

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
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Somehow it's already past Memorial Day. Another RC High School Alumni Weekend, another school year, and another Spring sports season has come and gone. It seems like it was just a few days ago that we were wrapping up the Winter sports season and returning from the girls state basketball tournament. While the calendar keeps changing, it doesn't really feel all that different since my daughter is still keeping us busy following her around to club basketball tournaments and softball games. But it really is summer and that means it's officially my busiest time of year at work: tourism season. This year presents special challenges given the state of road construction downtown. Nevertheless, we're poised to make this our biggest and best year ever at Discover Red Cloud/Heritage Tourism. Rather than try to convince you of that with a bunch of data or economic impact studies, I think it might be most useful to simply give a preview of what to expect this summer.

Let's start with our signature tourism event: the Spring Willa Cather Conference, June 4-6 at the National Willa Cather Center. The theme for 2026 is "Memory, Myth, and Meaning: Cather in Dialogue with America 250" and will feature a keynote presentation from rare books dealer and author Rebecca Romney. Some readers might recognize her from the HISTORY Channel show *Pawn Stars* or from her written work such as *Jane Austen's Bookshelf* or articles in *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, and the *New York Times*. Another highlight will be the Opening Celebration of the *All Aboard: West Bound Trains and American Culture* exhibit at the recently restored Burlington Depot. This exhibit will add another top notch cultural experience for visitors to the Cather Center year-round and will be of interest to anyone who enjoys American history. Academics, scholarship winners, and Willa Cather enthusiasts will also present on a broad range of topics related to Cather throughout the weekend. The Spring Conference will culminate with a banquet and a production of *The Bohemian*--a play adapted from Cather's short story "The Bohemian Girl." The play will be performed/produced by the The Harbor Stage Company, an ensemble of professional theater artists from Wellfleet, MA. Many events at the Cather Conference are free and open to the public or, in the case of the *The Bohemian*, ticketed events that non-conference attendees can purchase.

The National Willa Cather Center and its Willa Cather Bookstore are also featured on two passport programs for travelers this summer. The first, WanderNebraska, is a statewide travel adventure program organized by the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation. You can get a booklet at wandernebraska.com or download the WanderNebraska app. The second is the Nebraska Book Trail, a statewide passport program encouraging readers to visit independent bookstores across Nebraska. Participants collect stamps at each location and submit a photo of their completed passport to receive prizes. Learn more by following Nebraska Book Trail on Facebook.

The Palace Lounge & Steakhouse is also part of a statewide adventure this summer as they are on the Nebraska Beef Council's Beef Passport program which runs through September 30th.

According to the Beef Council, participants will “enjoy the mouthwatering beef offered at restaurants, meat shops, and meat processors across the state. Your purchases at participating locations can earn you points that unlock prizes from the Beef Council. Go to nebeef.org to learn more and download your passport.

The Starke Round Barn is back in play as tourism stops this year. Visitors need to contact owner Liz Rasser at 402-746-4165 or lrasser@gmail.com if they’re interested in a guided tour. Visitors who go on their own are welcome to come and look at the site, but entry will be prohibited without Liz there to guide you. The building will be locked and the overly curious should be forewarned that parts of the building are part of an active livestock operation. Wandering in alone is not only trespassing, but also potentially dangerous.

There’s lots of exciting new exhibits to see at the Webster County Historical Museum as well, but the biggest new highlight this summer will be the relocation of the former Webster County Jail cell onto the Museum’s grounds. Contact Director Teresa Young at 402-746-2444 for more information or simply stop by from 1pm to 5pm every Tuesday through Sunday through October.

The Red Cloud Golf Course also has a tournament almost every weekend between now and the Hometown Market 4 Person Scramble on Sept. 26th. The season kicks off with a tournament on June 6th and additional highlights include the Whitetail Properties Invitational (formerly Bud/Palace) July 11-12, the Webster County Community Hospital 4 Person Scramble on June 20th, and Conway Insurance 2 Couple Invite on Aug. 8th. Shoot a text to 402-767-0059 for more information about these and other tournaments (find the full list on their Facebook page or on the visitredcloud.com events page).

Summer doesn’t officially end during our annual Street Car Days weekend, but it is often the last best chance to celebrate as a community before school starts back up in mid-August. This year’s celebration is from July 31st to Aug. 2nd and the theme is “USA 250.” It will feature Missoula Children’s Theatre on Friday and Saturday, beer gardens both of those nights, live music on the 1st, the annual Hotrods at the Hospital Car Show on the 1st, and the annual Lions Club Pancake Feed at the Airport on Aug. 2nd as well as a ton of other family friendly events. There will also be a Young Eagles Rally at the Airport on the 2nd, including an opportunity for free airplane rides for kids ages 6-17. The annual parade will still go on but will be relocated due to the downtown road construction. This year’s parade route will start on 11th avenue on the north edge of town and go along Franklin Street to the County Museum.

There’s so much to do and see in Red Cloud this summer and we haven’t even mentioned the Speed Bowl, the best 3/8 mile dirt track there is. The Speed Bowl has not yet announced its 2026 schedule but it does seem like it will happen. Stay tuned and follow them on Facebook for the latest updates. We also hope to start construction on the Hardwick Park project this summer as well, because road construction is not enough!

Hopefully this serves as a good primer on what fun and interesting things there are to see and do in Red Cloud. If you need a place to stay, such as the newly opened Hotel Garber (the best Boutique Hotel on the Prairie!) or need a place to eat, just check out visitredcloud.com and learn more about your options. Contact me at jmccartney@redcloudnebraska or 402-746-0032 if you need any help. Now go out and have a great summer!