

Kansas

Grüß Gott!

My name is Kellee Farmer and I am the Deputy Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna. Today I want to tell you about my home state of Kansas.

Kansas is probably best known from the book and movie “The Wizard of Oz” from the 1930’s. The heroine of the movie, Dorothy, is a Kansas farm girl who is caught in a tornado and somehow ends up in the Land of Oz. At the end of the movie, when Dorothy taps her heels together three times and says, “there’s no place like home,” she is transported home to Kansas.

Kansas is located right in the middle of the “lower 48” U.S. states. Kansas’s first known inhabitants were Native Americans who lived a nomadic life following the native buffalo. The name Kansas comes from the name of a Native American tribe known as the Kaw or the Kanza, which means “people of the south wind.” The topography of the state is very flat since it lies in the Great Central Plain of the U.S. -- so yes, Kansas can be very windy, although tornados are not as common as Wizard of Oz fans would like you to believe.

Kansas is on the route of migration trails used by early settlers. In the early 1800s President Jefferson sent a team led by two men, Lewis and Clark, to explore the previously unknown western part of the United States. The reports that they sent back encouraged millions of Americans to pack up and move west with the wagon trains. Kansas was at the crossroads of several trails that settlers used. The Santa Fe Trail from the 1820’s, the Oregon Trail from the 1840’s, and the California Trail from the 1840’s and 50’s that was put into use after gold was discovered in California and people moved west hoping to strike it rich.

Many towns in Kansas became “boom towns” as a result of the wagon trains moving through and the growing trade in cattle. The most famous of these towns was Dodge City, which for a time had the largest cattle market in the world. These were rough frontier towns which needed law and order. Famous men who kept law and order in Dodge City included: Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, and Bat Masterson. They were later immortalized in hundreds of Hollywood movies along with the fictional Marshall Matt Dillon who kept the peace for twenty years on the TV show “Gunsmoke.”

Once the railroad came into existence, Kansas City’s stockyards became an important hub for the livestock trade. Cattle and other livestock were driven to Kansas City, sold, and shipped by railroad to major urban centers throughout the United States. Today the legacy of the cattle trade is Kansas City style barbeque, which is made by smoking meet over wood and covering it with spicy sauce made of molasses and tomato.

Today, although a majority of people live in a few urban centers: Topeka, Wichita, and Kansas City, the state still has a rural and farming culture, and the economy is based on cattle, wheat, corn, and soybeans. Although Kansas also has a significant manufacturing industry in areas such as aviation.

There are a lot of famous Kansans, the most famous of whom is Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States and Allied commander in World War II. Other famous Kansans are Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, Langston Hughes, a leader of the Harlem Renaissance artistic movement, musicians Charlie Parker, Melissa Etheridge and Martina McBride, and actors Buster Keaton, Dennis Hopper and Annette Bening.

When you visit Kansas you can still visit Dodge City and learn first-hand what it was like to live in the Old West. You might want to hire a guide and learn how to hunt deer, geese or turkey. You should not miss the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, an 11,000 acre former cattle ranch that is preserving the prairie eco-system that the Native Americans and the buffalo once knew. If you're lucky you can watch my team, the famous Kansas Jayhawks, play basketball. We hope to see you, one of these days, in Kansas.