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Sunday Focus: Sweet summer spots

By **TAMMY BAIN**

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People enjoy a tanking trip down the Middle Loup River, thanks to Glidden Canoe Rental in Mullen.

Photo courtesy of Alan J. Bartels / Nebraska Life Magazine

By TAMMY BAIN

On your way to this summer's vacation destination, stop into Allsorts Boutique & Mug coffee shop in Sutherland, or Anne Marie's Antique Store in Paxton. Enjoy a glass of wine in Lexington, and a pizza with a microbrew in McCook.

Memorial Day kicks off summertime, and while it certainly can mean mapped-out travel to your dream destinations, don't forget to check out stops along the way — or go off the beaten path to see these local gems in tiny towns.

Sublime Boutique

246 Main St., Stapleton

Sublime is one of two boutiques in this town of just more than 300 people, along with Country Envy Boutique. Sublime owner Melody Hansen first bought her space as a personal office for her career in graphic design.

She and a friend began the boutique, and Hansen took it over as her own about four years later in 2016. As a graphic designer, Hansen had always wanted to place inspirational quotes on T-shirts, canvases and other items. Now, she designs all her shop's shirts and canvases, as well as some other goods, and carries other product lines such as bags, hair-ties and various gifts. Inspiration comes from places like Pinterest, but Hansen doesn't believe in copycatting — she'll add her own spin on each design, including those that people bring to her.

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Hansen's screenprint is either completed in Arnold or North Platte. Canvas prints can't be printed locally, but are done in the United States, she said.

"Not all of my products that I carry are made in the USA, but that is one of my missions with my store," she said.

Hansen also seeks out other entrepreneurs, such as "inspirational shoelaces" that she saw featured on Good Morning America.

"I like companies that have really good mission statements too, or missions behind them," Hansen said. One such product line uses recycled products. Another aims to fight Lyme disease.

As Hansen works to grow her business, she said it's hard to keep high traffic in a town the size of Stapleton.

"I could sit here for a full day and not see anybody come in," she said. "I can be here and have 10 people come in. It just varies."

While graphic design was a hard field to enter in rural Nebraska, today, "my graphic design business helps support my fun boutique business," she said with a laugh. Some products are wholesale goods and also come from her graphic design clients.

Hansen sets her hours "randomly," often working around her kids' and family's schedules. She sells many of her products on her website, features them on her Facebook page — where she changes her hours about every Sunday — and tells people that if the shop is closed, to call her, as she only lives about five minutes away on her husband's ranch.

"If I am home, I can swing in," she said. "My hours aren't set per se, but I am trying to be open more and more for the public."

Hansen sees a mix of local customers, as well as those touring the area. When visitors stop in, Hansen promotes other community shopping. She suggests Frey's General Store, which offers hardware and gifts, a gift line at The Feed Bunk and Main Street

Market and Deli.

Massacre Canyon and Visitors Center

3 miles east on U.S. Highway 34, Trenton

This site marks two major events in Trenton: One of the last great battles between the Pawnee and Sioux Native American tribes, and the paleontological find of stegomastodon remains, an extinct species related to the elephant.

The site is complete with picnicking, hiking and a visitors center open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., every day from the weekend before Memorial Day to Labor Day.

The visitors center opened in the 1990s.

In August 1873, the Pawnee tribe, who lived in eastern Nebraska on the Elkhorn River, went on one of its two biannual buffalo hunts. White hunters warned Pawnee tribe members about nearby rival Sioux. But the Pawnee tribe ignored the hunters, assuming that the hunters just wanted the land to themselves, said Don Keller, who manages the visitors center as a volunteer at 87 years old.

The Sioux Native Americans “weren’t hunting,” Keller said. “They were war-partying.”

The original monument, built in the 1930s, was moved in the 1960s after the completion of the Trenton Dam, Keller said.

More than 100 years later in 1996, remains of a prehistoric relative to the elephant was also found near here.

Jerry Williams found a skull-like bone on his farmstead about a mile from the monument, according to the visitor center’s brochures. Later that summer, students from the University of Nebraska, as well as community volunteers, helped uncover 80 percent of a skeleton — its skull, tusks, lower jaw “and at least one complete representative of each of the major limb bones,” according to the brochure.

The animal was later identified as the Stegomastodon, which existed between 3 million and 1½ million years ago. Its competition with “newly-arrived, primitive mammoths” likely caused its extinction.

In the shop, you can purchase jewelry made by South Dakota Sioux Native Americans, beaded leather goods, baby moccasins, bags, art, books and postcards with Native American motifs.

“We don’t have any support from taxes, grants or anything else,” Keller said, adding that the sales from the gift shop keep the lights on.

Lasso Espresso

418 Platte River Road, Gothenburg

This coffee shop just off Interstate 80 has rich history. Inside, timbers that line the walls came from Fort McPherson near Maxwell, where the national cemetery is today. Square nails hang in the wooden shelves, which coffee shop owner Marsha Hecox’s parents bought during the fort’s transition. Knowing the historical significance, Hecox’s father always hoped his kids would incorporate the timbers in their adult lives somehow.

“When I did it this way, I said my dad, I’m sure he’s looking down from heaven saying, those girls finally figured out what to do with those,” Hecox said.

Hecox and her sister, Corrine Auld, opened Lasso Espresso more than 18 years ago, after each having experienced breast cancer.

“People need a treat,” Hecox said. Her location gives a stop for travelers, truckers and locals, she said.

“Really that’s how it started,” she said. “A treat for people on a long journey, no matter what it was.”

About 12 years ago, Auld died of breast cancer. An angel hangs above the door in honor of her.

“I always found — we both did — the world of coffee so interesting,” Hecox said. During cancer treatments, Hecox educated herself about coffee, the history of espresso and how to make drinks.

Today, the coffee shop gets its grounds from an Italian family in Washington state, “that get their beans from the old country” before roasting the beans in the United States.

“We don’t push buttons,” Hecox said, adding that Americans have a way of putting their own spin on items. “We grind and tamp, and do coffee the way the Italian people have taught us.”

Lasso Espresso is open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week, sometimes closing earlier during the winter.

Sandhills Motel and Glidden Canoe Rental

507 Southwest 1st St., Mullen

Patty and Mitch Glidden bought the Sandhills hotel in 1993, and began outfitting canoes in 1994. In about 2003 or 2004, the couple began outfitting horse tanks that come with a wooden bench and “plenty of space” for coolers and other items to take on the river, Patty said.

Visitors stay in the hotel, which fills up fast between mid-March and the last week of April, Mitch gives guided tours to see the visiting grouse and prairie chicken.

The couple only takes canoeing customers to the Dismal River by request, and instead primarily serves the Middle Loup River, Patty said. The spring-fed river is known for water that “pops up” from the river 30 miles west of Mullen.

Patty called it a “true Sandhills River, right in the middle of the rolling hills.”

“We always have good water,” Patty said. With few sand bars, “we can tank every day of the year and not have to pull your tank, not get stuck.”

Water in the river tends to be knee to thigh deep, with some places, “just like anywhere,” going over your head, Patty said.

The Dismal River, Patty said, is in a gorge, and for experienced canoers only.

The couple moved to the area in 1987, where Mitch bought a swine operation and Patty worked for a butcher. A lifelong lover of water sports, Patty entered the hotel business after the constant butcher’s work gave her carpal tunnel, she said.

The hotel has 18 rooms, six of which are for singles. Online recommendations help bring in business, Patty said.