The America's old highways still lead to great destinations, including the historical wonders of Red Hills State Park.

On The *Back* Road Again

Story By Joe McFarland
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Long ago we all got used to the perfectly sensible idea that interstate highways are the only way to travel when it comes to driving long distances in America. The logic: If the real point of taking a trip is to get there quickly, ignoring everything but traffic, seeing nothing particularly memorable along the way, then interstates certainly are the ticket.

But not everybody out there chooses to travel those well-beaten paths. Some of us—the true explorers of today, the nostalgic sightseers and curious dawdlers—all prefer to wander the out-of-the-way highways those hurried travelers ignore. The thing is, secretly, many of those high-speed travelers wish they, too, could be wandering back roads, if only they believed they had the time.

Carl Aten knows what most drivers are thinking. He's a license-plate watcher, and a good one. It's an old habit from his county law-enforcement days, most likely. Glancing at license plates, Aten knows, reveals important clues about why any particular vehicle pulls off of U.S. Route 50 and into Red Hills State Park. There are locals, and he knows them all, and then there are people he will see but once in a lifetime.

"There are interesting and unusual people driving down Route 50," Aten says politely as he pulls across Route 50, which bisects this 967-acre state park a few miles west of the Wabash River. "And sometimes they stop in."

This is an off-the-beaten-path area of rural, southeast Illinois, not far from the

Peaceful and pastoral, the landscape around Red Hills State Park invites nostalgic travelers and nature lovers alike.

Equestrian opportunities at Red Hills include a 5-mile equestrian/biking trail, a horse campground and horse arena featuring regular events.

Indiana border, where Aten has now been site superintendent for 21 years. As a matter of habit, this routine plate-watcher understands that the origin of each plate reveals a bit about the nature of the driver.

Case in point: A man and a woman on motorcycles arrived at the park campground the other day. They were from Canada. According to campground hosts Ivan and Norma Barnett, a pair of local retirees who look after the popular campground throughout the camping season, the motorcyclists were taking the so-called Blue Highways of America as they headed west out of Florida, and clearly had no intention of taking the quickest route.

"They said they didn't want to go on the interstate," Ivan Barnett recalled. "They wanted to enjoy the view."

And then a second group from Canada showed up. Totally unrelated.

"They were storm chasers," Norma Barnett said. "The common denominator was Route 50."

Watching license plates, it turns out, had a lot to do with the creation of this state park more than 60 years ago. Aten explained that, back in the 1940s someone visiting Indiana counted up the number of Illinois license plates in the parking lots of a state park just across the Indiana state line. At the time, there were no Illinois state parks serving this specific region of Illinois. Officials added up the lost commerce and recreation opportunities for Illinois, and a convincing argument was soon made in Springfield to create a new state park on our side of the Wabash River.

While searching for good location, one spot clearly stood out above all others. Illinois geography buffs know the highest elevation anywhere between Cincinnati and St. Louis is none other than Red Hill—the highest land in what is now Red Hills State Park. Within a few years, the newly established park between Olney and Lawrenceville, featuring deep, forested ravines and hills, along with open fields for picnics and equestrian events, became the local destination of choice for campers, travelers and sportsmen.

But more attractions were added. Someone suggested a lake would be nice here. The timing was perfect. In 1950, the federal Dingell-Johnson Act had just been passed (the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, as it's known, levies a small tax on fishing and boating gear nationwide, providing money for projects such as new lakes.)

"Here's a bit of history," Aten offered. "Red Hills Lake was the first

The Trace Inn restaurant and banquet facility overlooks Red Hills Lake and attracts as many locals as out-of-town visitors.

Picturesque Red Hills Lake was the first project in Illinois funded by the federal Dingell-Johnson Act.

project in Illinois funded through the Dingell-Johnson Act," After the 40-acre lake was completed and stocked, fishermen and campers really began streaming into this rural recreation hotspot. A lakeside restaurant was built (remodeled and updated today as the Trace Inn). Traffic began rolling in from everywhere, many to camp at the shaded tent and trailer sites, others to fish, hunt or hike. It was the heyday of American highway travel in the 50s, back before interstates rerouted travelers away from communities, and U.S. Route 50—just like U.S. Route 66—carried a steady stream of truckers, tourists and long-distance vacationers straight through America on these two-lane wonders.

Today, people still seek out Red Hills State Park, many to savor the old-fashioned sights along Route 50, others for the pure satisfaction of experiencing a remnant of unspoiled America. As historians point out, Red Hill has a national history dating back more than 210 years.

"See that line of hills in the distance?" Aten asked while standing at an overlook on Red Hill. "That's Indiana." The fact is, people have been marking territorial boundaries at this spot for nearly as long as America has been a country. In 1795, Revolutionary War General Anthony Wayne (the namesake of nearby Wayne County) signed a treaty establishing the so-called Indian Boundary Line at Red Hill. At the time, Red Hill marked the western edge of the United States, and it was the first declared U.S. land in what is now the State of Illinois. Evidence of the jagged boundary line still runs through the state park in a southwest/northeast line.

There is additional history running through Red Hills. U.S. Route 50, which bisects the park from east to west, runs alongside the old Cahokia Trace, or the Trace Road, the original route between Vincennes (the oldest city in Indiana) and St. Louis. The park's lakeside restaurant—the Trace Inn—gets its name from the old road.

Thus, long before interstates whisked away motorists from this rural region, travelers heading west toward St. Louis and east toward Vincennes followed the same, ancient path that had been traveled since before America even existed here.

It's a quieter trail these days, favored by those seeking a nostalgic passage across America. Clearly, this was once a well-traveled road of some importance. Dated images along the road to Red Hills make getting there half the fun today. Weathered barn advertisements and 1940s-50s-era motels—monuments to that classic era of neon overstatement—still welcome Route 50 travelers. To the west, one barn beckons Route 50 travelers to "SEE 7 STATES FROM ROCK CITY." For those unconvinced of the merits of Chattanooga, the sign adds: "WORLD'S 8th WONDER." The famous white squirrels of Olney, roughly 10 miles west of Red Hills, still represent a must-see attraction for anyone passing down Route 50.

Traveling to Red Hills State Park, therefore, becomes a sentimental passage through time. It's easy to see why those Canadians showed up, and it's easy to see why license-plate reading tells a lot about the kind of people pulling into Red Hills.

Site Superintendent Aten has carried on the tradition of giving travelers a rea-

Anyone with an eye for nature will enjoy the shaded, woodland camp sites—along with wild discoveries.

The newly restocked Red Hills Lake is already showing promise for anglers. Bowhunting for whitetails remains one of the top hunting choices here.

son to stop. He installed a basketball court and sand volleyball court some years ago—unexpected but highly appreciated amenities that local athletes and visitors use continually. Local Boy Scout troops hold summer and fall activities at the tent-camping area. The horse arena, now one of the oldest chartered horse arenas in Illinois, still hosts equestrian events.

But after more than 50 years, Red Hills Lake had to be upgraded.

"In October 2008, the lake was drained to make necessary repairs to the spillway," Aten explained. "But it's now filled up, restocked, and the fish are really growing fast."

DNR fisheries biologist Mike Hooe said a variety of sport fish were stocked into the refilled lake, including largemouth bass, red ear sunfish, black crappie, bluegill and channel catfish. During a recent, midsummer sampling at the lake, Hooe said he was pleased to see a healthy growth rate among all species.

"Also, I saw no signs of contamination by undesirable species such as green sunfish, bullheads or carp," he said. "The stocked fish are growing well, just as we expected, and within a couple of years the bass will reach the minimum 15-inch limit."

A new boat launch was expected to be completed by late summer, replacing the narrow, shallow runway that frustrated some trailer-backers. For visitors who want to stay, campground hosts Ivan and Norma Barnett said there are more than 100 Class A sites here—all tree-shaded—with vehicle access and electric hook-ups, a sanitary dump station, water and a disabled-accessible building with showers and flush toilets.

"The rent-a-cabin also is popular," Norma Barnett pointed out. "Plus, there's a horse campground, along with plenty of tent camping sites."

A satellite facility included under the management of Red Hills is a 627-acre Illinois Nature Preserve known as Chauncey Marsh. It's located roughly 8 miles straight north of Red Hill itself, and includes the best remaining example of a Wabash Border marsh ecosystem, with marshes, dry and wet prairie, lush bottomland forest and thriving riverine community.

For sportsmen, archery deer hunting is permitted in season (no firearm deer hunting at Red Hills but permitted at Chauncey Marsh), along with squirrel, dove, rabbit, woodcock and quail. Trail enthusiasts will find 8 miles of hiking trails, from moderately difficult to easy, winding through scenic locations. A 5-mile equestrian and biking trail also is open when soil conditions permit.

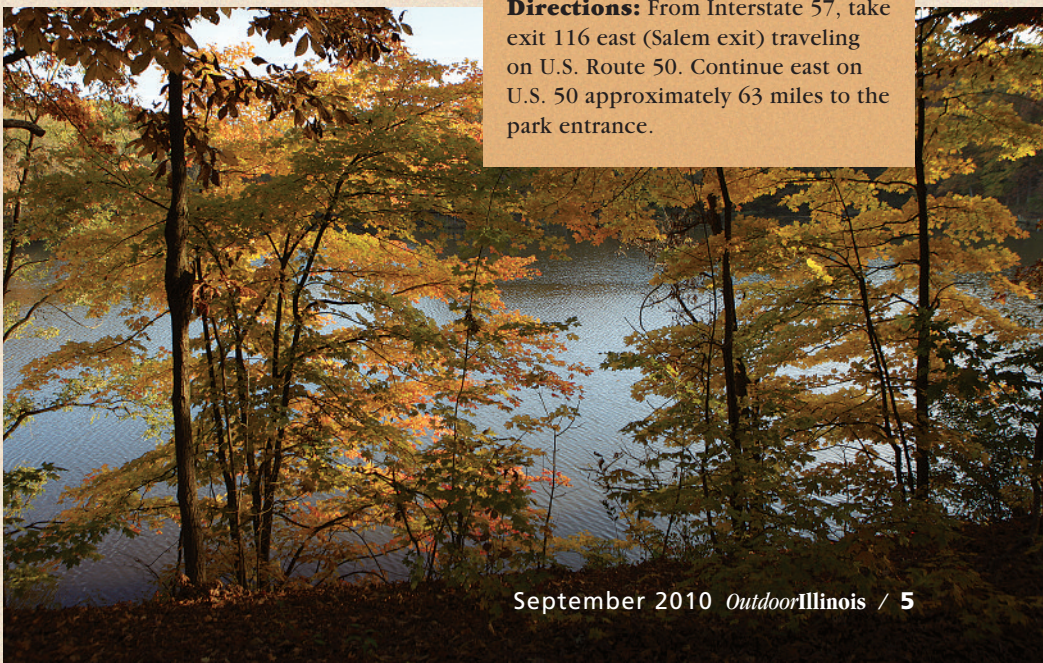
Once you arrive at Red Hills, it's easy to want to stay to soak up the relaxing atmosphere—including the upper atmosphere of Red Hill itself. And you won't be alone.

"There are a lot of people who like traveling on roads that aren't interstates," Aten observed.

Just look at the plates.

At a glance

Red Hills State Park, R.R. 2, Box 252A, Sumner, IL 62466
Telephone: (618) 936-2469
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/redhls.htm
Directions: From Interstate 57, take exit 116 east (Salem exit) traveling on U.S. Route 50. Continue east on U.S. 50 approximately 63 miles to the park entrance.



The tranquil fall colors around Red Hills make it a primary sightseeing destination for visitors each autumn.