

# Can's Ass

## Fock 1: The Giant Prairie Dog Scam



Kansas has the only state flag that actually bellows out its name. Many of them say the state name somewhere in the design or seal, but Kansas makes good and goddamn sure you know who they are.

I understand they had a bitch of a time deciding on the final version of the flag, that it took over ten years to actually come up with an official one, and even that was a goddamn banner instead of a flag. Well, the down-hanging banner made some people pretty cranky when it came to displaying it. You couldn't run it up a flagpole, because then it would be

sideways. You had to have a special frame to carry it in a parade. And, worst of all, the Feds refused to hang it with the other state flags because it was too much of a pain in the ass. So, finally, some governor just took it on himself to change the goddamn banner to a goddamn flag. Then -- and not all that long ago -- another governor must've had trouble picking it out of the lineup, so he had the name KANSAS boldly block-lettered across the bottom, giving it the distinctive look of a Wal-Mart label.

The other flags must goof on the Kansas flag all the time. Like, say you're at a big formal gathering, and, like everyone else, you're in your best suit or tux. It's a fine looking affair, but there's this one -- and only one -- jamoke wearing a "Hi, My Name Is KEN" name tag. You know the other 49 guests will be snickering and chortling behind his back. Or greeting him with a jaunty, "And what's *your* name?" Hardy-har-har.

It just looks so dorky.

The pains hit me in Kansas. Big, bad pains in the plains.

It wasn't an instant thing. The celestial guardians of the Kansas border did not fling lightning bolts at Blue Man as he crossed the dotted line. No, it took a couple hundred miles or so. But when those pains hit, they didn't mess around: oh lordy lordy, they laid this roadtrippin' man low.

The Sunflower State itself was, however, an almost instant change from Soonerland. The browns of Oklahoma had begun to give way to greens already, but when we breached the Kansas boundary, grasslands simply abounded. The route from beautiful Enid to Dodge City (the next five-digit population on the route) was decidedly angular. It was as if the Kansas map had been drawn with an Etch-A-Sketch:

- enter Kansas, going due north on Highway 8,
- **90° left turn**, go 3 miles straight west,
- **90° right turn**, go 24 miles north on Route 281,
- **90° left turn** at the town of Medicine Lodge (pop. 2453), go 41 miles west on Route 160,
- **90° right turn** near (but not in) the town of Coldwater (pop. 939), go 22 miles straight up north on 183 to Brenham -- site of the World's Largest Hand-Dug Well (nope, didn't stop) -- then, finally,
- **90° left turn** onto Route 400 which would run straight through Dodge, then out of Kansas and right up the hoozy of Pueblo, Colorado.

You know, though, as one zig led into the next zag, I got to thinking: was that well really dug by *hand*?? Was some guy burrowin' like a dang ferret? Didn't he use tools? I mean, even levering away a hefty stone with a flat stick would disqualify him from "hand-dug" status. Hmm. Guess I shoulda stopped and checked it out after all...

Kansas is pretty big. It's bigger than Minnesota. Betcha didn't know that. I didn't, until Rand McNally told me. (That guy knows evvvvrything.) Twelfth biggest goddamn state in the US of A.

But it has only half as many people as Wisconsin, and Wisconsin ain't exactly bulging with folks. With 30.4 Kansans per square mile, and a square mile containing a neat and tidy 640 acres (which are, by definition, square things anyway), each and every goddamn Kansan has 21 goddamn acres to his or her goddamn self. That's a tidy goddamn parcel, pardner. Plenty o' room for grazin' and growin' the goddamn stuff that feeds America.

The landscape of south central Kansas was intriguing. It was not hilly, and it was not flat. There was grass aplenty, but few trees. The terrain rolled and swelled, reminiscent of the large Sand Dunes of Cape Cod's National Seashore, though these undulations were awash in good green grass, which wasn't especially long, nor was it especially short. It seemed strange, though there was no single strange aspect to it. Maybe it struck me odd that the grass was green when it had so little shade to keep it from scorching out. Maybe it puzzled me that Route 160 could be so rolling and fertile while my previous trans-Kansas treks had been far flatter, and a mix of tans, beiges, and much more muted greens.

The first Kansas crossing must have made an indelible impression, I guess. It was in '82 on the *Rudes Rock The Rockies Tour*, and Richie and I had spent a unique night in Topeka, where his big sis Mo had a job as a goddamn curator at some goddamn museum. It was a Friday evening, and Topeka was happenin'. There was a fair portion of drinkin' and such involved, and considerable good cheer. Mo's beau Joe was there, as was Joe's bro, Moe. [Moe's real name is Kevin, but some phrases are too good to pass up.] There might have even been another friend or two. We ate and drank at a decent spot called The Landmark, then adjourned to a cool place called Pore Richard's for the late night pounding, and finally stumbled back to Mo's at about 2:30 – which, of course, was 3:30 to us Eastern Time Zoners.

The next afternoon was spent touring the wonders of downtown Kansas City, a backtracked 65 miles east. The "highlight" that Mo steered us to was Crown Centre, a typical centerpiece collection of high-end shops and eateries, such as is common in most major cities. That didn't take very long since we weren't particularly shopping-oriented, unless it was shopping for ice cold draughts. So, in short order, we were rollicking back down the Kansas Turnpike westbound to Topeka for another go-round at Richard's.

Beer does funny things to people's judgment, as everyone is aware, but sometimes it really does make you stupid. For instance, on the ride back from KC, we were rapidly running out of beer. Richie and I had made a stop back in Missouri and procured some unusual beers at a gas station store. We focused on brands that we had never had, or, even better, that we had never heard of. This store had a mix-your-six promotion going, so we pieced together what seemed, at the time, to be a fun assortment.

Trouble was, they all sucked. Bad. So bad that we got disgusted with that selection and quickly bought real beer to replace it. However, with Joe and Kevin helping us out, the real beer went fast, and before you could recite the Mahabaratta, we were down to just a couple from the mix-n-match batch: Tecate, from Mexico, and Country Club Malt Liquor, a Texas brew. When beer drinkers are faced with this-or-nothing, "this" almost always prevails.

And so it was with us. Two cans, four guys. We decided to share both flavors among the foursome; that way, no one would miss out on any part of the experience. The Tecate was first. It was frigidly cold. It was Antarctic cold. It still sucked. But at least it was cold.

Then there was one. It, too, was at maximum chillage, having been buried under copious amounts of ice for two full days, so, we figured, how bad can it really be?

Being the driver, I went first. I guesstimated my allotted three ounces and swigged away accordingly. There was no way I ingested all three ounces. Choking and gasping, I shoved the can away.

"Gaaaawwwwwwd!" I sputtered, "That is AWFUL!!"

My companions laughed at my discomfort, which was made even worse by the fact that there was nothing else to wash away that wretched aftertaste. It just did its horrid dance on my palate and I tried to will an extra flow of saliva that would cleanse my tormented taste buds.

Still chuckling, Richie grabbed the can and said "Let me try it." Without hesitation, he poured the ghastly liquid into his mouth. His eyes locked in place and his neck muscles clenched as his body tried to reject the vile brew. His resolve, hardened through five years of dedicated keg-draining in college, won out, though, and he swallowed his share.

"Auggggggghhh!" he exclaimed, "That is such PISS!!" He hurriedly handed the can towards the back seats.

Joe and Kevin laughed heartily. I was still too discombobulated to respond.

Joe took the offensive container, saying boldly, "let me see that." And with a scoff that said, *those guys are wusses*, he took a confident slug of the putrid concoction. A Sacramento second later, he, too, was gagging.

"Oh my GODDD! That is GRRRRROSS!!" he coughed, and he extended the can towards Kevin. "Try it," he wheezed.

“Are you **kidding** me??” responded Kevin. “After seeing you three assholes react like **that?! I** pass.”

We all wanted to deride him for his cowardice, but none of us was quite hypocritical enough to chastise him for his good sense.

None of us wanted those final three ounces either, cold though it was. It got dumped out the window – yes, our **last beer** -- as we zoomed back to ‘Peka. It was one of the only times I have ever seen Richie dump out a cold beer. “I’d rather see a church burn,” was his usual philosophy about that.

I did admonish him, though, to try to make sure that none of it splashed on the van, because I was sure it would have eaten right through the paint.

At the crack of noon on Sunday, we bid Mo and Joe a hearty “Yo!” and set out to cross The Sunflower State on I-70 – rollin’ across 375 miles of a whole lotta nuthin!



That was what impressed me so much: how much nothing there really was out there. I had never seen so much nothing. I don’t know how many times I just said in wonder, “Look how far you can see!”

Even across the farmlands of Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, there were things that took up viewing space: trees, small hills, little towns, clusters of buildings. But my vivid memory of Kansas is one of totally empty plains. Thin strands of wire were strung from short pole to short pole near the shoulder of the highway, separating state property from somebody’s vast spread of land. Cattle appeared as small dark dots waaaaaay over there. Thunderclouds loomed over the

distant horizon, but it was obvious that we would be far, far away by the time that storm reached the Interstate.

After about 180 miles of wide-open plains, somewhere in Russell County, about halfway to Colorado, we pulled off the highway to fill our tank and our tummies at a bizarre little place called The Bear House. We pulled off there because it was the first place we had seen for quite some time, and we were wary that we might never see another one.

The Bear House was a very small plain building with a couple of old gas pumps and an abandoned tractor out front, a few small tables within, and some fairly tasty Westernburgers on the grill. We asked about the name of the establishment, and were told to check out back. Sure enough, in a rather small cage out back, sat a black bear.

The poor thing looked miserable. Aside from the thin lines of shadow cast by the bars of the cage itself, there was no shade for the bear to hide in. The midday summer sun just beat down on the big fella. We stood there pitying the bear for only a minute or two; it was just too damn hot to stand out there for long. And we had tank tops and shorts on, not a thick black fur coat.



In the next two hours of westering through more and more and more nothing – nothing sure does take up a lot of space sometimes – we encountered a series of billboards for a place called Prairie Dog Town. Perhaps you’ve heard of it. The first billboard was quite a long way from Prairie Dog Town, and they became more frequent as we neared it.

It was not as extreme as the Pedro signs of the Carolinas, or the almost 800-mile parade of Wall Drug signs that spill out of both ends of South Dakota, but the concept was similar. There were claims that we rolled our eyes at, and some that we just openly ridiculed. “See 600 prairie dogs!” was one. Another claimed “500 snakes!” Yet another proclaimed “See a 2-headed calf!” and one more boasted a “6-legged steer!” We reassured each other that there would be no Rude Brothers pit stop happenin’ at Prairie Dog Town.

But the very last sign got us. We had weathered the jabs and the roundhouse rights of the billboard barrage, but the final one was a haymaker and it got us square on the chin: "See an 8000-Pound Prairie Dog!!"



Exploding with skepticism, we cut the wheel hard and just made the exit ramp. Prairie Dog Town, technically, was true to their ads. There were hundreds of snakes, but almost of them were DEAD and lying shriveled in this large wooden bin. There was a two-headed calf, though it was mounted on the wall and gazing at us with its four glassy eyes.

And there really was even a six-legged steer – alive -- the unfortunate survivor of a birth defect that left an extra pair of limbs dangling uselessly from his collarbone as he trudged around in his cage.

The "six hundred prairie dogs" claim was pushing it, though. There were a few dozen in medium sized cages, separated by gender and priced for quick sale as pets. The strange part was that the rest of the "600" were scooting zim and zam around the large, fenced-in, dirt yard. The free prairie dogs raced around, as if taunting the captive ones, darting in and out of countless holes all over the yard, which obviously led out beyond the fence. And they didn't even need to do that, since the fence was made of wide-squared *wire*.

The biggest whopper of all, though, was the one that suckered us in. They had a four-ton **something**, all right, but it was just a nine-foot tall hump of concrete that was shaped VERY vaguely like a prairie dog sitting on its haunches. It wasn't even painted. It just sat there: one big, gray, and inert tribute to motorist stupidity.