

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago
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Whether the Liquor Had Best Be Put In

Asahel Beach must have been both dismayed and relieved by what he found when on January 20, 1859, he returned to his recently-established trading post at the Santa Fe Road crossing of Cow Creek 100 miles west of Council Grove. Beach had been away for two months, leaving the trading post, known in the parlance of that time as a “ranche,” in the hands of his 22-year-old son, Abijah, and his companion, John H. Burr of Leavenworth. The older Beach ascertained that the young men were in good health but his property considerably diminished.

On December 23, 1858, about twenty mounted Kanza warriors led by Chief Wahtianga had swept into the ranche site, seizing 39 head of cattle belonging to Beach and several horses and ponies owned by Burr. They also raided the store, carrying off items, which are—with one exception--undisclosed by the historical documents.¹

What had moved Wahtianga and his braves to plunder the store? We do not know for certain as no one interviewed the Kanzas to get their side of the story but we can identify a number of likely motivations.

For one, Asahel and Abajel Beach had established their ranche in the very heart of the Kanzas’ favorite buffalo hunting grounds. For many years the Kanzas had made their winter hunting camp at the confluence of the two forks of Cow Creek, about five miles east-southeast of Beach’s ranche (two miles south of present Lyons, Kansas).

The Cow Creek camp was the western terminus of the “Kaw Trail,” over which the Kanzas journeyed *en masse* each fall to hunt buffalo, returning over the same trail to their Council Grove Reservation in the winter, arriving here sometimes as early as Christmas and sometimes as late as March. The Kaw and Santa Fe trails paralleled each other, the Indian route lying from three to eight miles south of the white man’s road.

These hunts were crucial to the survival of the Kanzas for several reasons: the Kanza women dried great quantities of the meat, packing it back to the Neosho River villages for the tribe’s winter and spring sustenance; the buffalo robes and furs gathered during these hunts earned the Kanzas up to as much as \$12,000.00 a year in trade value; and in the winter the short buffalo and grama grasses of central Kansas were more nutritious than the bluestem grasses of the Flint Hills, thus providing vital nourishment at a critical time to the all-important pony herds.

Sometimes the Kanzas were motivated by elemental needs. “I am satisfied that it is hunger and extreme want that drives them to a greater part of the thieving they commit,” wrote Kanza agent Milton C. Dickey in September, 1859. The presence of the Beach ranche diminished the tribe’s chances for a successful winter hunt, as did the influx of tens of thousands of emigrants traveling the Santa Fe Road in 1858-59, seeking their fortunes in the Pikes Peak gold fields.

Shortly after their annuities had been distributed to them at their agency on November 3, 1858, the Kansas had left the Council Grove area bound for their Cow Creek hunting grounds. An unsuccessful hunt of seven weeks duration would have made Beach's cattle and Burr's horses look all the more desirable.

A description of "Beach Valley" from the Leavenworth *Weekly Herald*, June 11, 1859, illustrates the ranche's threat to the Kansas: "they [white men] are killing and putting up large quantities of buffalo meat, and will during the coming season,...have ready for market about one hundred tons. They have hunters out who do nothing but kill buffalo, and each hunter will kill as many as ten men can haul in and take care of. The meat is sugar-cured and smoked."

In addition to operating a federally chartered toll bridge and post office, Asahel and Abijah Beach herded stock for commercial freighters, and sold corn at \$3.00 per bushel and hay at \$50.00 per ton. "They also," the *Weekly Herald* reported, "do a considerable business in the grocery and provision line."

Among the "groceries" was the one item we know the Kansas took from the trading post: liquor. Traveling west on the trail with a small party in February, 1859, Hezekiah Brake : "...reached Cow creek, the last and only place of refreshment between Council Grove and Fort Union, New Mexico. A man kept a whisky shanty here, and sold cheap liquor and dear oysters to travelers. Few passed his 'house' without doing ample justice to both viands and spirits."²

A few months later a First Cavalry trooper noted the ranche's "Dead Shot Whiskey."³ Whiskey, then, more than likely provided both a motivation and the necessary disposition for Wahtianganga and his warriors to carry out their December raid.

When Asahel Beach proceeded with his depredation claims against the Kansas, the theft of the whiskey posed a problem as the sale of liquor anywhere west of the Mississippi River was in clear violation of Section 20 of the 1834 Trade and Intercourse Act.⁴

In a November 1, 1860 letter to his attorney in Council Grove, Samuel N. Wood, Beach wrote: "Enclosed I send you my accts. against the Kaw Indians...I do not know whether the liquor had best be put in or not—If you think not take it out and make a bill of the other items."

Beach claimed that he had made complaint of the theft to the Kanza agent, John Montgomery, in January, 1859 and had met Montgomery's successor, Milton Dickey, to discuss the raid on July 4, 1859.

On August 22, 1859, Beach filed a claim in Leavenworth County asserting that the 39 cattle taken by the Kansas were worth \$50.00 each, for a total of \$1,950.00. Whether he was successful in gaining compensation for his losses is not known.

John Burr, on the other hand, filed a claim with the Department of the Interior on February 7, 1864, alleging the Kansas had on December 23, 1858, stolen "horses, ponies, etc." valued at \$2,647.36. This claim was reported to the Interior Department on November 11, 1885, at which time it was disallowed.⁵

1. Asahel Beach's statement of August 22, 1859 (in Misc. Kinton, Kansas Historical Society, Manuscripts Division).
2. Brake, Hezekiah, *On Two Continents: A long Life's Experience* (Topeka: Crane & Company, 1896), p. 123.
3. *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, volume 1, p. 199.
4. Unrau, William E., *White Man's Wicked Water: The Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802-1892* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1996), p. 49.
5. *49th Congress, 1st Session, H. Ex. Doc. No. 125* (Ser. 2399), p. 12 (Claim No. 151).