

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago
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By Ron Parks

“We Want a Gun Smith”

In November 1858, the two blacksmiths assigned to the Kanza tribe, assistant blacksmith Abraham Park, and head blacksmith Lemuel Park, were fired. No one was named to replace them and, in spite of the requirement of the Kaw Treaty of 1846 that the U.S. government provide the tribe with blacksmiths, the position was not filled for many years to come.

The Kanza agent, 23-year-old John Montgomery, had for several months petitioned his superiors in the Office of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. for the dismissal of his agency’s blacksmiths. Finally, having received no reply to his entreaties, Montgomery assumed the “matter left at my discretion” and proceeded to wield his administrative axe.

The agent’s explanation was straightforward: “...the amount of labor for one year at the smith shop at this place can be performed with the space of three weeks.” Justifying the termination of employees in terms of time inefficiencies is a timeworn formula of managers in both public and private organizations. However, this particular dismissal reflected a more complicated picture of the incongruities between government Indian policy and the actual conditions experienced by the Kanzas.

Since becoming the Kanza agent in April 1855, Montgomery had been plagued by the blacksmith situation. The first blacksmith, Jepe King, resigned in December 1855. In March 1856 Montgomery asked his supervisors to fill the position, stating “I think it is very necessary under present circumstance in employing a person...who will observe the Intercourse Law in every respect.”

Among the provisions of the 1847 amendment to the Trade and Intercourse Act of 1834 was the imposition of substantial prison sentences to vendors convicted of selling alcohol to Indians in what was referred to as “Indian Country.”¹ Although we know of no convictions of Kanza agency blacksmiths for this particular offense, we do know that Montgomery found sober blacksmiths in short supply.

On April 30, 1857, Montgomery discharged assistant blacksmith Frances James “on account of his drunkenness and consequent bad conduct.” The next day he filled the vacancy by hiring John Finney at \$240.00 per year, only to remove Finney five months later “for intemperance.”

The character of the agency blacksmiths surfaced during a meeting of Kanza chiefs and Commissioner of Indian Affairs James Denver in Washington D.C. on July 22, 1857. Tribal spokesperson Hard Hart complained that “The blacksmith is also a bad man. He is a mean man....We want a gun smith, and not a common blacksmith.”

Chief Hard Hart's plea for a gunsmith brings into sharp focus the disparity between what the government sought to impose on the Kanzas and what the Indians actually needed.

All three Kanza treaties—1825, 1846, and 1859—promised blacksmiths to the Kanzas with the understanding that the Indians would turn away from hunting and embrace farming as their primary means of sustenance. According to this policy, as small farmers, the Kanzas would need their tools and implements—shovels, hoes, axes, mowers, wagons, reapers and so forth--kept in a state of good repair so as to establish and maintain themselves as productive agrarians.

Having lived with the Kanzas for three years, Agent Montgomery had a keen sense of their actual needs when he wrote in June, 1858, “The Kansas Indians have little or no blacksmithing to be done, and the work that is done here is chiefly repairing of fire-arms, spears, and cooking utensils, but the work is principally upon fire-arms,...there is sufficient [work] to keep a Gunsmith well employed.”

On December 1, 1858, Montgomery once again beseeched his supervisors for a change: “...at this time, and at other periods during the year, not a single Indian can be found within the limits of this reservation; that they are scattered over the plains west of here for the purpose of hunting wild game upon which they chiefly subsist,...” He then recommended “...employing a gunsmith instead of a Blacksmith and assistant for these Indians—a change which they have repeatedly asked for.”

The Kanzas's affinity for the hunt can be partially explained by the weight of cultural tradition, particularly ingrained gender roles. For generations Kanza women had raised corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash in small patches of ground employing hoes with which they practiced shallow tillage. Men were hunters, an occupation requiring great skill and endurance, the successful pursuit of which conferred subsistence to the people and great honors to the hunter.

To transform Kanza men into farmers, the aim of government policy, required a radical shift that few if any cultures are capable of. It made far more sense to the Kanzas, and their agent, to both uphold their traditions of gender identity and more effectively harvest bison, elk, deer, and other game. To do so required keeping their rifles and shotguns, of which the tribe had ample supply, in good working order.

By November of 1858 another change had recently come to the Kanza Reservation which compounded the tribe's reluctance to convert to commercial farming: “Their [The Kanzas] reserve is covered all over with white settlers, who will not allow them to plant their corn this spring” reported James Denver following a meeting with Kanza chiefs in March 1858.

Denver's assessment echoed Agent Montgomery's June 1857 description of the invasion of white squatters onto the Kanza Reserve: “...and although there is not the slightest grounds to justify them in locating immediately around this place it is now being done, breaking prairie, cutting the timber, fencing farms and cultivating the soil: the Indians having heretofore been driven from their little farms...”

In August 1858, a sympathetic Quaker neighbor, Thomas Stanley, defined the obstacles faced by the Kanzas: “...the present state of the reserve would forbid my doing anything towards

encouraging them to go to farming...Some of them did plant some but as it is not fenced (and if they had wished to fence it I think the settlers would have objected.) it is in danger of being destroyed by the settlers stock.”²

The Kanzas lived on the Council Grove Reservation until 1873. They were never assigned a gunsmith.

1. 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. 57.
2. Thomas Stanley to Charles Mix, August 23, 1858, *Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs*, Kansas Agency.