

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago

October 20, 2008

By Ron Parks

The Air Is Filled with Smoke

In October 1858, prairie fires erupted on and near the Kanza Indian Reservation, a twenty-mile-square chunk of land encompassing Council Grove. E. Goddard, a squatter living illegally on the reservation near present Dunlap, had twenty tons of hay destroyed by fire the first week of October.

“The prairies commenced burning much sooner than was anticipated, and thus some were taken unawares,” reported the Emporia newspaper, *The Kanza News*, on October 9. “The grass is still burning and the air is filled with the smoke. In a short time the prairies will present a black and desolate appearance in strange contrast with their green and verdant look of a few weeks since.”

Fanned by a persistent southwest wind, the fires had burned several days, destroying not only hay but many split-rail fences. The October 23 *Kanza News* reported that “...The prairies have mostly been ‘burnt off.’”

In contrast to our annual Flint Hills controlled burns conducted in the spring, prairie conflagrations in October were the norm in early-day Kansas. Moving west across northeast Kansas in 1830, explorer and surveyor Isaac McCoy noted in his journal on October 18 “...the ashes from the recently burned prairies and the dust and sand raised so by the wind annoyed us much, the wind rising, I found that the dust was so scattered that it became impossible to perceive the trail...”

McCoy then noted the atmosphere to the west darkening and determined that a misty rain must be approaching. He and his exploring party began to inspect the security of their animal packs when “...a few minutes taught us that what we had fancied to be rain, was an increase of the rising dust, sand, and ashes of the burnt grass, rising so much and so generally that the air was much darkened and it appeared on the open prairies as though the clouds had united with the earth.”

“Our eyes were so distressed that we could scarcely see to proceed, it was annoying to our lungs. The black burnt grass, lodging on our hands and faces, and each one rubbing his watery eyes with pain, soon occasioned a most horrid appearance, our clothes also blackening fast...”¹

Then as now, viewers of nocturnal Kansas grass fires were struck by their beauty. The October 27, 1855 issue of the Lawrence *Herald of Freedom* observed: “The prairies are on fire, and present a gorgeous appearance after night as it lights up the heavens with lurid glare.”

But the newspaper tempered its aesthetic enthusiasm with this admonition: “A law must be passed, as soon as there is a competent body to act on the question, making it a penal offence to set these fires. Great damage is frequently caused by them. We have learned of several very narrow escapes of houses being burned during the late fires.”

The newspaper does not place the blame for the fires. But early-day Kansas in October offered prime conditions for a prairie to light up. Man-made fire barriers such as tilled fields, ditches, and roads were few and far between in the tallgrass prairies of pre-territorial and territorial (1854-1861) Kansas. The dry tan and gold grasses standing thick and tall stretched unbroken for miles over the landscape. Couple this tinder with the dry, windy atmosphere of autumnal Kansas and a major conflagration was likely.

Men also set fire to the prairie in the autumn, especially Indian peoples of the tallgrass region such as Osages, Kansas, and Pawnees. Folk memory among Flint Hills ranchers records that the Indians would set the prairie afire by wrapping rawhide around a big ball of dead grass, lighting it, then pulling it behind a running horse.²

The Indians had their own reasons for managing the prairie by means of fire. An insight into their motives and methods is contained in historian Richard White's study of the Pawnees, a tribe who like the Kansas lived in permanent villages in the tallgrass region, practiced horticulture, maintained a substantial horse herd, and hunted bison in the mixed-grass regions of the central plains to the west.

White wrote: "The Pawnees appear to have regularly burned the prairies in the fall, with less frequent burning in the early spring. They set these fires both in the vicinity of their earthlodge villages and along the routes—the Platte, Republican, Blue, and Smoky Hill valleys—to their hunting grounds. The operation involved some skill, and whites who witnessed it were impressed by the way the Indians took advantage of the winds to burn the grass around the villages without touching the surrounding cornfields."

The rationale for the Indians' burning was that it stimulated earlier growth and guaranteed a larger yield of nutritious grass in the spring. This not only attracted game to their hunting grounds but also provided better forage to their horses when it was desperately needed following the lean months of winter.³

On the Kanza Reservation, agent Hiram Farnsworth was keenly aware of the destructive potential of fire. In 1861, he wrote to his superiors in Washington D.C. urging them to abandon their plans to build the 138 huts for the Kansas out of wood. Instead Farnsworth recommended stone as the primary building material, in part because of the threat posed by prairie fires that frequented the reservation. The government did, in fact, heed their agent's advice.

The events of October, 1859, had provided substance to Agent Farnsworth's concerns. The October 29 and November 5 issues of the *Emporia News* contained several descriptions of prairie fires. A brief sampling follows:

"Our city was visited on Wednesday last by one of the grandest prairie fires we ever beheld—completely sweeping over one-quarter of the town...about a week since, a large body of prairie west of us burned, destroying a number of cabins and considerable hay....losses are reported as much more severe, including buildings, cornfields, hay and grain ricks, together with cattle and hogs....The air was so filled with dust and ashes from the burnt prairie, that we could hardly get a glimpse at the sun. It was a bad day for ladies and hooped skirts."

1. Barnes, Lela, "Journal of Isaac McCoy for the Exploring Expedition of 1830," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (November, 1936): pp. 339-377.
2. "Pasture Burning in the Flint Hills," *Kansas School Naturalist* (March, 1993).
3. White, Richard, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp. 184-186.