A New Approach to Storytelling

New Exhibits for the Kansas Museum of History
For 140 years the Kansas Historical Society has ignited passion and pride in Kansas. Started a mere 14 years after statehood the Historical Society was founded to preserve the state's role in the American narrative and has achieved a long and distinguished list of accomplishments. At the Historical Society’s headquarters in Topeka the Kansas Museum of History serves as the front door, welcoming visitors to the campus.

The Kansas Historical Society has an annual budget of $8 million, with 82 full-time employees and many more part-time and seasonal workers. The Kansas Historical Foundation is a private, not-for-profit organization that is a partner to the Historical Society. The Foundation is governed by a board of 60 accomplished individuals from all corners of the state.
Thirty years ago the Kansas Museum of History opened its doors to Kansans and visitors of all ages.

The exhibits were state of the art, earning recognition and awards from state and national organizations. People came from near and far to learn about Kansas. The Museum and the Historical Society were rated among the top three state history organizations in the country.

We are upgrading our exhibits at the Kansas Museum of History from the ground up so that the Museum retains its reputation as one of the state's most valuable resources and once again becomes a must-see experience for the schoolchildren and families of the state, as well as travelers visiting the Great Plains.
Two years after the last permanent exhibit was installed at the Museum the Internet became public and changed our lives forever. For the past 20 years the Kansas Historical Society has capitalized on technology to drive its overall visits to more than 13 million annually; most of these visits are virtual.

We are now focusing our attention on creating a world-class experience for our audiences that visit us in person. We will offer a unique and extraordinary experience that cannot be found anywhere else. Visitors will be encouraged to step into Kansas’ exciting past and leave with pride knowing how the state has changed the country and the world. Allowing visitors to actively participate in the past through fewer barriers and a compelling narrative style with meaningful experiences will give our guests reasons to return again and again.

Together we can create the 21st century Kansas Museum of History
A new approach to storytelling

The gallery will begin with a multimedia experience of Kansas sights and sounds: A ride on horseback through the Flint Hills, the heat and grandeur of a prairie fire, the noise of a buffalo stampede, the drums of a pow wow, a walk through a busy aircraft factory, and the remarkable views of a Kansas sky from a vintage aircraft. Exiting the entrance gallery the visitor will encounter a series of thematic spaces that showcase original artifacts and experiences that teach about Kansas’ role in our nation’s history.

The following is a sample of the stories we will tell.

In **Gathering of Cultures**, experience Fool Chief’s Village, which sits on the north bank of the Kansas River and dates to 1830, a time when the Kansa were moved eastward due to the pressures of many cultures competing for resources. The village, which included 30 to 50 lodges, was among the last occupied by the Kansa in the tribe’s ancestral homeland. Visitors may work as assistant archeologists and interpret Kansa, French, Spanish, and American artifacts recovered from the actual village, speculating on what the items tell about life in the 1830s. Guests can explore a Kansa lodge, as well as a tipi used during hunts and experience how the environment determines our way of life.

In **Bleeding Kansas**, hear heated arguments over the expansion of slavery into Kansas Territory and follow the stories of several Kansas characters including famed abolitionist John Brown, whose letters and personal weapons can be seen. Visitors can crawl into a barrel in the basement of a Topeka home as Ann Clark did when she escaped slavery in Lecompton to find freedom through the Underground Railroad. David Atchison, a U.S. senator from Missouri, will tell his story of how he led proslavery border ruffians into Kansas to seize control of the polling places and cast tens of thousands of fraudulent votes to elect a proslavery legislature. Charles Robinson, who was to become the first governor of Kansas, spoke to every citizen when he said,

> It is for us to choose for ourselves, and for those who will come after us, what institutions shall bless or curse our beautiful Kansas. Shall we have freedom for all her people and consequent prosperity, or slavery for a part, with the blight and mildew inseparable from it?

Guests may also attend the territorial legislature meeting in Wyandotte with newspaper woman Clarina Nichols who sat knitting in the chambers so she could lobby the delegates for women’s rights at every opportunity.
This is a fraction of the stories we have to tell.

Instead of merely presenting history in chronological order, eight pods will be built around the basic themes allowing visitors to connect the threads between yesterday and today. For those who like chronology, enhanced timelines will connect the eight spaces.

- Gathering of Cultures
- Wild, Wild West
- Making a Living
- It Happens First in Kansas
- Bleeding Kansas
- Making a Home
- Blowing in the Wind
- Separate but Equal is Inherently Unequal

Interactive displays will breathe life into the 26,000-feet exhibit space with technologies that allow for a variety of learning styles. Carefully selected items from the vast collections of more than 500,000 historic photographs and more than 53,500 cubic feet of archive materials will be strategically utilized to draw attention to the many unique Kansas Historical Society artifacts:

- Osage cradle board
- Civil War battle flags
- George Armstrong Custer's boots
- 1880s Cyrus K. Holiday Santa Fe locomotive
- Carry A. Nation's diary
- William Allen White’s printing press
- Dwight D. Eisenhower’s military jacket
- Lucinda Todd's plaintiff papers relating to Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka

The new gallery will use current scholarship and storytelling techniques so that visitors can be fully engaged in learning about and celebrating Kansas. The goal will be to use technology to layer information so that visitors choose how deeply they wish to explore specific topics, allowing young children and their parents, as well as scholars, to achieve a satisfying and personal experience at the Kansas Museum of History.
The Kansas Museum of History is the crown jewel of Topeka.

— Larry Wolgast, Mayor of Topeka • July 2014

The current museum is among the most valuable resources in the state. Schoolchildren, scholars, tourists, and the general public visit the Museum regularly. This past year 30,000 individuals visited from across the United States and throughout the world. Each year K-12 students come to the Museum as part of their Kansas history studies. From the time it opened in 1984 more than 1.5 million visitors have toured the Museum and consistently praised the facility.

What’s the matter?
The current permanent exhibits at the Kansas Museum of History have served the state well. But after more than 30 years the displays lack the sophisticated technology, art, and interactive capabilities of the modern museum. Lagging attendance in recent years and visitor evaluations confirm the need for renovation.

Kansans love our history. It’s in our DNA. But the technology to illustrate those stories has outstripped the ability of the institutions responsible for telling and preserving them. So it’s incumbent upon us to find new, fresh, innovative methods of retelling our history in ways that are compelling to our many different audiences. Four-year-old children have computers at home but when they go to the Museum nothing talks or moves. This presents a challenge to museums and historical societies throughout America. It impacts the Kansas Historical Society particularly hard because the wealth of material in its collections is newspapers, photographs, diaries, and artifacts. It’s time to make those artifacts tell their stories at the Kansas Museum of History.
The Kansas Historical Society seeks to raise $9 million to renovate the main gallery ($6 million) and build an endowment ($3 million) for future exhibits and educational programs for youth and adults. Specifically a $3 million investment with a modest five-percent spending policy will provide $150,000 annually.

Total estimated cost: $9 million

This draft plan is intended for discussion purposes and feedback is welcome and encouraged.

For more information or to provide feedback, please contact:

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When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas.

— William Allen White, 1922