



LET'S HIT THE ROAD!

Everything Is Appealing

*From apple country to a crooked river,
Crawford County is hardcore about its fundamentals.*

By Julie Gilkay, Managing Editor

MONTHS SINCE our last visit to Wisconsin's west coast, Gary and I were happy to get back on the road again...but not just any road. We were kicking it up in the Kickapoo River Valley on the Wisconsin Great River Road.

Traveling 250 miles along the Mississippi and through eight counties, it's Wisconsin's portion of the 10-state Great River Road National Scenic Byway, which in 2025 was voted the most scenic drive in America by readers of *USA Today*. In Crawford County, it passes through the county seat of Prairie du Chien, Lynxville and Ferryville following State Highway 35.

If that's not enough of a draw, the crookedest river in the state sure is. At 125 miles, the Kickapoo is the longest tributary of the Wisconsin River and thought to be one of the oldest active rivers in the world.

That's thanks to the glaciers that bypassed the Driftless Region and left this one alone to do its work, carving deep valleys millions of years ago and resulting in forested hills and steep bluffs with sandstone cliffs rising above the river.

Calling Our Bluff

We needed to test the water ourselves. From our Fox Cities home, we headed south on U.S. 41. Let's put this travelogue in drive and get into gear...

Located at the base of bluffs towering

almost 600 feet above the Mississippi, Ferryville sits at one of the river's widest points and beckons with its outdoor recreational possibilities. It's also the home of former Governor Patrick Lucey (1971-77).

We learned during a stop at the observation deck at River View Park that in the early 1900s, people could wade across the Mississippi River. That changed in the '30s with the addition of locks and dams to provide reliable navigation. It's hard to imagine today!

Built in 2008, the observation deck overlooks Lake Winneshiek, a broad expanse of the Mississippi formed by the Lynxville dam, and offers a telescope for spying bald eagles.

While we didn't see or hear any choo choos during our fall visit, it's apparently a hot spot for train watchers to observe the ones making their way below on the BNSF Railway line.

That eye candy led to another. Following North Buck Creek Road, we trekked over to Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area, a 440-acre preserve run by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy. With a name like that, you know it's going to be a sweet spot. It sure was.

There's a kiosk at the top of the hill

IN EVERY WAY. Kickapoo River flows north, south, east and west over its 125-mile length. Visitors can peer into a telescope at River View Park in Ferryville. Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area offers views of the Mississippi.



by a small parking area that leads to the trailhead and a panoramic perspective of the Mississippi and the Great River Road.

The 1.5-mile roundtrip trail begins in a prairie and then meanders through a woody ridgetop—be sure to follow the path to the right when you reach the Y intersection—before opening up to a glorious view of the water and land.

After taking a moment to breathe it all in and watch a hawk circle overhead in the nearly cloudless sky, we went out the way we came in and were back on the road along with a few motorcyclists—a common companion in the region.

We headed east to Gays Mills, Apple Capital of Wisconsin with more than 1,000 acres of orchards.

On our way, we passed just as many cars with Iowa license plates as Wisconsin ones as well as a sign for a lutefisk and meatball dinner at Utica Lutheran Church in Mount Sterling. Curious, I looked it up and found it's an annual event during which a full Norse meal is served, complete with potatoes and gravy, lefse, rutabagas, cranberries, pastries and rommegröt.

All the Juicy Details

According to the historical marker we came across as we wove our way above the village, apple growing began in the area in 1905 when farmers discovered the fertile lands surrounding both sides of the Kickapoo River. Today, the community offers the largest concentration of orchards in the tri-state area.

We made our first stop at Sunrise Orchard atop the hill along Highway 171 known as Orchard Ridge. It's a 225-acre supersized operation that provides a positively supersized first impression.

It was clear that orchards in Gays Mills, population 577, are in a class of their own. With a separate parking area for motorcycles alone, Sunrise stretches on and on. Visitors will find a bakery, gift shop, playground, yard games, dog park, tailgater food stand and curd mobile. Oh, and there are also 21 varieties of apples. Grab a cart if you're loading up!

At the store, say yes to a Sunrise Slushy Supreme, an apple cider slush topped with whipped cream and caramel sauce and finished with an apple cider doughnut. It's a family-friendly version of the loaded Bloody Mary.

Led by Allen Teach, this family-owned orchard sells apples in 3-, 5- and 10-pound bag options and by the half and full bushel. Gary and I settled on a new favorite, Empire, after doing some sampling.



FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR. Corlia Botes and Leatitia du Plessis sort and bag apples for sale at Sunrise Orchard, which has two locations in Gays Mills, as does Kickapoo Orchard. A sculpture celebrating the fruit and its impact stands in Lions Club Park in the Apple Capital of Wisconsin.



Allen, whose middle name is Mac (after the apple, of course), is the third generation to run the orchard, having started full time in 1978 after graduating from Michigan State. His grandfather came to the orchard in 1934, and three of Allen's nephews represent the fourth generation.

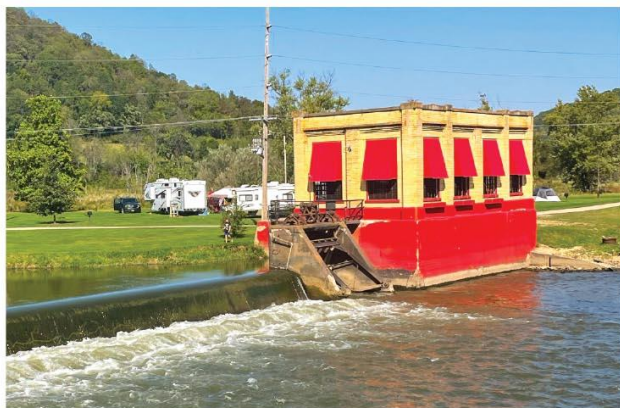
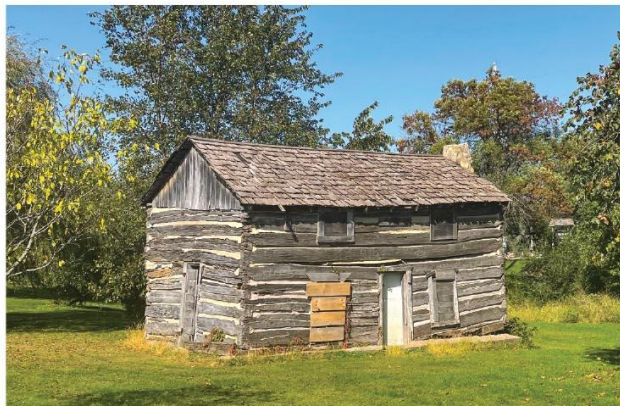
"I started working here when I was in grade school and have been here all my life," he says. "I've worked with employees who shared stories of what it was like in the 1920s and '30s. I carry that history with me, and I'm trying to pass that on to the younger generation."



With 152,315 apple trees to care for, Allen is doing what he can to preserve the orchard's history and ensure its future success.

Last year, Sunrise produced 175,000 bushels of apples. With an average of 110 per bushel, that means more than 19 million apples in a harvest starting in August, with the season finishing in March.

"There've been so many memories created here that I really feel an obligation to our community and to our customers—retail and wholesale—that we're still here," Allen says. "We added our second location



last year, and we think we're well set."

Hungry for lunch, we went down the road to 1913 Kickapoo Orchard, which features a farm market, deli, cider house, bakery, and events like wine tastings and a corn maze.

They have a whopping 41 heirloom varieties, including the popular grapefruit-size Wolf River apple, and intriguing ones like Kickapoo Spice, Early Strawberry, Snowsweet and Wine Crisp.

We were tempted by the apple pizza, available fresh and frozen, but reluctantly passed knowing we had a dozen apple cider doughnuts waiting for us.

Instead, we ordered a Cider House Hammy, an apple cider-smoked spiral ham with cheese on toasted bread, and the Harrison, a crispy chicken cutlet on a toasted brioche roll topped with warm apple compote, apple slices and garlic cheese spread.

Bottoms Up!

We took our hot sammies to go and made our way to Log Cabin Heritage Park, an outdoor museum that preserves the folk architecture of the Kickapoo Valley. There are several log structures, horseshoe facilities and a spring-fed creek at the park,

making it a peaceful place for a picnic.

Steps away and adjacent to the county fairgrounds was Kickapoo Bottoms Nature Preserve, an 85-acre tract of land along the river, where we stumbled upon a portion of the Stump Dodger Trail, which provided up-close looks at the river, hills and woodlands. We even crossed paths with a few frogs and fishermen.

On the way back to our car, we stopped to admire the dam and powerhouse dating back to 1847 when James Gay founded this

"We passed as many cars with Iowa plates as Wisconsin ones..."

unsettled area in the Kickapoo Valley. He constructed a dam and sawmill about 16 feet from the present one and was later joined by two brothers.

Ready to explore the county seat, we took Highway 27 through Seneca before returning to the Great River Road. As we approached Prairie du Chien, we could

BUILT TO LAST. Find dwellings and horseshoe facilities at Log Cabin Heritage Park next to Crawford County Fairgrounds in Gays Mills and near the historic dam and powerhouse. Gary Gilkay sips a wine at Eagles Landing Winery across the border in Marquette, Iowa.

smell the delicious aromas coming from the smokers at Ridge Top BBQ on the outskirts of Eastman before we saw the restaurant. If only we were hungry...

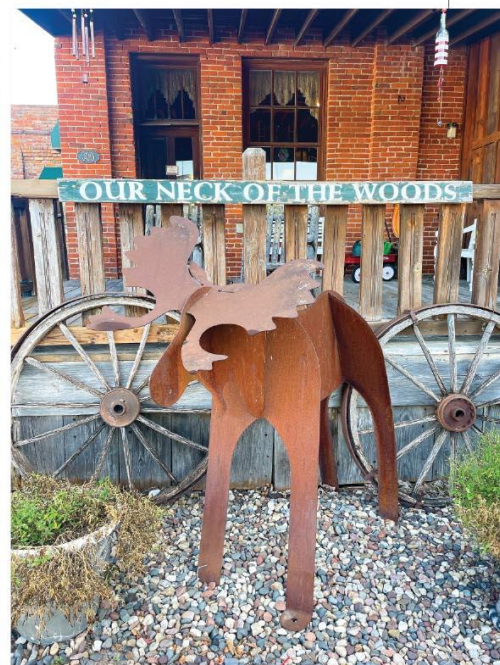
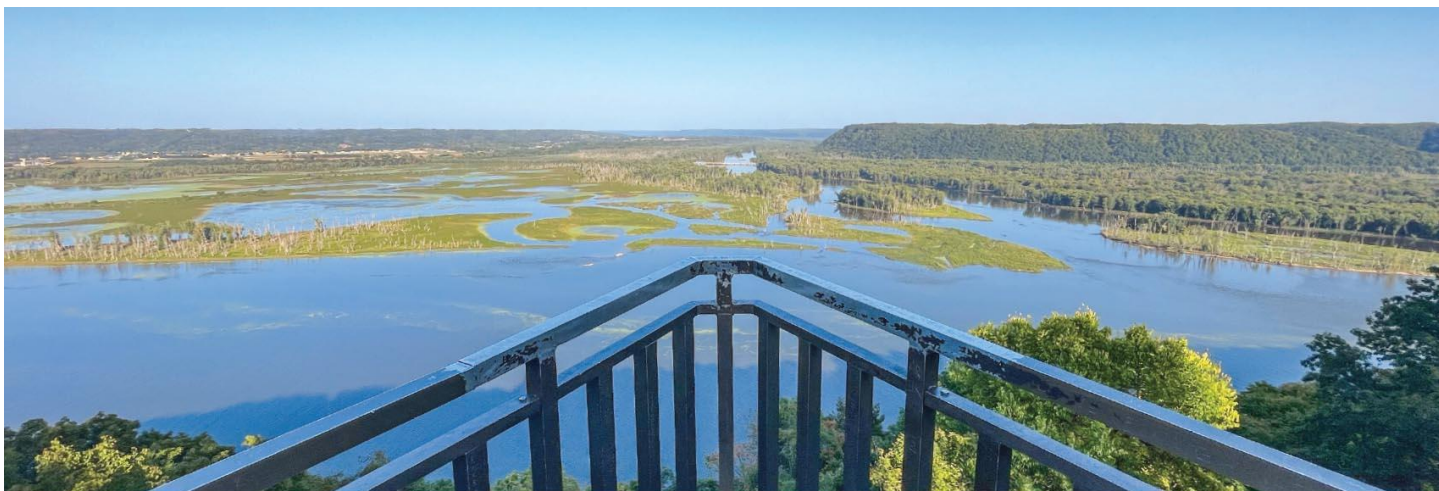
At Their Peak in Iowa

We called an audible and bopped across the state line into Marquette, Iowa—taking in the stunning 360-degree views on the Marquette-Joliet Bridge—before finding a picture-perfect setting at Eagles Landing Winery.

We settled in on the outdoor patio and, in keeping with our day, I chose a glass of spiced apple, a flavorful sweet wine with a hint of spice; it would be tasty served warm with a cinnamon stick.

Four miles to the south, McGregor earns its nickname The Pocket City by being wedged between the Mississippi and the surrounding bluffs. We passed through the cute downtown on our way to Pikes Peak

Sideline: Ferryville hosts its 16th annual Bald Eagle Day on March 7 at the Village Hall, featuring educational programs, live raptors, nest building, crafts and a hooting contest.



NEW HEIGHTS. The islands and pools seen from Pikes Peak State Park, where a wooden boardwalk leads to Bridal Veil Falls, are the result of ponding from the lock and dam system built in the 1930s. Danielle Rinner and Krista Burgin from Iowa shop at The Cannery.

State Park, considered one of Iowa's premier nature destinations and one of the most photographed.

In 1805, the U.S. government sent Lt. Zebulon Pike to explore the Mississippi River Valley and select locations suitable for military posts, according to the Iowa DNR. Pike recognized the park site as an important strategic point.

Government officials agreed but built the fort across the river in a lowland prairie, now Prairie du Chien. Several years later, Pike was sent westward, where Pikes Peak in Colorado was named after him.

Our starting point was the overlook atop the 500-foot bluff at 1,130-foot elevation to see the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers, where we marveled at the majestic vista and how miniscule the

pleasure boats looked down below.

Inspired to see more, we hopped on the half-mile wooden boardwalk that leads to Bridal Veil Falls and discovered Bear Mound, one of 63 effigies built by American Indians who inhabited the area from 800 to 1200 AD.

While the waterfall itself is a bit lackluster, the spectacular views of the river valley aren't. Unsurprisingly, the busiest time of year is during fall colors, which typically peak around the second week of October. Yup, it's earned a reputation.

Next we headed to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin's second oldest city, dating back to 1785. (Green Bay, at 1765, is the oldest.)

We made what we thought was going to be a quick stop downtown at The Cannery home decor and gift shop, a two-story



Wisconsin Historical Society

GETTING BUTTERFLIES. Clockwise: At St. Feriolo Island, Julie Gilkay stands under an archway at the gardens. Groundbreaking for the Dousman House, now an event venue, took place while Lincoln was president. Villa Louis is the oldest European settlement on the Upper Mississippi. A statue at Mississippi River Sculpture Park pays tribute to Emma Big Bear, a Ho-Chunk woman known for her honesty and humility. She made a living selling her woven black ash baskets.

behemoth of a store that would be ideal for a game of hide-and-seek. The Cannery's 30,000-square-foot building, originally the home of The Prairie du Chien City Canning Company, was built in 1912 to process and can local tomatoes and cabbage for sauerkraut.

Today, it's home to oodles of candles, decorations for all seasons, pillows, linens, greenery, lawn and garden accessories, lotions, cabin-themed items, jams and jellies, wall hangings, kitchen gear, lamps and so much more. We both lost track of time and had fun doing so.

An Island Getaway

The next morning, we set off for St. Feriolo Island, a 240-acre park in Prairie du Chien that sits on the east channel of the Mississippi and attracted the earliest

settlements in the area. The island is home to St. Feriolo Memorial Gardens; Mississippi River Sculpture Park; the Dousman

“Next we headed to the second oldest city in Wisconsin...”

House, a former hotel built in the 1860s that's been restored to serve as a wedding and event venue; and Villa Louis State Historic Site.

Villa Louis highlights the estate of the Dousmans, who made their fortune in the fur trade, lumber, land speculation and stock-farm business. The lawn of what

would become Villa Louis was the site of Wisconsin's only War of 1812 battlefield.

Built in the 1840s, the first Dousman house was razed and replaced in 1870 with the current Italianate-style mansion. Original furnishings, artwork and family heirlooms are on display in the mansion, which has been open to the public since 1952 and has been restored to its 1890s appearance...a showcase of Victorian architecture and design.

Tickets are required to enter the buildings and check out the grounds. Instead, we strolled through the nearby gardens—"a business of people since 2015"—admiring the wonders of nature and appreciating the sheer beauty of it all.

And that pretty much sums up Crawford County...to its very core. 🍷

Sideline: Stump Dodger is the nickname of the Kickapoo Valley and Northern Railroad, which operated from 1892 to 1939.