Holy Cow!

Bill Bunyan’s drive through Kansas is a (medium) rare feat
he way Bill Bunyan sees it, he eats his cheeseburgers in paradise. In Ulysses, at Iris’ Country Café. Or at the Utica Community Café, where the tempter of the day was a memorable sausage burger. Or Lizard Lips Grill and Deli, near Toronto, population 320, in Woodson County, where the open-faced chili cheeseburger was worth enduring Susan’s concerns about sitting too close to her burgermeister husband as they headed up the road for a basketball game in Allen Field House.

“I’ve been told the best hamburger is in Glade,” Bunyan, c’61, says excitedly from his home in Dodge City, and here’s the whole point of Bunyan’s retirement quest to eat a hamburger in all 105 Kansas counties: When somebody tells him the most DeLuxie of all Kansas burgers is on the grill in Glade, at the regionally famous Triple C, Bunyan starts planning.

To savor the single Triple C, dive into the double Triple C or—heaven (and cardiologists) forbid—test the triple Triple C, you first must know where Glade is. So Bunyan consults the laminated wall map of his beloved home state.

“That’s in Phillips County,” he says. In fact, the Glade burger joint is a roadside haunt on U.S. 183, at the intersection of Main and Central streets, where Phillips County locals and tourists visiting the Kirwin National Wildlife Refuge and Reservoir converge in a beef feast.

“I don’t eat in chains,” Bunyan says emphatically. “Only down-home-type cafes. And I can tell you I have eaten in places my wife said she’d wished I hadn’t gone into.”

He says he is on a “great burger quest.” Does “great” qualify the burgers or the quest? Both. And neither.

The quest is about Kansas, and burgers are only part of the journey.

Explains Bunyan: “It’s a fun way to see what our state has to offer.”

The retired fifth-grade teacher’s Jayhawk sentiments are legend in the KU family. He and his wife, Susan, are longtime volunteers for the Kansas Honors Program in Dodge City as well as hosts of annual sendoff parties for KU freshmen. A former member of the Alumni Association national board, he has received the Association’s Fred Ellsworth Medallion and Mildred Clodfelter Award for service to the University and his hometown. Bunyan is virtually the heart of KU support in southwestern Kansas.

But when it comes to Kansas, Bunyan is about more than the University of.

From Mount Oread in the east to Mount Sunflower in the west, Bill Bunyan wants to explore and promote, meet and greet, buy and buy some more. That’s why he and Susan are active in the Kansas Explorers Club, a branch of the Kansas Sampler Foundation, organized by Marci Penner, c’79, of Inman.

“People often think Kansas is dull, flat and boring,” says Penner, the foundation’s executive director and sole employee. “If we can do things in a fun manner, that helps everybody lighten up a little bit and enjoy what we have. The whole thing is about exploring and having fun.”

Penner says Bunyan’s fellow Explorers are always eager for updates on his burger quest; she also says there are places in Kansas where the price of a burger basket and a tall glass of tea is not inconsequential.

“Bill goes out and eats his burgers,” Penner says, “and in a small town, it makes a difference when one additional person comes in for a visit and spends money.”

While Bunyan has found a focus for his journeys, the goal for all Explorers is identical: Find new Kansas places, make new Kansas friends and spread the Kansas wealth. When he met Larry “The Bowler” Woydziak and heard of the Lawrence man’s quest to bowl a game in all 79 Kansas counties with a bowling alley, Bunyan figured he needed a quest of his own.

“I want to get it done in three years,” Bunyan says, “so we’re trying to average three a month. I should finish right before I turn 65, if cholesterol doesn’t get me first.”

As for the report we’ve all been waiting for: Two years into his quest, Bunyan says two of the best burgers in the state can be found in his own hometown, at the Cowtown Club and Peppercorn’s. He also favors the Seabrook Bar & Grill at 21st and Gage in Topeka, where he tried gamely to boat the 3-pounder.

“It was a great burger,” he says.

“But I gave up.”

Two years into his three-year quest to eat a hamburger in every Kansas county, Bill Bunyan rates the impossible-to-finish 3-pounder at Topeka’s Seabrook Bar & Grill one of the best.

For more information about the Kansas Explorers or Kansas Sampler Foundation, see www.explorekansas.org; e-mail marci@explorekansas.org; write to 978 Arapaho Rd., Inman, KS 67546; or call Marci Penner at 620-585-2374.