

## The Kanza Reservation 150 Years Ago

By Ron Parks

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*This is the 20<sup>th</sup> in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and Council Grove 150 years ago.*

### Dances Were Serious Affairs

On Monday, March 19, 1860, about twenty Kanzas “gave a war dance” in Topeka. The dance was conducted in a circle, with ten or twelve “musicians” seated in the center keeping time and making “a sort of music” by beating upon drums constructed of raw hide while the dancers moved around them in slow procession.

“Many of the Indians were arrayed in war costume,” reported the *Topeka Tribune*. “One wore an otter skin cap, with horns about eight inches in length upon each side of the head...All of the dancers were painted; some black with streaks of red, some altogether red, some with blue in streaks, and one...a ghostly pale yellow.”

Both the dancers and musicians “kept time and joined in a kind of low, dirge like grunt, with an occasional Ugh! Ough! by some of the braves.”

Why the Kanzas performed this dance remains unclear. The tribe had many different kinds of dances. Scholar Charles Lynn Van Middlesworth lists twelve Kanza dances including scalp dance, war dance, dog dance, sun dance, mourning dance, woman’s dance, and calumet dance.

The Kanza dances were “of a religious nature,” wrote Middlesworth, extending “to the cultural dimensions of symbolic expression. Here is where the superhuman ceases to be thought and becomes symbolically actualized and personified in the minds of the performers.”

“When viewed in isolation, [the dances of] the Kansa seem naked and ‘primitive’ indeed.” This limited perspective is reflected by the newspaper descriptions of Kanza dances, most laden with condescension, if not contempt.

“The dancers, of whom there were four, were in a state of semi-nudity and painted in the most hideous style,” observed the *Kansas Free State* in describing a Kanza “war dance” in Lawrence in early April, 1855. The dancers “kept up a kind of barbarous music by singing and beating upon a rude drum.”

A similar tone was assumed by another Lawrence newspaper, *The Herald of Freedom*, in describing the same dance: “...they kept up a discordant sound, accompanied by a low humming guttural....The dance was wild, and no doubt a faithful delineation of savage life.”

Following the dance, two small kegs of powder and seventeen pounds of lead were donated to the Indian band by Lawrence citizens who had formed a ring around the dancers. This ammunition was to

help the Kansas defend themselves against the Sacs and Foxes, who had killed three Kanza a few days before.

As the Kansas sunk into greater poverty during their final years on the Council Grove reservation, dance performances to generate cash became more common. The Kanza agent, E. S. Stover, facilitated this economic strategy in his February 3, 1868, letter of introduction for Ogoshawachici, “a young chief of the Kansas Indians.”

“He is a brave young warrior and is in good standing in his nation...is traveling through the country ‘touching the light fantastic toe’ in the celebrated ‘war dance’ and other popular dances of his people for the amusement of his white friends.”

Unfortunately, three of Ogoshawachici’s nine-member party, after traveling throughout the eastern U. S. presenting dances, became stranded in May in Washington D.C., where they appealed to the government for funds to pay for their return to Junction City, then the railroad terminal closest to the Kanza reservation.

About a month before Ogoshawachici’s departure, most of the tribe had encamped on the south bank of the Smoky Hill River near Fort Riley. Here in the last week of December, 1867, amidst “about 300 warriors sitting around a fire,” the Kansas performed a series of “war dances” attended by “large parties from town [Junction City] and the fort.”

*The Junction City Union* provided a description of a memorable Friday night dance: “The old men of the party [Kansas] were remorseless in their demands for more money while the young chief who led the dancers, had just whiskey enough in him to cause him to be exceedingly anxious to give us a first class entertainment.”

“But an old squaw, whose part in the performance seemed important, was in a very bad humor, as her vinegar face indicated....and at last she committed an assault on the ambitious and gallant young buck who led the dancers.”

Another observer, Fort Riley freighter John Wells, described what happened next: “A little squaw rushed into the circle and made an assault on the big fellow. He was floored and on his back in a jiffy. As fast as he got up he was thrown again by the little Amazon. This was done three times and our enthusiasm had grown to the highest pitch, which our crowd displayed by generous applause.”

A Kanza chief got on a stump, Wells recounted, and “in a gruff tone of command said, ‘All white men go home, quick.’ We vamoosed without arguing about it.”

At the time of these dances the tribe was trying to recover from a recent tragedy. In mid-December on Plum Creek near present Great Bend, the Kansas skirmished with the Cheyennes, killing and scalping at least seven of the latter tribe.

Fearing reprisal from their more powerful enemies, the panic-stricken Kansas’ immediately fled eastward across central Kansas. Along the way 61 stragglers succumbed to freezing temperatures and

exhaustion. The fact that almost all of these victims were females may explain the Kanza woman's "very bad humor."

When the Kansas returned to their Neosho River reservation in January, they conducted a scalp dance in the Big John Creek village near the Agency. Trader Joab Spencer, a retired Methodist minister, observed this dance and, unlike newspapermen, rendered a somewhat empathetic description:

"The scalps [Cheyennes'] recently secured were hung on a pole erected in the midst of the village....The dance consisted of a kind of shuffling motion and a spring up of a few inches from the ground. This gave them a bobbing-up-and-down motion, but did not move them from their position. An onlooker would see a line of men shuffling and jumping but not changing place."

"Their dances were very serious affairs and continued far into the night. The dancers had a grave and serious look, and seemed to give close attention to their work."

"How men could endure such exercise for hours without recess, is hard to understand. This dance, as well as all others, was a religious ceremony, and was really a thanksgiving service for their late victory, which they regarded as proof that the Great Spirit was not angry, but pleased with them."

In June 1868, a large force of Cheyenne warriors bent on revenge engaged about 150 Kansas in a battle immediately west of Little John Creek within a half mile of the Kanza agency. The agent, E. S. Stover, had gathered many of the Kanza women into the protection of the agency buildings.

During the battle, Joab Spencer witnessed an extraordinary dance of Kanza women, who were "singing a solemn chant while dancing" under the leadership of an old woman named Mahunga.

"Such an expression of earnestness, reverence and solicitude I think I have never witnessed in any one. She was in this act of worship invoking the help of Wah-kun-dah, the Supreme Being, in the then raging battle, for her people's success. Her whole soul was enlisted in this act of worship."

"I have never felt more respect for the religious devotions of any one than I did for that old heathen woman and her company of devotees." After a few hours the Cheyennes broke off the attack and retreated.

Spencer was fortunate to have witnessed the Kanza dances as pure expressions of their religious sensibilities. But the Kansas continued to occasionally perform dances for white people at least partly as means of economic sustenance. Dances were held near Junction City in November 1868 and in Americus in May 1870.

The Americus dance, although attended by 1,500 white people, was deemed a failure as "few Indians came in, and after a very shy and tame commencement, the dance was soon brought to a close by their refusing to remain." Perhaps being surrounded by several hundred on-lookers of questionable good-will contributed to the Indians' "shyness" and reluctance to perform.

In early June 1873, the entire tribe journeyed with a government escort from the Neosho River reservation to their new home in Indian Territory. En route they stopped on June 12 at El Dorado where, according to the *Walnut Valley Times*, "They gave us a war dance on Thursday night which was attended by almost every man, woman, and child on the townsite."

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SOURCES: *Lawrence Republican*, 3-29-'60; *The Kansa: Cultural Construction and Preservation of Traditional Culture Under Acculturation*, Charles Lynn Van Middlesworth, Master's Thesis, pp. 187-198; *Herald of Freedom*, 4-14-'55; *Kansas Free State*, 4-14-'55; Staab, Rodney, "Kansa Presence in the Upper Kansas Valley, 1848-1867," *Kansas Anthropologist*, 1995, p. 31; *Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Kansas Agency, 1865-68*; *Junction City Union*, 12-28-'67, 1-4-'68, 11-21-'68; *John R. Wells Discovers Kansas*, ed. Jean Lindsey, p. 2; "The Kaw or Kansas Indians: Their Customs, Manners, and Folk-Lore," Joab Spencer, *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 10, pp. 375-76; *Emporia News*, 5-20-'70; *Walnut Valley Times*, 6-13-'73. Doug Sharp, Pauline Sharp, and Marla Evert provided invaluable research assistance for this article.