

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
Red Cloud Chief
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The last three years have been a blur of uncertainty for the tourism industry as the state dealt with disastrous flooding in 2019 and the nation grappled with the COVID pandemic in 2020-21. Locally, we were lucky enough to weather these storms thanks in part to our geographic isolation. A feature that often works to our detriment worked to our benefit as people sought out destinations far from the madding crowd. Lodging tax revenue in Webster County smashed the all-time record by 18% in 2021 and bested the 2019 mark by 45%. Nevertheless, 2020-21 was a time out of mind, where even if the visitors were still coming by, they blended into the background as the Spring Cather Conference moved mostly online, Alumni Weekend was cancelled in 2020, and large group and school tours were largely scrapped.

That's why 2022, despite its apparent flaws, feels like a breath of fresh air. As the weather warms up (finally), people are coming back together. We have been seeing this over at the Cather Center with an increase in school tours. Of course, the big tests for this transition back to normalcy will be Alumni Weekend (May 27-29) and the 67th Spring Willa Cather Conference (Jun 2-4). If you are a regular at either of these weekends, we need to see your smiling faces again! If you have been thinking about attending, this would be the perfect year to show your support. If you attend the Red Cloud Community Fund's Round Barn Reunion (5pm, May 27th), you will learn about how close we are to finishing fundraising for the Hotel Garber project, our plans to build a community recreation trail, and see how Heritage Tourism ties it all together. The following day will feature opportunities to learn about progress going on downtown, The Valley Child Development Center, and a chance to immerse yourself in memories of Red Cloud thanks to the Sid Tobler photography exhibit.

The Spring Cather Conference will be back and better than ever the following weekend. There are several opportunities for the public to get involved, including free presentations from Dr. James English and composer Christian Ellenwood, as well as a ticketed events featuring NPR's Maureen Corrigan and the Nebraska Chamber Players. Locals should note that the Saturday evening banquet is the only catered meal. There will be numerous opportunities for local restaurants to get business and for organizations to host fundraisers. Please consider having special hours during these weekends and make money by helping people make the sort of memories that will make them want to return.

Despite the difficulties of the last few years, our success indicates a clear lesson. Visitors want to escape the chaos of modern living and an "always plugged in" existence. They are willing to travel great distances, often at a great expense, just to get a taste of what we take for granted. Let's figure out how to make that work for everyone.