

The Kanza Reservation 150 Years Ago

By Ron Parks

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This is the 23rd in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and the Council Grove area 150 years ago.

A Wild, Roving People

On Sunday, June 17, 1860, Luke Parsons was returning home from the sandstone “buttes” southwest of Salina, when he decided to visit a nearby camp of Kanza Indians. Although Salina was located about 65 miles west-northwest of their reservation villages near Council Grove, Parsons’ diary recorded the presence of the Kansas near Salina on six occasions June through December 1860.

Parsons and his white contemporaries did not consider it unusual to encounter the Kanza far from their reservation on the upper Neosho valley. One hundred fifty years ago the tribe continued doing what it had done for at least two centuries before Salina’s appearance on the banks of the Smoky Hill River--roaming the prairies of present-day eastern and central Kansas.

“But my warriors impatient of restraints as the wild horse in the toils of the hunter,” stated a Kanza chief to military officials on the banks of the Missouri River in 1818, “brook no controul. Free as the air which they breathe, light and impetuous as the Antelope, they bound Mountains and Moor in pursuit of pleasure which nature has ordained they should enjoy.”

Though replete with expressions of the Romantic Age of literature, the translator on this occasion does convey an elemental truth about the Kansas--their well-deserved reputation as wanderers.

“The Kansas are a wild, roving people,” agent John Whitfield declared in 1853. “They are a wandering tribe,” observed the March 13, 1858 Lawrence newspaper, *The Herald of Freedom*. “They have no fixed residence and reside only in tents made of cotton drilling, or skins.”

The Kansas’ roaming penchant was often seized on by area editors as one of many opportunities to heap invective on the tribe:

“A set of lazy lousy savages....not here only a very small portion of the time. The most of their time is spent in chasing Buffalo upon the plains,” snarled the Council Grove’s *Kansas Press*. “Worthless vagabonds,” concurred the August 1860 *Emporia News*, who “keep back the improvement and hinder the development of this most beautiful and fertile strip of country.”

A chronological review of the tribe’s whereabouts 150 years ago confirms the Kansas’ practice of mobility continued unabated in 1860:

On January 24, Kanza agent Milton Dickey reported “the larger part of the Kaw Indians have been and now are camped on the Smoky Hill Fork, Cow Creek, and the little Arkansas engaged in hunting.” Cow

Creek was located about 100 miles west of the Kanza Reservation. Twelve miles east of Cow Creek, the upper Little Arkansas River flows southeast between present Lyons and McPherson.

In early February the Kanza were reported camped on the Cottonwood River and Middle and Diamond Spring creeks in west Chase County. An Emporia merchant visited Chief Ebesunga's camp on Middle Creek, buying "five hundred wolf-skins and a quantity of other furs."

A couple of weeks later the Kanzas reportedly stole a keg of whiskey from a Cottonwood Falls store. A drunken melee ensued, two men and one woman were killed. Afterwards local citizens demanded the Kanza leave.

On February 4 the *Topeka Tribune* announced "The Kaws are beginning to bring in Buffalo Robes. Now is the time to buy." One month later the newspaper contained a description of a Kanza "war dance" given in the city. The writer thought the tribe "made an appearance ludicrous in the extreme."

On March 10 the *Emporia News* gave an account of a shooting match in Emporia between a dozen or so Kanza and some local boys at five cents a shot. "We saw one Indian hit a five cent piece at four rods with an arrow."

On April 15 this item appeared in the Emporia paper: "A party of ten or twelve Kaw 'braves,' gaudily dressed, and mounted on fleet ponies, came in from the west on Thursday morning. After spending a few moments in town, a cloud of dust to the east marked their departure towards the land of the Osages."

The Kanza frequently visited the Osage villages, the closest located in present Neosho County 100 miles downstream from the Kanza villages. Intermarriage, mutual enemies, proximity, and a common language bound the tribes together.

In early July a party of Kanza camped near Indian Creek in present Butler County was ordered by local citizens to leave the neighborhood.

On July 15 cavalry troops in pursuit Kiowa and Comanche Indians on Cow Creek near its confluence with the Arkansas River "found about three hundred Kaw Indians in camp, laying in their winter stock of Buffalo meat."

According to the *Council Grove Press*, about 30 Kanza along with "Texas Indians" joined the cavalry column as guides. The troops pursued the Indians north across the Saline, Solomon, and Republican rivers. The September 1 *Press*, quoting Captain Sturgis, reported 40 hostile Indians killed during the expedition. The Indian guides took 27 scalps, "and seemed much elated with their trophies."

On July 16, Luke Parsons noted: "Got dinner with the Kaw Indians on my way home."

On July 27, agent Dickey reported the Kanza "are now out on a hunt with the exception of a very few...and are scattered from the Agency from 100 to 150 miles." Dickey stated that because of the

drought the Kanza corn crop had failed, predicting the Kanza “would in consequence be roving about causing more or less trouble and annoyance.”

On August 1 a party of white hunters was visited by a couple of Kanzas on Bruno Creek in eastern Marion County. “They seemed to be real jolly fellows....They wanted whisky—too-back, (tobacco) salt, etc.”

A letter sent to Council Grove newspaper editor Sam Wood reported that on August 23, following the illegal sale of whiskey to Kanza encamped near Cottonwood Falls, “a big fight occurred during the evening and night among the Indians, and some were killed.”

On August 26, Luke Parsons shot a buffalo in Salina “but he [the buffalo] ran and fifteen or twenty Indians attacked him and shot him full of arrows.” They were Kanza “just arrived from Council Grove. They thought they had a first right to all buffaloes and I did not think best to argue the question.”

By early October the Kanza returned to their reservation where at the agency three miles southeast of Council Grove they received their annuity payment of \$8,000. Immediately following the payment, the tribe dispersed once again.

Early that fall a band of about 60 Kanza encamped on the south side of the Smoky Hill River at the site of present Enterprise [five miles east of Abilene] killed a Pawnee attempting to steal horses.

A “war dance” ensued, whiskey being furnished by a local merchant, “the entire white settlement gathered in to witness the spectacle...and for half an hour...witnessed the most frightful contortions of which the Indian frame is capable.”

On October 26, Parsons noted “Kaw Indians in town. Some of them have some money.” On November 23 he wrote: “good many Kaws in town. Name of one is Shingawa.”

Undoubtedly this is the same individual James R. Mead called “Shingawassa,” who had “with his band, camped in the timber close by our ranch.” Mead’s ranch was located on the north bank of the Saline River about one mile east of present Tescott.

Mead also stated that while trading with the Kanza at the “Big Bend” of the Smoky Hill River in 1860, he “noticed some of them returned to camp full of booze.” Mead discovered that a man named Sharp was selling the Kanza whiskey and tobacco at a secluded shack on Sharp’s Creek in present northwest McPherson County.

As the chronological sketch above makes clear, in 1860 the Kanza were a people always on the move. As they had for generations, they went west onto the plains to hunt buffalo for meat and to secure robes for trade. They made journeys to battle their enemies. They visited their friends and relatives. They sought trade opportunities. They were on the lookout for whiskey.

Beyond these longstanding behaviors, the Kanza were also responding to the pressures of more recent developments. By 1858 their reservation had been overrun by illegal white squatters who no longer

made them feel welcome or safe at their Neosho villages. Free-ranging squatter livestock and the drought of 1860 destroyed their crops. The Plains tribes increasingly challenged the Kanza hunting domain. Destitution became the norm rather than the exception.

“This Kaw tribe are roving from place to place not having so much as an acre of land they can call their own,” wrote agent Dickey in February 1860. “Not having anything to attract them on their Reserve (it being settled upon and in dispute). When in from the hunt they are roving about the country begging, and also charged with stealing whether guilty or not.”

Among these well-established conditions one more should be considered that by no means diminishes the harsh realities outlined above.

The Kanza loved to roam.

“Should we then,” proclaimed the Kanza chief in 1818, “...quit the pleasures and the adventures of the hunt, and like you, confine ourselves to one solitary valley, to practice discipline and subordination to live in idleness and indolence. No, father.”

SOURCES: “Luke F. Parsons Diary—1859, 1860, 1861,” typed manuscript, Kansas Collection, Salina Public Library, 6-9; *The Missouri Expedition, 1818-1820, The Journal of John Gale with Related Documents*, Roger Nichols (editor), 39; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1853*; *Herald of Freedom*, 3-13-'58; *Kansas Press*, 12-12-'59; *Emporia News* 1-28-'60, 2-4-'60, 2-18-'60, 3-10-'60, 4-14-'60, 7-21-'60, 8-25-'60, 9-22-'60; *Letters Received, Kansas Agency, 1856-61*; *Topeka Tribune* 2-4-'60, 3-3-'60, 3-10-'60; “Reverend Father Paul M. Ponziglione,” *Kansas Historical Collection (KHC)*, v. 9, p. 27; “With the First U.S. Cavalry in Indian Country, 1859-61,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, (Winter 1958), 407; *Council Grove Press*, 8-6-'60, 9-1-'60; “Letter from J. B. Hodgin to Samuel N. Wood, *Kansas Memory*, Kansas Historical Society, 8-25-'60; *Dickinson County Chronicle*, 7-14-'76; *Hunting and Trading on the Great Plains*, James R. Mead, 102; “The Saline River Country in 1859,” *KHC*, v. 9, p.17.

