

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:



**All Shook Up:
*The Parkway from Ridgeland to Tupelo (Mississippi)***

As you explore this stretch of highway, you will encounter facts that might seem inevitable today but at one time seemed far from possible. How could a child born in a tiny shotgun house in Tupelo grow up to be the King of Rock and Roll? How could a self-described “poor black girl from Mississippi” grow up to be a queen of television and noted philanthropist? How, late in the war, faced with two-to-one odds, could a Confederate general lead his forces to a daring victory?

It’s just that kind of place, where a school can emerge from the wilderness and where a herd of buffalo can appear suddenly in a modern city. Anything can happen here; good things frequently do. One of them will be your journey.

The scenery is seductive as you follow the Parkway from Ridgeland, the road’s gentle curve hugging the blue waters of the Ross Barnett Reservoir. The birds bid you farewell, blue herons standing in the shallows, loons dipping low over the glassy expanse. It’s hard to believe that fifty years ago, this body of water was nothing more than an idea. Today, it’s a 33,000-acre paradise, with more than 100 miles of shoreline—a haven for all manner of outdoor recreation, not to mention contemplation, as you’ll see and enjoy for yourself at the Scenic Overlook.

A little further down the road, at the Cypress Swamp take the self-guided tour of moss-draped wetland, where the wizened “knees” of bald cypress emerge from the water like totems. A mile away, Brashear’s Stand and Old Trace watches over the Parkway. Once a “house of entertainment,” this historic spot takes you near an original portion of the Old Trace.

You’ll find another portion of the Old Trace when you reach the city that began as one of the oldest settlements on the Natchez Trace—Kosciusko, where Natchez Street runs through the center of town. Visitors sometimes think “Kosciusko” is an Indian name, but in fact the town was named in honor of a Polish general who became a hero in the American Revolutionary War; you can find out more at the newly renovated visitor center and museum.

If people today aren’t familiar with General Tadeusz Kosciusko, one native daughter of this small town is so well known she need only use her first name. For some time now, the Oprah Winfrey Road has been a popular drive-by attraction for visitors, taking them past the Buffalo United Methodist Church where she worshipped as a child, the Winfrey family cemetery and the house that was her birthplace.

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This year, another Oprah structure—this one created by the talk show host herself—has become an important addition to the Kosciusko community as well as a surprisingly popular destination for tourists. The Attala County Boys & Girls Club, founded with Winfrey’s assistance, opened its new 32,000-square-foot facility this year, and while the children it serves have enjoyed its library and teen room and innovative programs (one created by Winfrey’s personal chef), visitors from as far away as Texas and California have stopped for a before-hours tour and walk through the gardens.

Winfrey has said, “As a little girl growing up here in this town, I started dreaming about my own possibilities.” And indeed, dreamers of all kinds are welcome in Kosciusko. With its picturesque Historic Downtown Courthouse and scenic streets lined with graceful Victorians and stately Greek Revival homes, the city has proven so inspiring to painters that their portraits of Kosciusko have earned the city official designation as one of the “Prettiest Painted Places in America.”

And certainly one of the prettiest places in this pretty town is the Mary Ricks Thornton Cultural Center, a converted church with gothic spires and stained glass windows, that along with the historic courthouse, serves as a downtown landmark.

The beauty found in Kosciusko doesn’t only arrive in traditional form. L.V. Hull’s delightful ethnic yard art makes her home one of the town’s most charming and sought-after destinations, where shoes on stakes “bloom” among the lilies and cannas, and where everyday items find vibrant new life as found art objects.

On the road beyond Kosciusko, the French Camp Historic District tells another inspiring story of possibility. Begun as a tavern in the early 1800s, it later became a town, which still later opened a Female High School. As much of the town fell away, the school and its mission continued to thrive. Today, French Camp is both a home and school for children in need. It is also a fascinating historical site, where visitors can see how a Revolutionary soldier lived, watch a blacksmith work his bellows and every fall watch sorghum being made. Stay overnight at the beautifully tranquil B&B, and be sure to enjoy some delicious mud cake at the Council House Café.

Further on, the Jeff Busby Overlook on Little Mountain is a scenic rest stop where you can picnic, camp or hike a trail. Bynum Mounds with its accompanying exhibits is another site you’ll want to take in.

Once you reach Tupelo, the question isn’t whether you’ll visit the Elvis Presley Birthplace, it’s simply when. The tiny shotgun house is part of the Birthplace Center that includes a park, a recently renovated museum, gift shop and a chapel built with funds donated by fans. On the grounds you can stand in front of the life-size bronze statue of “Elvis at 13,” Elvis’s age when he and his parents moved to Memphis. You can also take the Elvis Driving Tour to the childhood places of his heart. At Tupelo Hardware, you can stand in front of the glass case where Elvis saw his first guitar.

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Standing at the tiny birthplace you can sense the improbability of it all; standing on the Brice's Crossroads National Battlefield Site you can get a good feel for how Nathan Bedford Forrest rallied his overmatched force to an improbable victory. At the interpretive center/museum, a video is available; on the site there are hiking trails and the Confederate Gravesites exhibit, where the remains of 13 unknown Confederates lie (milepost 269). Re-enactors converge on the site every year and do the impossible, making a long-ago battle come to life.

All around Tupelo, you'll see the evidence of people who believed in possibilities. Private citizens making their own dreams real are responsible for three of the city's popular attractions. At the Oren Dunn City Museum, named for its founder, you'll find an entire village of artifacts, complete with a Memphis street car that had once been converted into a well-loved local diner. Tupelo businessman Frank Spain drove all over the country to locate the classic gems in the Tupelo Automobile Museum that now boasts 100 cars, everything from a Tucker to a Duesenberg to an 1886 Benz. And at the Tupelo Buffalo Park and Zoo, where the largest herd of buffalo roam this side of the Mississippi River, along with giraffes, pigmy goats and other exotic animals, the dream of local resident Dan Franklin runs right on schedule in the "bison buses" taking visitors into the "wilds" of Tupelo countryside.

A constellation of Native American sites offers a glimpse of wild game that was (and still is) a common site on the Natchez Trace. The Chickasaw Village, with its fact-filled exhibits, creates a vivid picture of early life along the Trace, right down to the authentic native plants that grow along the Village's self-guided trail. The Chickasaw Council House was once the site of Pontatok. Also in the area are the Monroe Mission, where Chickasaws learned trades, and the Chickasaw Agency, operated from 1801 to 1825.

Encapsulating and explaining the rich and varied history of the Natchez Trace is no easy task, but at the recently renovated Parkway headquarters and Visitor Center, the new interactive exhibits succeed in creating a portrait that is at once comprehensive and compelling, educational and engaging. More than 60,000 people visit the center each year, to see the exhibits, to get information about other areas of the Parkway and to take the self-guided walk through forest re-growth.

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