

## **The Kanza Reservation 150 Years Ago**

**By Ron Parks**

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*This is the 18<sup>th</sup> in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and Council Grove 150 years ago.*

### Killing Wolves

In late January 1860, the Kanza Indians traded 500 wolf skins to Emporia merchant, A. G. Proctor, in exchange for “groceries, dry goods, etc.” Proctor found most of the tribe in their winter camps approximately thirty miles west of Emporia near present Elmdale in the Cottonwood valley and its tributaries, Middle and Diamond creeks.

The Kanzas had just returned from their annual autumn hunt in present-day central Kansas. From October through mid-January, the tribe dispersed in bands, establishing camps on Cow Creek and the Little Arkansas, Smoky Hill, and Saline rivers. The men pursued game, especially buffalo, and gathered furs; the women tanned and dressed the robes and peltry into saleable condition.

The return trip down the Cottonwood River valley passed through where Florence stands today. But the Kanzas had not made a successful hunt, “owing to the fact that the Buffalo had for some reason gone further back and were very scarce in the country where they had been accustomed to find them.”

In February 1860, Kanza agent Milton Dickey estimated that all the robes and furs brought in by the Kanzas that winter “would not sell for more than \$2,000 or \$2,500 at the most.” He predicted “they will be so reduced in a very few weeks as to drive them to commit depredations in order to sustain themselves.” He recommended the Office of Indian Affairs provide relief to his Indian charges.

The Kanza camps in the Cottonwood valley, approximately 20 miles southwest of Council Grove, were located well outside the boundaries of their reservation. The Kanzas stayed away from their reservation because it had been overrun by white squatters and, in the words of chief Hard Hart, “There used to be plenty of game in our country, but there is none.”

The Indians traded dressed buffalo robes for \$4.00 to \$5.00, wolf-skins for \$1.25, and prairie wolf (coyote) for 75 cents. Otters brought \$3.00 each, deerskins \$1.00, badgers and coons 50 cents, and kit foxes 25 cents.

The Kanzas of 1860 were following a commercial pattern their ancestors had practiced for at least eight generations. From about 1700, the Kanzas had traded their furs to the Europeans, predominantly the French, in exchange for foodstuffs and manufactured goods such as tobacco, flour, coffee, sugar, calico, blankets, firearms, ammunition, knives, pots, trinkets, and whiskey. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans became the tribe’s trading partners.

Throughout the 1700s and the first half of the 1800s, deer skins and beaver pelts were the most desirable and lucrative item of the fur trade in Kansas. In 1775, Kanza hunters provided European traders 150 packs of deerskins, seven of beaver, and one of otter. These packs were comprised of processed skins compressed and bound for efficiency of transportation. Each deer skin pack contained 40 skins and a beaver pack 65 skins. Otter packs, like wolf's, contained 100 skins.

In 1798, the lieutenant governor of Spain's Upper Louisiana reported that "from this tribe [the Kanza] 180 packs of furs are obtained annually....They number about 400 men, and are all better hunters than the Osages."

By 1860, due to changing fashions in Europe and an over-trapped and depleted beaver population, buffalo robes, supplemented by wolf skins and smaller animal pelts, had become the mainstay of the fur trade in Kansas.

Wolf pelts, most of which were shipped to Russia and Europe to be made into coats, put money in the pockets of white hunters and traders, goods in the hands of Indians, and profits in the ledger books of businesses. Economics held sway, both wolves and Indians had become the pawns of international capitalism, and dead wolves were worth more than living ones.

Five hundred dressed wolf-skins required a huge investment of time, physical endurance, patience, and skill on the part of Kansas, especially the women. Firsthand observations of the Kanza methods in hunting wolves do not exist, but the process as practiced by white "wolfers" who often hunted with the Indians is straightforward, well documented, and gruesome.

One hundred fifty years ago wolfing was a booming business in central Kansas. Wolf pelts were most marketable when taken in the winter, and the cold season was a "downtime" for farmers and laborers eager to supplement their meager incomes in cash-starved Kansas Territory.

In November 1861, three recently discharged soldiers established a wolfer camp near present Rush Center. By March they had killed 2,000 coyotes, 800 wolves, 100 foxes, and hundreds of other animals. They sold all of their peltry to the Fort Larned sutler for \$2,500.

The November 19, 1859, the *Kansas Tribune* (Topeka) reported: "Parties are still starting from our city on trips to the buffalo and wolf grounds, for the purpose of securing furs. Skins of the wolf will find a ready sale here." The *Kansas Press* (Council Grove) observed on April 9, 1860, "Mr. Peacock of Allison's old ranche passed through town the other day with 2,000 wolf pelts for Kansas City."

In the fall of 1859, young James R. Mead had come to the Saline River valley to establish a "hunting ranch" a mile or two east of present town of Tescott. He immediately proved to be both a skillful hunter and successful frontier entrepreneur.

In his fascinating memoir, *Hunting and Trading on the Great Plains, 1859-1875*, Mead described his dealings with a band of Kanza led by Chief Shingawassa who "camped in the heavy timber immediately back of our ranch." The Indians "constantly asked us to trade with them" having an abundance of meat "but they lacked coffee, sugar, flour, and tobacco, of which they were fond."

"I had designed to spend the winter hunting, but now found myself an Indian trader," Mead wrote. Although the Kansas brought him their wolf-skins for trade, Mead and his partners also gathered their own wolves.

"We found it also a very profitable business killing the big gray wolves which lived with the buffalo and travelled with them, and also the coyotes."

"Our method of killing wolves was to shoot down two or three old bull buffaloes in different places....We would let the buffalo lie one night in order to attract the wolves. The next night, just before dusk, we would go and scatter poisoned bait about the carcasses, each bait containing about one thirtieth part of a dram of strychnine."

Mead and his men gathered the wolf pelts by the score the next day. One morning they found and skinned 82 dead wolves. The wolf carcasses were left where they had fallen, attracting thousands of ravens which "in eating their stomachs and intestines would also eat the partially digested baits. This would kill them, and the prairie about the carcasses would soon be dotted with the glossy, shining bodies of defunct ravens, with an occasional bald eagle among them."

"The buffalo were killed by the bullets of the hunters, the wolves were killed with strychnine for their furs, and the ravens died from eating the poisoned carcasses of both, so that they all became practically extinct at about the same time," reflected Mead.

As the market for wolf pelts remained strong, strychnine sales boomed. Westport Indian trader William Bernard recalled that from the late 1850s on "an unusual article of trade was in great demand, namely, strychnine, and it was imported and sold in wholesale quantities to hunters who pursued wolves for their pelts.

Council Grove merchant William Shamleffer reminisced that a trader "should have on hand in his store a supply of everything from Bibles to whisky and strychnine."

The effect of ingesting strychnine on the wolves was recorded by a "Western Territories Correspondent" of the *New York World*:

"...the released strychnine takes hold on the wolf's vitals, and then there is music...He will next stand up on his hind legs and walk about and dance, but it all does no good. His shrieks and cries of pain are terrible to hear, and about the last thing he does is to turn two or three somersaults in the air and fall dead. The strychnine kills them every time."

James R. Mead never wrote about the cries of the death-thrashing wolves he had poisoned, but the veteran wolf-killer remembered their calls as beguiling:

"...the most soul-stirring music I ever heard was the clear deep bass voice of a big gray wolf on a clear cold winter night rolling out over the ice-covered prairie. It would commence on a high note and then run down the scale to the bottom, soon to be answered by his companions from every hill and canon for miles around." Addressing a meeting of the Kansas State Historical Society in December 1904, Mead

rhapsodized about “the hills and plains of Kansas, God’s great park, surpassing anything art or wealth of man has made. To me their primeval condition was the most beautiful and interesting of all the earth.”

A few months later a wolf sighting was reported in Kansas. It was the last one.

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SOURCES: *Of Wolves and Men*, Lopez, pp. 178-79; *Kansas News* (Emporia) 1-28 & 2-4-1860; *Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Kansas Agency*, 1856-61, 6-30-'57, 2-6-'60; *Wolf Hunters*, Grinnell, pp. 243, 286; *The Beginning of the West*, Berry, pp. 31, 43, 44; *Mead's Hunting and Trading...* pp. 71-74, 109; “Reminiscences of Frederick Chouteau,” *Kansas Historical Collections (KHC)*, v. 1-2, p. 424; “Westport and the Santa Fe Trade,” Bernard, *KHC*, v. 9, p. 558; “Merchandising 60 Years Ago,” Shamleffer, *KHC*, v. 16, p. 567; NYW article in *Ellis County Free Press*, 2-29-1888, *Mammals in Kansas*, p. 168.