

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
December 5, 2024

The Red Cloud Community Fund recently honored Bridget Barron with the Carrie Miner Sherwood Friend of Tourism award during its annual banquet. A lot of you might not know Dr. Barron but her husband, Jerry, was a 1973 graduate of Red Cloud High School. Jerry, a Civil Engineer, went on to do a lot of great things including becoming the CEO & President of the Headwaters Corporation as well as the Executive Director of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. Jerry had an abiding love for the Red Cloud area and owned river bottom land alongside the River Road just southeast of town. After his passing in 2018, Dr. Barron decided to donate this land to the Willa Cather Foundation.

Barron's gift opens up a lot of possibilities for Heritage Tourism to create new recreational opportunities for tourists and locals. A good deal of the 80 or so acres is situated in a prime location for river access and in a meadowed area. This means there are possibilities for camping, fishing, boating, hiking, trails, unique lodging, and even outdoor workshops and skill building activities for all age groups.

Part of the reason we're eager to develop this recreation site is that we're acutely aware that we need to supplement all of our historical tours with activities that are interesting to a broader demographic and are the sort of things families with children might be interested in. The Hotel Garber will very likely open sometime in late winter/early spring 2025. Our historic sites and restored buildings are the envy of most other small towns, but we want people to spend more than a day in Red Cloud—we would like them to consider the community and the region as a tourism destination that they would like to spend multiple days in. We want them shopping, dining, and dreaming of getting a little place of their own to fix up in Webster County.

It was with that context in mind that Hotel Garber General Manager John Schwichtenberg and I decided to take a few days to explore some agritourism sites and visit with professionals running those sites in the Elkhorn and Missouri River Valleys of northeast Nebraska and southeastern South Dakota. These sites ran the gamut from Poppy's Pumpkin Patch near Norfolk to a wedding venue with a reception hall in an adapted machine shed (Blue Tin Ranch near Burbank, SD) to Pfanny's Farm (Randolph, NE) which included a cottage and geothermal and traditional greenhouses that allow the farm to sell produce all year long and ahead of the market.

For me, the highlight of the trip was the historic buildings lovingly restored by two reality show veterinarians (Ben and Erin Schroeder, the stars of *Heartland Docs* on the NatGeo Channel/Disney+) in Hartington, NE. Hartington's downtown looks fantastic. The crown jewel is the thoughtfully restored Hotel Hartington. I was able to spend some time talking to Ben and Erin and both assured me that the restoration of the hotel and the former Globe Clothing Building (which they converted into living space) were the catalysts that kickstarted a facelift for their beautiful, clean, and mostly filled downtown.

During our visit to Hotel Hartington we discovered that the venue is mostly used for weddings, receptions, and overnight accommodations for wedding parties. Most guests stay at the Cobblestone Inn & Suites down the street. They attract wedding guests from all over the country and from Omaha in particular, despite being 2.5 hours away. Hartington has 1500 people. We can do it here too.

People are looking for authentic, immersive experiences that are an escape from the hectic urban lifestyle. Experiences we take for granted many find mesmerizing. I can't even count the number of times someone has reached out asking if I can book them a tour of Gottsch Feedlot.

There's an untapped market for things as simple as building a pumpkin patch or creating an attractive and unique wedding venue. People here regularly drive 75 miles to Helgoth's near St. Libory. And there's some good examples of successful agritourism ventures closer to home as well, such as the Spring Creek Campground near Deweese and the various guided hunting experiences and lodges near Alma, and Lebanon (Trouville Hunting Lodge) and Courtland, KS (Heartland Game Birds). I encourage you to visit the websites of all of the businesses I've mentioned as you can get tons of great ideas. I can also connect you with most of the business owners who are very friendly. The Central Community Center Entrepreneurship Center would love to talk to you if you need help writing a business plan or talking through ideas. Just reach out.