Board Members Jan Lohr and Shirley Gray (not pictured). Donations to help build the brick building can be made at the City of Goodland office or to Jan Lohr at the First National Bank.

Photo by Pat Schiefen/The Goodland Star-News

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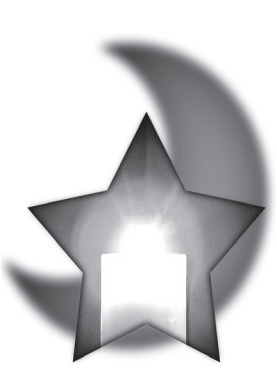
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