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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2014 – Flint Hills Land, Sky, and People (Cathy Hoy, Jim Hoy, Marty White, Editors)

The Road to Ivanpah

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Recommended Citation

Price, Jay M. (2014). "The Road to Ivanpah," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2014/sky/11>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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The Road to Ivanpah

Sometimes there are places we want to visit just because they are there. For me, one of those was Ivanpah, pretty much just a place name in Salem Township in west central Greenwood County. I had come across the name when doing research on oil development in Kansas, and it just intrigued me.

Ivanpah is so small that it does not appear in lists of Kansas place names or many local histories on the web. Ivanpah, California, the other location with that name, predates the Kansas one by about a decade and was a small silver-mining settlement located in the Mojave Desert. Ivanpah seems to be a California Native American word meaning “clear water.” It is a mystery how a Mojave place name ended up in Kansas. Ivanpah, Kansas, had a post office from 1879 to 1904, but all that survives today is a stone school building, an abandoned farmstead, and vestiges of oil exploration.

I had wanted to visit Ivanpah just to see what was there. Since it was way off the beaten track, it was not en route to anything. A special trip was required. My first attempt to see what was there did not turn out so well. I went with a friend along the gravel roads of the Flint Hills one sunny afternoon, only to get

ABOVE: IVANPAH SCHOOLHOUSE
Jay Price

a flat tire about two miles from the intended destination. Deciding not to risk a second flat tire way out in the countryside, I limped back home. It seemed the place did not want me to visit. Now it was personal.

Recently, I tried again, heading north from U.S. 54 at Sallyards. I decided that perhaps it was time for a better relationship. Since the first attempt, I had come to the realization that westerners in general and Americans in particular have a tendency to “take” things from a site (souvenirs, pieces of things, photographs, etc.) when they visit while other cultures tend to mark a trip by giving something as an offering to/at a location. This attempt was going to be different from the flat-tire-plagued journey several months earlier.

I crossed Ivanpah Creek, turned at the correct intersection, and saw the old stone school. It was starting to spit rain. Perhaps I was not wanted here. I continued, though, driving along the road that maps say is “Ivanpah.” In a place with almost no buildings, it was hard to determine just where a location started and stopped. This time I stopped, looked around, and asked (yes, asked) the place to accept my presence there. I even left a small token object as a sign of my intent to “come in peace.” By the time I headed on back, the sun was shining brightly again. The place, it seemed, accepted my offer to visit.

I obviously made it back just fine. My adventure has turned into a relationship. Now, I will be more on the lookout for connections to Ivanpah, to understand the history of this place, and perhaps, as part of my side of the relationship, honor the location by allowing its story to be told. Sometimes places want to be known, not just experienced and left behind.

Jay M. Price, Director of the Public History Program at Wichita State University, currently serves on the boards of the Kansas Humanities Council, the Wichita Sedgwick County Historical Museum, the Kansas Association of Historians, and the University Press of Kansas. His most recent books are Temples for a Modern God: Religious Architecture in Postwar America, Wichita 1930-2000, and Kansas: In the Heart of Tornado Alley.