

Buckle Up in Kansas

ABILENE, Kans.—Ever wake up in the morning, search for something to wear, fail to find anything that satisfies, and then decided—oh, what the huckleberry—you might as well break a world record if you really need a new clasp to hold up your pants?

Something of that sort seems to have happened a short time ago in small-town Kansas, when Jason Lahr—an Abilene welder and owner of Fluter's Creek Metal Works—embarked upon a project to create the World's Largest Belt Buckle.

"[I] started off just trying to find a belt buckle I liked," Lahr explained to KWCH-DT *Channel 12 News*, "[I] really didn't see anything that was perfect that I wanted, so I kind of just made my own."

And make a belt buckle, Lahr did. His gargantuan clasp—now displayed at 400 North Pine Street in Abilene—is just the sort of shiny fastener that might hold up your trousers, if it didn't stand nearly 19'-10½" wide and 13'-11¼" tall.

The big buckle was funded by the Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau, and it's something of a history lesson. Lahr incorporated famous icons of Abilene into its design—President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who lived in Abilene from 1898 to 1911; James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok, who for a time served as the town's marshal. Tourists who study the work of art will find the image



NEW JEWEL IN TOWN: [Above] Dedicated in December 2022, the World's Largest Belt Buckle took about seven months to build. This roadside attraction is part of a larger Cowboy Art Trail that celebrates Abilene's Chisholm Trail.

of a greyhound displayed inside one of its flourishes—a dog placed to honor the city's Greyhound Hall of Fame. They'll spy the stylized forms of the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad, the Historic Seelye Manson, a C.W. Parker carousel horse, and a C.L. Brown telephone, all arranged around the head of a Chisholm Trail longhorn inlaid with the richest of blue quartz.

Crafting giant belt buckles has become something of a national competition in recent years. While Lahr worked on his big beauty, he kept its dimensions secret so other artists wouldn't try to best him. Now that his buckle is unveiled, it unthrones the former World's Largest Belt Buckle in Dallas which, in turn, took the title from another big buckle in St. Robert, Missouri.

Who knows who will next take a crack at the crown? All we know is that if they come for the king, they'd best be wearing some pretty big pants.



Cozy Dogs Dancing Again

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.—The iconic Cozy Dogs are dancing again along Route 66 in Springfield, Illinois, thanks to an 82-year-old sign company that's keeping Mother Road icons alive.

The Cozy Dog Drive-In opened in the late 1940s after its owner created a fast-cooking recipe for deep-fried wiener that was destined to be known as the corn dog.

By that time, Ace Sign Company had already finished its first job: a \$5.60 trailer lettering project for Meadow Gold Milk.



Little did either business know that seventy-two years later, both would still be playing key roles along Route 66.

Cozy Dog founder Ed Waldmire made his first corn-batter-wrapped wiener in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1941. But he first gave serious thought to perfecting the "hotdog on a stick"—whose current batter was baked and seemed to take forever to cook—while stationed at an air base in Texas. His creation was a hit at both the USO in town and the Post Exchange at Amarillo Airfield. After he left the service, Waldmire opened the Cozy Dog Drive-In.

Flash forward eighty years: When the restaurant's sign needed work, Waldmire's family—who still uses his recipes for chili and corn dog batter—turned to Ace, a company that specializes in salvaging Route 66 artifacts.

It's a partnership that has the cartoon Cozy Dogs dancing again over the famous highway that's still home to the birthplace of the American corn dog, and there's nothing corny about that.

