



Arikaree Breaks Dancer

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Arid, rugged badlands are carved into the pale soils of Cheyenne County in northwestern Kansas. Awe-inspiring views are equaled only by the region's colorful history, kept alive by one man's dedication and love of the land.

Imagine if you will that there is a Kansas Grand Canyon. In fact, there is — at least a “miniature” version of the famous spectacle. Commonly called the Arikaree Breaks, this Kansas panorama spans half of Cheyenne County in the northwestern corner of the state. The steep canyons carved here actually follow the breaks of the South Fork Republican River and its many tributaries, of which the Arikaree River is just one.

And there is one man who knows the Breaks like the back of his hand — Tobe Zweygardt. Zweygardt may be 84 years old, but he still can “break dance.” In fact, he may have invented the art form, at least as it’s practiced in this magnificent corner of Kansas, where folks travel from across the country to explore the unique landscape. He guides about 300 people a year on bus tours from places as close as Goodland, Oakley, Hays, and Garden City and as far away as Pennsylvania.

As a tour guide for this area, there could be none better; he has spent a lifetime studying its landscape and history. Along 60 miles of maintained roads, he has placed some 350 signs marking the locations of former cemeteries, schools, homesteads, way stations, and battles. At one time, there were 78 school houses in the county, most of which he has marked.

It is early September when I am blessed with one of Zweygardt’s tours, arriving at his home in St. Francis about 9 a.m. It’s a bluebird day, and as we drive out of town, Zweygardt tells stories of growing up in this area and about the great flood of 1935, when the Republican River rose into town.

Our first stop is about a mile north, where Zweygardt has placed a sign for a one-mile river walk among the cottonwoods and willows of the Republican. The next stop is the Grand Army of the Republic Cemetery, established in 1889 to provide destitute veterans of the Civil War an honorable burial. Next is Spring Creek, a popular homestead site because this natural spring has always provided water.

Between each site, the country gets more and more rugged, and although I am already enthralled by the landscape, the best is yet to come.



At Hackberry Creek, we stop and visit. Zwegardt hints at the wealth of historical information stored in his brain and of which he will reveal more later:

“George Bent was a survivor of the Sand Creek Massacre, and he came to Cherry Creek,” he explains. Of Russian Volga-River German descent, Zwegardt still speaks with the endearing accent of his ancestors. “We’ll go by there later, but anyway, he was educated, and he kept a diary. You can read it in the book, *The Life of George Bent Written From His Letters*, by George Hyde.” Zwegardt explains that Bent’s letters were discovered by Hyde in a library in Denver in 1956. The letters were the first historical mention of an Indian encampment on Cherry Creek, and their long absence is the reason that earlier books on the history of plains Indians don’t mention Cherry Creek.

“There’s a map in there, and he showed the route of Indians coming to Cherry Creek through Devil’s Gap on the way to Julesburg for a raid up there and back to Cherry Creek again. It shows the beginning of Hackberry, and that’s where he made his map of the trail they took.”

Then, seeming to sense my curiosity before I can express it, he

explains his interest in all this.

“When I grew up on Cherry Creek, my dad and I hunted coyotes, and I walked up and down Cherry Creek and hunted and fished, and by golly, I was just always interested in history, but I didn’t even get to go to high school. I had to help my dad back there in the thirties. I always enjoyed talking with older people, and I kept all these stories in my mind. Then after I retired, I just took it on myself to really study history. I made contact with the Indians and began taking people out. I never charge anybody. I just enjoy doing it. It keeps me out of the pool hall.”

Several miles north of town, the landscape levels out somewhat, and farmland appears. Here, Zwegardt asks if I want to take a detour to Horsethief Cave. Whatever that is, the name is intriguing enough to inspire a “yes.” Before we get there, however, we are distracted by a large animal running in the road ahead of us. At first, I think it’s a badger, but it’s too big. Then I realize it’s a critter I’ve never seen in the wild — a porcupine. A huge one, it must weigh 40 pounds.

I hop out with my camera and chase it around the field for a bit, snapping pictures, and Zwegardt keeps right up, heading the animal off so it turns toward me for a better

shot.

This unusual experience complete, we continue the drive, and the landscape once again changes from farmland to deep gullies and canyons. In the back of one canyon lies a two-chambered cave once used by horse thieves to hide their bounty. I take some photos of the cave, and then Zwegardt and I stroll along the road, admiring the beauty and musing about thieves and sheriffs and the various plants, some unfamiliar to me.

Zwegardt picks up a familiar one and declares that it’s going to be a hard winter. “Mature cockle-burs,” he exclaims. “They never get caught with their pants down.” Then he picks up a dried-out piece of gray, fibrous root. “This is a yucca root. The Indians used yucca for everything. They used the blades for paint brushes and made shampoo out of the sap. The roots could be made into rope, or dried-up stuff like this was used for fire starter and even diapers.”

Now we get back into the truck and backtrack, then head north into the Breaks. About 100 yards from a rising curve in the road, Zwegardt has me stop and walk up to a ridge where the view on the other side is hidden. When I reach the top, I am breath-taken. “Grand Canyon” is the only comparison to be made with this view. The color is different, and the scale is not nearly so large, but it is, indeed, grand. It’s as if the shortgrass prairie had been carved and sculpted with a giant fork.

The landscape is characterized by rolling loess hills with canyons cut by the South Fork and its tributaries. (Loess is a fine-grained silt, like a rock flour.) During the Wisconsinian period, glaciers covered much of the central United States but stopped several hundred miles short of Kansas. As those glaciers melted, they created streams with broad river plains. When the streams dried up, they left behind dusty channels, and the wind whipped the silt into these huge hills.

Erosion eventually carved the



Tobe Zwegardt has placed more than 350 signs throughout the Breaks. This marker alerts travelers to a particularly stunning view of the area’s trademark landscape.

canyons, but the arid climate of western Kansas made this a slow process. As the loess gradually sloughed off, it left steep, vertical slopes that tended to be stable. As the waterways drained, the rolling hills gave way to steep canyons.

According to the Kansas Geological Survey, rock formations also grace the Breaks:

“Erosion exposed the Pierre Shale, deposited late in the Cretaceous Period, and the Ogallala Formation, which is composed of rocks that eroded off the face of the Rocky Mountains and were washed by streams onto the plains of western Kansas. At the surface, those rocks have often been naturally cemented together to form a hard, tough rock called mortar beds.”

Because of the arid climate here, vegetation is primarily shortgrass and yucca, and from my current vantage point, I can see for miles, an occasional tree sprouting from the canyon floor like an afterthought.

My first view fully absorbed, we drive deeper into the breaks until we finally emerge onto flatter land across the Nebraska line, then head west some 10 or 15 miles before driving back south. On this western side of the Breaks, we finally descend into the Arikaree River breaks. Near the river, Zweygardt has me stop the truck by an old foundation. We are now some 25 miles from St. Francis — in the middle of nowhere for sure if you had to find this place on horseback. The foundation, Zweygardt explains, is the remains of a gambling joint owned by one Ed Lake in the 1890s.

We now enter the property of Rex Daniels, a self-taught pilot who owns the property where Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska unite — the Three Corners. As we traverse the winding road to the marker that identifies the junction of these three



Canyons are carved throughout Cheyenne County along the South Fork Republican River and its tributaries, including the Arikaree River. Vegetation is mainly shortgrass and yucca.

borders, Zweygardt points to a rock about 150 yards south of the marker.

“In the 1870s, the people who surveyed the Colorado line came down through here, and they said that that’s where the Kansas-Nebraska line was, but they couldn’t find the marker that was put down by the original surveyors in 1859. So they measured out and placed the point where that rock is now. Well, when satellites came out in 1990, they said, ‘Well, gosh, that

isn’t right. We’ve got to establish the right spot.’

“Well, I was here when they had their TV set and equipment out here. When they got near the right point, they got to digging around and found the bottom part of the original rock from 1859. So they got to looking around and found the top part way off on top of a hill. They figured what happened was that there were still a lot of Indians around here in 1859, and they didn’t want the white man to mess the

deal up, so they broke the top part off and dragged the rock way up there. It still had the markings on it, so they buried it next to the bottom part."

Then Zwegardt wags his finger at me. "Now I want you to be a thinkin' about this. Surveyed in 1859 with whatever equipment they had, they came across all these hills here, clear across the breaks, and how far do you think they were off according to the satellite?"

"Probably not far from what you tell me here," I lamely reply, expecting maybe 50 yards or so.

"Eight inches!" Zwegardt exclaims. "Eight inches! That is unbelievable! With the equipment they had in 1859? Them guys was good!"

Zwegardt goes on to explain that the satellites also established that Baseline Road in Boulder, Colo., lines up perfectly with this point. This man of history is also fascinated with the wonders of modern technology.

Zwegardt has explained all this to me as we approach the Three Corners marker. Once there, I stand on the marker, proudly noting that I am in three states at once.

After leaving Three Corners, we head for what is perhaps the most



Zwegardt stands in Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado at once — the Three Corners Marker.

interesting historical site in the Breaks — the Cherry Creek encampment. This site is significant because of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, in which Colorado militiamen under Col. John M. Chivington attacked a peaceful encampment of Indians. The surprise attack, during which hundreds of Cheyenne warriors, women, and children were killed, occurred after their leader, Black Kettle, had agreed to an armistice with the U.S. Army. After the attack, the Indians fled to this site.

When we get there, Zwegardt explains the history in more detail:

"There were more than 3,000 Indians camped in here in 1864 and 1865. Indians came from Sand Creek to the Smoky Hill and then to Cherry Creek because here is where the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers had their campsite and did their hunting up and down Cherry Creek. There was always running water in Cherry Creek, and the rocks along here always had chokecherries, wild plums, wild grapes, and currants. There was a pond about every hundred yards or less where they could catch bullheads and sunfish and turtles, so they always had plenty to eat."

Food was not the only benefit of living in the area. Bark from red willows along the creek could be chewed to relieve a headache, much like aspirin. Indian pod and a variety of other herbs, when dried and inhaled, would relieve the symptoms of asthma and migraines. (In 1990, Zwegardt took a group of Indians to this



An accomplished metal sculptor, Zwegardt created this marker commemorating an event in Plains Indian history.

area, and one of the priests climbed the rocks and collected these elements for this purpose.)

As if to emphasize our physical presence in a profound historical context, he reiterates, "This is where the Indians camped." (Pointing to the dark sandstone cliffs along the south side of Cherry Creek, Zwegardt says somewhat wistfully that this is also the place where the white man killed the last buffalo in the area, driving it over the cliff.)

The Indians' stay at Cherry Creek would be short-lived, however. "Spotted Tail and Pawnee Killer smoked the war pipe," Zwegardt tells me, "and they led the people up to Julesburg, Colorado, where they burnt the whole town in retaliation for the Sand Creek Massacre, and then they came back here."

According to Bent's letters, this site on Cherry Creek is "where the Plains War between the Indians and whites began — a war that lasted 12 years and culminated at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana in 1876."

After the raid on Julesburg, the groups split up.

"Black Kettle and his bunch went south, and the Sioux, Cheyenne, and part of the Arapaho went north," Zwegardt explains. "They're up there in Montana now. Of course, Black Kettle went down to Oklahoma, and Custer killed him

and his wife down there.”

In 1990, Zwegardt held a dedication ceremony at this historic site in honor of the victims of the Sand Creek Massacre. He contacted the Cheyenne Nation, and descendants of Sand Creek survivors attended the ceremony. Zwegardt, a skilled metal sculptor, had placed tepee, buffalo, and prairie dog sculptures in a small handmade corral and a life-sized metal silhouette of an Indian chief on horseback overlooking the scene from the rocks above. (In a mailbox, he keeps a visitor’s sign-up notebook filled with names and addresses from across the nation. Many notations are from Native Americans.)

Zwegardt tells a remarkable story about the drive to the site, a spot called Devil’s Gap (a landmark on the route the Indians took to Julesburg), and one of his passengers, a Cheyenne chief:

“He had heard about this site from his ancestors back. He had never been here, but he wanted to come one time to see this. He sat in the back of the car and never said a word until we ‘pert near got to Devil’s Gap. Then he said, ‘Stop! I want to get out.’ And he got out and said, ‘This is it! This is it!’ And he walked up the road about a couple hundred yards to Devil’s Gap. He had all that in his mind, from stories



A large porcupine, unbothered by the region’s lack of trees, is a surprise encounter during the tour.



Mike Blair photo

The Breaks are named for the Arikaree River, but this river is just one of many responsible for the rugged canyons that mark this region.

handed down, exactly what that looked like. And he’d never been there before. And that’s the reason we know that George Bent was pretty accurate with his maps.”

There were several other notable Native Americans who made the trip, as well.

“The Keeper of the Sacred Arrowheads and the Elkhorn Scraper came from Montana, and from Oklahoma there was a chief and two priests who came. This Keeper of the Sacred Arrowheads said, ‘I’ve got to tell you a story. I’ve never been to Cherry Creek before, but this story has been handed down to me from my great-grandmother that when the Indians were here, a white man came through and we killed him. But he had gold in his saddlebags.’ They decided to make trinkets out of that gold, but the chief told them not to wear the gold trinkets because if a white man saw them wearing them, they would know they had killed this guy. So they buried the gold in the rocks of Cherry Creek.

“He wanted to see those rocks, but there’s about 13 miles of them, so that gold is still buried in those rocks.” Zwegardt’s voice becomes animated. “These are the

kinds of things you find out if you just visit with people.”

The Native Americans who Zwegardt has taken through the area appreciate his efforts, he says. “Last year they invited me down to Colony, Oklahoma, and when I got down there, they gave me a blanket.” In appreciation for all Zwegardt had done for them, the chief also gave Zwegardt a beaded hat.

Our trip is nearly at an end now, so we leave Cherry Creek, the rugged canyons and yucca gradually giving way to gentler inclines and cropland. I am pensive now but thoroughly satisfied. I have seen the rich grasslands of the Flint Hills; the rugged woodlands of the Chautauqua Hills and the Ozarks; the western-movie Red Hills reminiscent of Rocky Mountain Foothills; the hazy, rolling Smoky Hills of central Kansas; and the vast stretches of shortgrass prairie on the high plains of western Kansas. Each has filled me with awe, yet I know there are other places hidden away in this great state, places that I have yet to explore. Each, undoubtedly, will have its own story to tell, if I can find the storyteller.

Tobias Zwegardt has given me a gift. It’s amazing the kinds of things you find out if you just visit with people. ♡