

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

**By Ron Parks**

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*This is the 17<sup>th</sup> in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and Council Grove 150 years ago.*

### Supposed to Have Been Stolen

The missing child was first noted locally in the December 5, 1859, Council Grove newspaper, the *Kansas Press*.

“About three weeks since a little boy belonging to Mr. Meachem strayed or was stolen from his father at Zeandale, K. T.” reported the *Press*. “Fears are entertained that he was stolen by the Kaw, or Kiowa Indians.”

In fact, the three-year-old boy, Charlie, had disappeared on the afternoon of October 28. His mother, Martha, last saw him at about 3 p.m., when he was playing just outside the Meachem cabin, located near Zeandale, about eight miles east of Manhattan. An hour later the wind began to rise so Martha called to the boy to put on his coat. He did not respond. She discovered he was no longer in the yard.

Alarmed, Martha Meachem checked with the neighbors but found that none knew anything about Charlie. She and four women began a search. When Martha’s husband, Oscar, returned to the house in the evening, he immediately organized a party of about fifteen men, who searched the neighborhood with lanterns throughout the night.

The next day about fifty men joined the search, for two days and nights scouring the woods and hills and prairies, finding “never so much as a shoe or a scrap of his little dress.” It was only after a thorough search of several days had been made up and down the creeks, including nearby Deep Creek, all without results, that the men set fire to the prairie, but still no trace was found. Neighbors feared that Martha Meachem would lose her mind.

At this point suspicions began to turn toward the Indians.

The Meachems learned that on the evening of Charlie’s disappearance a band of Otoe and Kiowa Indians had crossed the Kansas River about six miles from the Meachem cabin. An investigation confirmed that on November 3 the same Otoe and Kiowa party arrived at the Otoe Reservation north of present-day Marysville, Kansas, but they did not have a white child with them.

Attention then turned west to the plains, and a Mr. Jones of Manhattan, who had lived in “Indian Country” a few years previous, volunteered to conduct a search among the Indians, starting with the Kanzas, then conducting their winter bison hunt from while encamped on the Smoky Hill and Little Arkansas rivers and Cow Creek in modern-day central Kansas.

At about this time the Kanza agent, Milton C. Dickey, became involved in the investigation, and it is from his January 24, 1860, report to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Greenwood that we learn the most reliable facts of the case.

Jones visited all of the Kanza hunting camps, and on Cow Creek, about 125 miles west of Council Grove, he found a white man, woman, and small boy encamped with the Kanzas. Most importantly, the dress of the boy matched the description of what the missing child had been wearing when last seen.

Jones returned to Zeandale, got Meachem, and they returned to the Cow Creek camp, only to discover that the boy there was not Meachem's. In his January 24 letter Dickey reported that he, the Meachems, and Jones then concluded that the Kanzas had not taken the boy.

But the newspapers had a different message.

Both the February 6 *Kansas Press* and the February 11 *Emporia News* reported that agent Dickey was instituting a search among the Kanzas "for the child of Mr. Meacham; supposed to have been stolen by some of the tribe some three months ago."

Not surprisingly, the Kanzas served as all-purpose bogeymen for area settlers and publicists. On December 17, 1859, the *Emporia News* reported that A. L. Scribner, who had been missing for eight days, had been murdered on the Little Arkansas by Kanzas encamped nearby. On January 7, 1860, the *Topeka Tribune* acknowledged that Scribner "has turned up safe and sound on the Little Arkansas."

On July 14, 1860, the *News* carried the sensational story, remarkable in its resemblance to the Meachem tragedy, of the disappearance of a three-year-old boy on Indian Creek in Butler County. Mrs. White had left her son in the house while she walked to the creek a few rods distant to fetch a bucket of water.

"After having been back about an hour the boy was missed...Search was immediately instituted about the premises. The alarm was given and the neighbors assembled and searched the woods for miles in either direction, and dragged the creek, but the child was not found, and no trace, not even the slightest, was discoverable."

Some neighbors suspected the Kanzas. The following week, the *Emporia* newspaper averred that "It is now remembered that two weeks previous to the disappearance of the child, a party of Kaw Indians camped near Mrs. White's, and were ordered to leave the neighborhood."

The child was never found. Years later a neighbor offered a more plausible explanation: intra-family abduction. Mrs. White's in-laws, who "were of English birth, and the relatives of the child's father, residing in England, had been very desirous of getting possession of him [the missing boy]."

In search of an explanation for the Meachem disappearance, agent Dickey traveled to the Deep Creek area to interview the boy's parents and their neighbors and to survey the landscape. He described the land north and west of the house "bluffy and broken, the creek is skirted with thick underbrush varying from 1 to 15 rods in width, the water was running at the time...in places 3 to 6 feet in depth."

He concluded his report by casting suspicion upon another shadowy and ubiquitous frontier presence with a reputation for treachery:

“Previous to the loss of the child and since there has been seen several large grey wolves in the neighborhood...taking into consideration the nature of the country the difficulty of searching the creek the fact that large grey wolves have been frequently seen the sparceness of the settlement makes it clear to my mind that the chances are more than equal that the child was destroyed by the wolves.”

That spring a neighbor, “while hunting his cows on the north side of the bluffs, found in a cave-like den a little skull, which the doctors pronounced that of a child about the age of Charlie.”

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SOURCES: *Kansas Press*, 12-5-59, 2-6-60; *Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Kansas Agency, 1856-61*, Dickey’s letter, 1-24-60; *Manhattan Express*, 11-5-59; *The First One Hundred Years: A History of the City of Manhattan, Kansas, 1855-1955*, Carolyn Jones; *Topeka Tribune*, 1-7-60; *Emporia News*, 12-17-59, 2-11-60, 7-14-60, 7-21-60; *Chase County Sketches*, Volume 1, p. 421.