

The Kanza Reservation 150 Years Ago

By Ron Parks

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This is the 19th in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and Council Grove 150 years ago.

Drunkenness Is a Common Vice

“A party of Kaw Indians one day last week succeeded in stealing a keg of whisky from the store at Cottonwood Falls,” reported the *Emporia News* on February 18, 1860. “They all got drunk, and from the effects two men and one squaw were killed. The citizens are endeavoring to have them removed.”

About a month before this incident the Kanzas had established their camps on the Diamond and Middle creeks a few miles west of Cottonwood Falls. Here the Indians, having just returned from their winter hunt in central Kansas, traded furs and buffalo robes to an Emporia merchant in exchange for clothing and foodstuffs, especially coffee, sugar, flour, and tobacco.

Although unmentioned in reports of this exchange, whiskey was a common and profitable lubricant of the Indian trade in Kansas. It was no secret that the Kanzas, like other area tribes, had a strong appetite for whiskey.

Perhaps less acknowledged is that the Indians in their indulgence in both “spirituous liquor” and the ensuing violence, were a mirror image of their white neighbors.

“Much of their [the Kanzas] money goes for whisky or for worthless trinkets that are of no benefit to them,” wrote Kanza agent Milton C. Dickey in September 1860. “And in a very few days it is gone, with but little or nothing to show for it.”

The Kanzas recouped some of their losses by establishing themselves as middlemen in the liquor trade on the Central Plains. “The Kansa nation clearly was at the forefront of the intertribal alcohol traffic on the Missouri border,” wrote historian William Unrau in *White Man’s Wicked Water: The Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802-1892*.

In May 1862, the commanding officer of Fort Larned requested that the Kanzas be confined to their reservation because they served as “go-betweens” in the liquor trade. “We learn...that the Kiowas and Cheyennes are extremely troublesome,” reported the June 12, 1862 *Smoky Hill and Republican Union* (Junction City). “It is said they are furnished whiskey by the Kaws, and when they can’t get an emigrant to scalp, they scalp one another.”

The tendency for drunken “in-group brawling” among Indians attracted considerable coverage in Kansas Territory newspapers. “Some of the Otoe Indians got on a ‘regular bender’ on Sunday last after getting a good supply of whisky aboard,” reported the *Marshall Co. Platform* (Marysville) January, 1860. One brave was stabbed to death and “several others were severely wounded.”

Cottonwood Falls was the setting for yet another Indian melee in August 1860. This time members of an unidentified tribe got drunk on liquor whites traded to them, “had a row, killed several of their number, and made night hideous with their yells.”

“Strange that white men will not learn better than give the ‘fire-water’ to savages, knowing as they do, the damage it is liable to do, and that it is a palpable violation of law,” opined the *Council Grove Press*. “Drunkenness is a common vice,” lamented the newly-appointed Kanza agent, H. W. Farnsworth, in September, 1861. “Whiskey is sold in many places in violation of law and all efforts to prevent it.”

Farnsworth’s frustration was echoed by Indian agents throughout Kansas. “As yet, no law of the general government or of this Territory has afforded a remedy for the evils resulting to the Indians from the use of intoxicating drinks,” wrote the Osage agent in September 1859. “The habitual use of intoxicating liquors, brought about by this unwarrantable traffic in their midst, retards all efforts for their civilization.”

Among the factors limiting the effectiveness of the Indian prohibition laws was how widespread and deeply rooted the sale and consumption of liquor was among both Indians and whites. Early-day Kansas was a besotted frontier, Council Grove not excepted, as this reminiscence by Council Grove merchant William Shamleffer makes clear:

“In the ‘Old Pioneer Store’ nest, east from the old town well, in two years over \$12,000 worth of whisky was sold as the seasoning to many, many times that amount of merchandise—probably \$200,000 a year, and during the same period \$15.20 worth of Bibles.”

That some of this whisky was sold to the Kansas is beyond doubt. In July 1851, immediately following an annuity distribution on the nearby Kanza reservation, Indians were observed openly purchasing whiskey at the store owned by Westport merchants Boone and Bernard, then managed by its future proprietor Seth Hays.

The May 4, 1861, *Council Grove Press* provides this word-picture of business as usual in Council Grove: “A fat brave with his unctuous better-half, and a pack of buffalo robes, all piled upon the back of a small pony, is no uncommon spectacle. Being a man of business, the Indian immediately proceeds to the store to trade, and by a series of signs and grunts, manifests his desire to buy something. His first demand is always whiskey.”

However, as suppliers of whiskey to the Kansas, Council Grove merchants had many competitors, particularly at annuity payment time when the tribe received a payment of \$8,000 in gold and silver coinage. In 1857, the Kanza agent described where a good chunk of this money went:

“Whilst at almost every side and corner of the Indian reservation, like unto all others in Kansas Territory where annuities are paid to Indians in specie, are the little whiskey shops, supplied, open, and ready to catch the remaining half of their money, *which they never fail to do.*”

Unfortunately for the Kansas, from the time they arrived at the Council Grove reservation in 1848, they lived in close proximity to a liquor pipeline. “The Santa Fe road passing their lands,” wrote agent

Farnsworth in 1866, “whiskey is obtained in large quantities from trains, especially Mexicans, who are frequently supplied with kegs of whiskey for Indian trade.”

The illegal whiskey trade, however, was not confined to the disreputable. In the winter of 1860, hunter and trader James R. Mead was trading with the Kanza on the “Big Bend” of the Smoky Hill River in present northwestern McPherson County. He noticed the Kansas returning to their camp “full of booze.”

Mead investigated, discovering “a little shack hidden away in the almost inaccessible gulches of a creek coming into the Smoky from the South...Its stock in trade was booze and tobacco.” Its proprietor was none other than a future pillar of Council Grove society, Isaac Sharp, who went on to be the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 1870.

Consumers and suppliers of ardent spirits got most of their liquor from distilleries in Missouri, where the production of alcohol was big business. According to Unrau, by 1840 Missouri produced a half million gallons of whiskey annually and by 1850 Missouri brewers turned out 172,570 barrels of beer each year. In 1857, whiskey sales in Kansas City, population 1,500, totaled \$135,000.

Most of this booze, obviously, was not being consumed by Indians. An 1830 report estimated that the average white American over the age of 15 consumed seven gallons of liquor annually. “As the Territory of Kansas becomes populated, drunkenness and other vices become more prevalent,” warned Kanza agent Montgomery in 1857.

“This [the whiskey trade] trade must either be regulated...or the traffic must and will be stopped by the citizens,” proclaimed the December 31, 1859 *Kansas Tribune*. “No legal restraint is put upon the conduct of those who frequent drinking saloons and similar places.”

Drunken behavior among whites was not confined to the saloons. Soldier and scientist Elliott Coues described his overnight visit to Fort Larned on May 31, 1864: “drunken officer in command everybody half drunk already and all were whole drunk by bed-time. During the revelry an “uproarious drinking song” was “dinged into my ears,” including the lyrics “We’ll all drink stone blind, Johnny fill up the bowl!”

“The stuff called whisky, furnished at Cow creek [100 miles west of Council Grove],” reflected Santa Fe traveler Hezekiah Brake on camping here in 1861, “sometimes made the camps worse than scenes where escaped lunatics give vent to unbridled noise and passion....when all were fired with whisky, it was difficult to tell who were the worse men—Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, or Americans.”

And where men gathered to drink, violence often erupted. A survey of 1860 spring and summer issues of a Topeka newspaper, *The Kansas State Record*, furnishes the following:

--In March, an old man who had come to Topeka to sell some vegetables was assaulted “by some young men, who being in liquor...attacked and beat him in such a manner that he was obliged to be carried off.”

--In June, a "stabbing affray occurred in Kansas City...between two men named Burke and Haley, in which Burke was killed. Cause—whisky."

--In July, "A fracas occurred in a drinking saloon in Atchison, on Sunday evening last, in which one man was killed and several others wounded."

"The year 1860 seems to have been a good one for crime," wrote Council Grove attorney and historian John Maloy in his *The History of Morris County*. "There were several criminal offenses committed, including several murders."

The drunkenness and violence the Kansas manifested in Cottonwood Falls 150 years ago ostensibly reinforces the stereotype of the "Drunken Indian." Regarded in the context of the times, however, it is obvious the Kansas were reflecting the behavior of the whites surrounding them.

It seems the government's policy of "acculturation" whereby the Kansas were educated to adapt white men's attitudes and habits was successful in at least one area—the common vice of drunkenness.

SOURCES: Unrau, pp. 2, 45, 49-50, 65; *Emporia News*, 2-18-60; *Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1857, 1859, 1860, 1861, 1866; *Soldiers on the Santa Trail*, Leo Oliva, p. 143; *Smoky Hill and Republican Union*, 6-12-62; *Kansas State Record* 2-4-60, 3-3-60, 6-16-60, 7-21-60; *Council Grove Press*, 9-1-60, 5-4-61; *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 16, p. 567; *Hunting and Trading on the Great Plains*, James R. Mead, p. 102; *Kansas Tribune*, 12-31-59; *A Soldier-Scientist in the American Southwest*, Michael Broadhead, p. 8; *On Two Continents*, Hezekiah Brake, p. 178; Maloy, p. 31.