

## **Introduction**



*Above: The hike and bike trail connecting Gering with Scotts Bluff National Monument.*

*Previous page: Neligh Mill in Neligh. This museum, operated by the Nebraska State Historical Society, is adjacent to the proposed Cowboy Trail between Norfolk and Chadron.*

# Introduction

Trails have played a central role in Nebraska's history. Before westward settlement accelerated in the nineteenth century, Indian tribes established trails to guide movements through their territories. The Lewis and Clark expedition defined a trail of exploration along the Missouri River as the explorers inventoried the great land acquisitions of the Louisiana Purchase. As the United States expanded to the west, emigration routes from the east converged in Nebraska along the Platte River Road, guiding waves of pioneers to their new homes. These great Platte Valley trails -- the Oregon, California, and Mormon -- defined the history of our state and the settlement of the West. The fourth historic cross-Nebraska route, the Pony Express Trail, represented the nation's first cross-country communications link and created an enduring image of the romance of the American West. Trails were corridors of commerce and human activity through the wilderness. The national and international interest in the sesquicentennial of the Oregon Trail in 1993 illustrates the abiding magic that the western trails possess for people, even in an age of high technology and space exploration.

New transportation and communication methods replaced horses and wagons, but the old trail routes continued to influence the development of the nation. The Union Pacific, America's first transcontinental railroad,

followed the Platte River routes of the Mormon and Oregon Trails. Later, the Lincoln Highway (US 30) and Interstate 80 traced similar routes through the Platte River Valley, and US 385 followed the Sidney-Deadwood Trail in western Nebraska. The historic trail corridors that defined the growth of our country are still central to our lives at the end of the twentieth century.

Trails are now assuming other roles by emerging as important recreational and transportation arteries for people. Protected trail corridors help people rejuvenate themselves through fitness activities and contact with their environment, offer safe alternative routes for people to commute between home, school, workplace, and shopping, reduce traffic congestion and energy consumption, and preserve wildlife habitats.

Land and water-based recreational pursuits that involve moving along corridors are becoming increasingly popular among Nebraskans. Walking, hiking, bicycling, canoeing, tubing, equestrian activities, and running enjoy growing popularity; new activities such as cross-country skiing, in-line skating, and off-road vehicle use are gaining many adherents. Trails can enhance recreation by linking special places to one another and providing opportunities for people to explore the natural beauty, history, and communities of the state. Trails respond to the recreational demands of a growing number of Nebraskans.

Right: A landscape in the Seven Valleys region between Gothenburg and Callaway.



There is also a dimension to the development of trails in Nebraska that transcends recreation and transportation. This state has a varied and subtle landscape: the purples and golds of prairie grasses waving in the wind, the curving shapes of the Sandhills, the vision of a windmill etched against an endless sky. The character of Nebraska is visible in the form of a stream-cut canyon, and in a perfectly formed church steeple on a hill rising above a village far off the interstate highway. These are sights best experienced and reflected upon at a slower pace, a trail's pace. The expansive landscape of Nebraska invites a sense of tranquility; its communities, self-reliant and industrious, offer a chance to learn about the best of America.

Trails, then, offer opportunities for both recreation and discovery of ourselves and our state. Conceiving a trails system as a *Network of Discovery* -- a network that can help to

unlock the secrets of our environment, history, and communities -- can enrich the lives of both Nebraskans and visitors to our state.

### **The Trails Movement**

The movement to develop trails has grown around the nation as more communities and states recognize the benefits of recreation corridors that link the natural and built environments. In 1993, the nationwide Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, an organization that promotes the reuse of abandoned railroad corridors for both interim and permanent recreational trail use, announced the completion of America's five-hundredth rail-trail. Nebraska's neighboring state of Iowa is one of the nation's leaders in the conversion of abandoned rail corridors into recreational trails. Missouri's Katy Trail has created a vital recreational resource and contributed substantially to rural economic development. In western Iowa, the Council Bluffs-to-Shenandoah Wabash Trace Nature Trail attracts users from surrounding states and creates business opportunities in small communities along the route.

In Nebraska, Lincoln has led the state in the development of local trails with its growing urban network. The Great Plains Trails Network is sponsoring the development of the Mo Pac East Trail, connecting Lincoln with Wabash along an abandoned Missouri Pacific Railroad line. Trails development in Omaha is

accelerating as well, following the 1990 opening of the very popular Keystone Trail.

Trails development is spreading to other parts of the State, ranging from Dannebrog, with a recently completed bicycle trail, to the ambitious Monument Valley Pathways project of Nebraska's twin cities of Scottsbluff and Gering. In December, 1993, the State of Nebraska announced acquisition of the former Chicago and North Western "Cowboy Line" from Norfolk to Chadron as a trail corridor with continuation of rail service on its western end. This resulting Cowboy Trail will become the nation's longest rail-trail.

### **The Organization of the Plan**

In order to build on these substantial efforts and to promote recreational travel that does not use fossil fuels, the Nebraska Energy Office commissioned the preparation of this document, *A Network of Discovery: A Comprehensive Trails Plan for the State of Nebraska*. The project was financed with Exxon Oil Overcharge Funds and was supervised by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. Information and guidance was provided by the Nebraska Trails Plan Committee, made up of representatives of federal, state, and local governments, and motorized and non-motorized trails user groups. The plan provides a statewide framework for trails planning and development efforts. It consists of the following elements:



### **THE COWBOY TRAIL AND DEVELOPMENT**

*"The (Cowboy Trail from Norfolk to Chadron) will be the longest such facility in the country and will spawn economic development opportunities for business and towns along the line."*

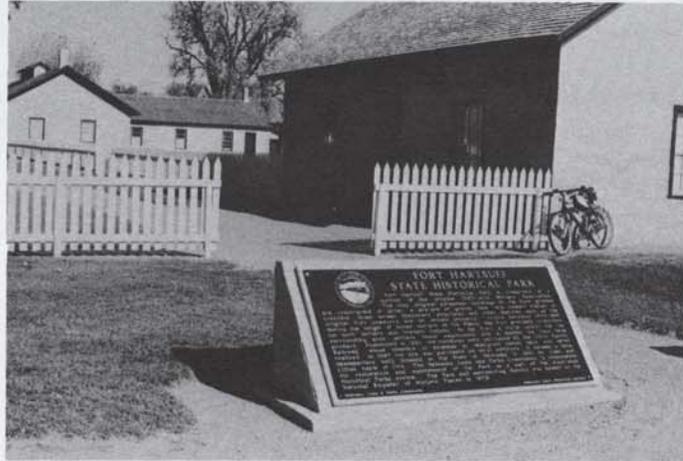
*- Charles Montange  
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy  
December 29, 1993*

*Top left: The Chicago and North Western's high bridge over the Niobrara River southeast of Valentine. This crossing will be a major feature of the Cowboy Trail.*

*Bottom left: The magic of a small town - a general store and incomparable sycamore trees in the center of Fort Calhoun.*

Top right: Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park in Elyria, between Ord and Burwell. Interpretive parks like this restored frontier fort help to define the trails system.

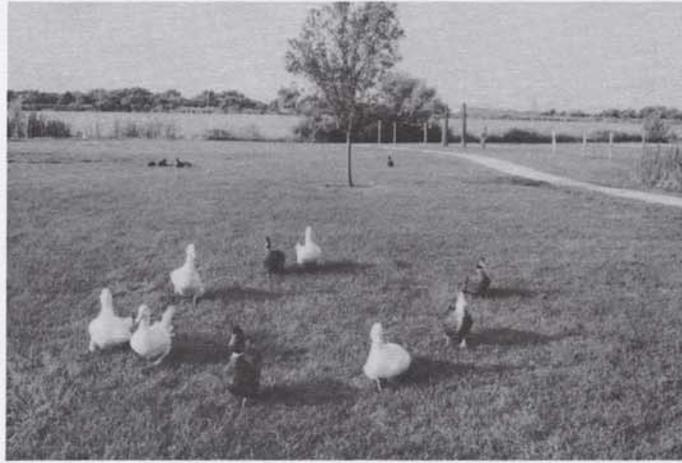
Bottom right: A young photographer along the Missouri River near Macy.



- *A Vision for Nebraska Trails*, establishing an overall concept and roles of the trails system.
- *Trail Resources and Opportunities*, considering factors in different parts of the state that determine the character of the trails system. This section includes an inventory of current trails development efforts. It also presents the resource corridor concept, designed to knit Nebraska's special features into an overall trails network.
- *Constituencies and Trail Types*, considering the demands and needs of various types of trail users, and defining the types and standards of facilities which meet these needs.
- *The Resource Corridors*, describing the clusters of features that define the planned trails network.
- *The Trails Development Plan*, designed to mold the vision and objectives of the trails system and the needs of individual user groups into an overall network of discovery for Nebraska.
- *Implementation Recommendations*, providing organizational and funding recommendations for the completion of the statewide trails network.

The plan presents an innovative and visionary approach to trails planning that unlocks the benefits that a *Network of Discovery* holds for Nebraska. It is dedicated to the hope that trails

can help residents and visitors experience the subtle interaction of people and nature that makes up our unique and great state. The plan is part of an evolutionary process, providing a way of looking at Nebraska and its endless possibilities for trails development. The concepts and trail proposals contained in the plan are both a starting point and an inventory of possibilities that will grow through the contributions and joint efforts of the people of the state.



*Top left: Ducks on the trail at Gothenburg's Lake Helen Park.*

*Bottom left: A bicycling family on Lincoln's Mo Pac Trail. This trail connects to the 26-mile long Mo Pac East Trail, providing a possible future connection to the Omaha area.*



