

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago (April article)

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By Ron Parks

*(This is the ninth in a series of monthly articles written by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and Council Grove 150 years ago.)*

### Horse Thieves Are in Our Very Midst

The Kansas had stolen the horses, there was no doubt about it.

The thefts happened in Council Grove on the night of April 23, 1859. There were four white men— Joseph Keasting, Price Piles, A. J. Wood, and Peter Windle--passing through town. They lodged here overnight and when they awoke next morning, nine of their horses were missing.

So they began their journeys to recover the horses, the trail of the crime leading them to the Kansas. Keasting and Pile each spent 61 days searching for their horses, Wood ten days and Windle four days.

Keasting suffered the greatest loss, six of the nine were his. Of these, five were valued at \$25.00 each, but his one yellow mare was worth \$150.00. Pile lost a stallion worth \$200.00; Wood and Windle each lost a mare worth \$25.00.

The Kansas' propensity for stealing horses was well known. In this, they were not unlike all of the tribes of the central plains. Not long after settling in the Neosho Valley in 1848, the Kansas provoked the wrath of the United States army by stealing horses and mules from the government wagon trains moving through Council Grove on the Santa Fe Trail.

Accusing the head chief, Kahhegawachegah (Hard Chief), of not disciplining his thievish warriors, soldiers seized the old Kanza chief, took him to Fort Leavenworth, and held him in prison there for a month. Upon being released, Kahhegawachegah "...said he would kill any Indian who would steal any more horses. He had been sleeping between logs long enough. He was very sore, and he would not do that for any man who would steal horses."<sup>1</sup>

A reflection of cultural misunderstanding, horse-thieving was a continuous source of conflict between Americans and the Kansas. Though considered a major crime by the Americans, horse stealing had long been an honorable means for young Kanza warriors to gain in status and wealth. Often horses were used as presents to obtain favors from chiefs and prospective fathers-in-laws.

Necauebanna (The One Who Runs Down Men) over time ran down and killed eighteen Pawnees with a knife. Each time he returned to the Kanza villages with a drove of horses he captured. Once he distributed 150 horses to the three Kanza chiefs.

More importantly, their horses were economically crucial to the Kansas by providing transportation to and from their bison-hunting regions in central Kansas. "I can see no other way for them to live during

the coming winter, but to return to their hunt," wrote Kanza Agent Milton Dickey in September 1860. At that time the 803 Kansas possessed 350 horses at an average value of \$40.00 each, totaling \$14,000.00, by far the tribe's most valuable property.

As the tribe sunk deeper into poverty, instances of horse stealing increased. "I am compelled to report that they never were in such a destitute condition," reported Dickey on February 6, 1860. "Heretofore when they have been reduced to want, as the last resort [the Kansas] would sell their ponies but then inclination for the pony or horse is so great that they fall back into the border settlement and steal horses to replenish those they are obliged to part with to sustain themselves, hence arises the greater part of all the trouble with the Kaw Indians."

In October, 1859, Dickey reported "very bitter and hostile feeling against the Indians in those settlements nearest the Reserve and many complaints against them for stealing horses, cattle, etc....I am satisfied that it is hunger and extreme want that drives them to a greater part of the thieving they commit."

The Kansas' destitution was compounded by white people stealing horses from the Indians. "The ponies of many have been stolen and they cannot hunt buffalo, and so provide for their families..." reported Dickey's successor, Hiram Farnsworth in June 1861. "I shall be...traveling considerably to assist the Indians in recovering horses that have been stolen from them."

Two months later Kanza chiefs requested that power of attorney be granted to a Mr. Deming to recover about fifty ponies stolen from them and to "fix the theft on the proper persons."

The chaos of the Civil War served only to magnify the problem. "We have had 150 horses stolen by your white children, which by the Treaty of 1825, you ought to pay us for," Kanza head chief Ishtalasea told Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole in 1863.

The Kanza were not the only Kansas tribe suffering from white horse thievery. A neighboring tribe located forty miles east, the Sac and Fox "... suffer much from the depredations of horse thieves by whom they are surrounded," reported agent Francis Tymoney in 1858. "And if some means is not devised to protect them the only property on which they rely will soon all be taken from them."

The Ottawas lost many of their horses and ponies, stolen by "lawless and unprincipled white men," their agent reported in September 1860. "I have made several attempts to follow and arrest such thieves; but, when closely followed up through this Territory, they leave for Pike's Peak, thus rendering pursuit useless."

The potential for violence implicit in such criminal activity was realized in 1859 when four Potawatomis were murdered by horse thieves based in eastern Kansas. <sup>2</sup>

In his annual report of 1860, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs A. M. Robinson warned that "...the country from the Missouri river to Pike's Peak is infested with organized bands of desperate horse thieves...committing their depredations indiscriminately on the white man and the Indian."

“Horse thieves are in our very midst,” harangued *Kansas Press* (Cottonwood Falls) editor Samuel Wood in June, 1859, “and the only way to rid our county, and territory of them, is to take the law into our own hands, and HANG EVERY ONE ENGAGED IN THE BUSINESS.”

That same month nine alleged horse thieves, all of them white, were arrested and tried by a vigilante court in Council Grove. Three of the men were acquitted, two were whipped ten lashes and ordered to leave Kansas Territory, and four of the men “were whipped each ten lashes, and one side of their heads shaved, and ordered to leave the country...”

Just as poverty contributed to Kanza thievery, so too did economic disaster drive some frontier white people to crime. The destructive and long-enduring effects of the Panic of 1857, which severely depressed prices of wheat and corn, seriously affected the territory of Kansas. On October 24, 1857, the *Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence) wrote: “The crash among Eastern banks falls very severely upon the people of Kansas. The country was full of Eastern exchange, which has become valueless. The times look dark and foreboding.”

Against this background, the desperation of Keasting, Piles, Wood, and Windle to recover their equine losses can be best understood. Keasting and Piles each claimed a total daily expense of \$122.00 at a rate of \$2.00 per day for the 61 days they searched for their horses. At \$200.00, the value of Piles’ stallion equaled a working man’s labor of four months.

The Kansas acknowledged they stole the horses. Keasting recovered his five horses, Wood and Windle recovered their mares. But Keasting’s yellow mare and Piles’ stallion were never returned, the Kansas “having run them into the Indian Country (Oklahoma) and disposed of them.”

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Unless otherwise noted in the text, the primary sources for this article are the *Letters Sent from the Kansas Agency to the Office of Indian Affairs, 1857-1863*, and *Annual Reports of Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1858-1861*.

1. “Reminiscences of Frederick Chouteau,” *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, (1903-04): pp. 432-33.
2. Clifton, James, *The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture, 1665-1965* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1977), p. 368.