

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago

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This is the 24th in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and the Council Grove area 150 years ago.

Paying Tribute to the Sleeper Below

When on the evening of July 16, 1861 Judge J. H. Watson observed several Indian graves on the brow of a hill overlooking the Cottonwood River and Middle Creek in western Chase County, he proceeded to desecrate them.

“These [the graves] are formed by piling up stones over the dead body,” wrote Watson. “On removing a few of these, I perceived the moldering bodies of the once proud savage, an old rusty tin cup, and the decayed remains of what was once a bow and arrow.”

Because the Kansas had encamped in this area the previous winter, it is likely these were the graves of their tribesmen. And the violation of Kanza graves by white people was not uncommon.

“It is perfectly easy to procure skulls...in the Kaw [country],” noted early-day ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan in 1860, “...if it is managed prudently. The graves are heaps of stones, or a pile of timber which can be easily opened at the top and the skull taken out, without much of any labor and without much disturbance.”

Accompanying Morgan on his examination of Indian graves was William Turner, who would secure “any quantity of Sauk and Fox, Kaw, etc.” skulls for Morgan at the bargain rate of \$1.00 each.

Both Watson and Morgan were not your run-of-the-mill grave robbers. Highly educated and a fine writer, Watson was one of the most respected and successful citizens of Emporia who narrowly missed becoming a justice of the state supreme court.

Morgan is considered by many the “father” of American anthropology and among the most eminent scientists of the 19th century. The interests of science, presumably, granted him license to remove skulls from Indian graves so that they might be taken back east to museums or other scientific institutions where they would be studied, catalogued, and stored.

Others were not so high-minded. A Geary County settler residing near the confluence of Lyon Creek and the Smoky Hill River recalled the Kanza in 1857 making a grave near his farm “on a slight eminence.” Soon after the body was interred, “Wolves had dug into it and some human goul [sic] had robbed the body of near all its trinkets.”

Why the wolves were able to access this grave becomes clear in the farmer's description: "The Kaw grave was scraped into the soft dirt about twenty inches deep, the body placed therein and short sticks laid over the grave, the ends resting on the surface of the ground and the dirt laid over the sticks."

Ordinarily the Kanza took measures to secure the body against animal scavengers, as illustrated by Morgan's description of a Kanza grave: "The hole in the ground is about one foot deep, the body is set up erect, and covered with bark, this is then covered with dirt lightly after which stones are piled up around the body loose so as [to] cover the body fully about one or two feet over their head."

Although Morgan maintained that the Kanza were buried "in a sitting posture facing the west," other accounts disagree, "stating that the body was placed in a grave approximately three to four feet deep, at full length with the head to the west."

In anticipation of a long afterlife journey, the Kanza placed useful and beloved belongings with the body. Morgan describes "A bow and arrow on the left side, a little brass or earth kettle between the legs or feet, containing corn or beans or dried buffalo meat, and their tobacco pouch and pipe." Dishes were placed on a Kanza woman's grave on Clarks Creek in northwest Morris County.

Often a warrior's gun, tomahawk, knife, saddle, bridle, blankets, and moccasins were buried with him. In 1841 a traveler in the Kansas River valley came across the grave of a young Kanza male covered by stones and a "heap of sods," and "surrounded with a pen of small logs, within which were set up two poles." Two scalps taken by the warrior were mounted on one of the poles, some ornaments of his horse on the other.

The spirit's afterlife journey was facilitated by the Kanzas' primary means of mobility—his or her horse. Though shocking to the modern sensibility, the Kanza sometimes killed the favorite mounts of the deceased on their graves. "While on a visit to the Kaw villages below town, a few days ago," reported the May 19, 1861 *Council Grove Press*, "we saw no less than four dead horses lying near as many fresh made graves."

An Emporia man, Will Irwin, had befriended a Kanza man. When the Indian's daughter died, Irwin was invited to the little girl's funeral. She was "buried with her beloved trinkets and food for her journey. Then after burial, three Indians seized her pony and strangled it—leaving it upon the top of the grave."

One night near the Stephens homestead on the Smoky Hill River in present McPherson County, the settlers observed two Indian women on one horse, the old one in front "rode with bowed and covered head, the other young with uncovered head, was wailing as if in pain."

The old woman had died and was buried in the meadow below the Stephens' house. Throughout the night "a continuous wail came and went with the sighing of the wind" from the Indian camp.

After the Indians left early in the morning, family members found a dead horse on the newly made grave. "The horse's tail had been cut off and mounted on a stake marking her last resting place. All summer long it waved there, paying tribute to the sleeper below."

Kanza mourning cries left a deep impression Euro Americans. "Such a noise they made," wrote Clarks Creek settler Caroline Warnike, "crying and yelling, mourning in their peculiar way." The McClure family on Lyons Creek was awakened in the middle of the night "by a series of the most hideous howls and screams imaginable," that continued through the night. On visiting the nearby Kanza camp the next morning, they learned a Kanza brave had died of smallpox.

After a Kanza man's wife died, he would cover his face with dirt and wander about from sunrise to sunset bewailing his loss. During this time he could not eat or sleep. When this mourning period ended, he could seek another wife. A Kanza widow also covered her face with earth and fasted during daylight.

Many family members of the deceased slashed their arms, legs, and faces with knives in hopes that Wakanda would recognize their sacrifice and help them in their time of loss.

Estimates as to the length of these mourning periods vary from one month to a year-and-a-half. One account states that the mourning period ended when a war party sent out "as a satisfaction for the loss which the Great Spirit has caused them to sustain" returned bearing scalps of their enemies.

A recent article, "Furthering Their Own Demise: How Kansa Indian Death Customs Accelerated Their Depopulation," by scholar Benjamin F. Dixon, asserts the Kanza declined in population partly because the tribe maintained its mourning traditions of killing horses, fasting, and raiding enemies.

Anthropologist J. Owen Dorsey observed a Kanza funeral ritual in the winter of 1882-83, ten years after the removal to Indian Territory, a time of steep population decline and attendant erosion of tribal traditions. Nevertheless, Dorsey's *Mourning and War Customs of the Kansas* describes an intricate ceremony in which clan identities and functions were hugely important.

The process also involved sacred songs, venerated objects such as the sacred shell and pipe, gift exchange, appeals to the great deity Wakanda, and preparations for war as a means of compensating the loss of the deceased, although this latter resulted not in Pawnee deaths but in the killing of five prairie chickens.

What is clear in Dorsey's account is the complexity and depth of the Kanza death traditions. Understandably the settlers' fixated on the wailing, burial site structures, and horse sacrifices, but in fact the Kanza mourning rituals manifested expressions as spiritual, venerable, complicated, and culturally integrated as those of their Euro American counterparts.

"Those who think that savages have no feeling of affection, have another guess coming," wrote Addison Stubbs, the official Kanza interpreter 1871-73.

"For a month or more before leaving Kansas [June 1873], the women, knowing they were to go away and leave the bodies of their dead in the numerous grave-yards on the rocky bluffs, made pilgrimages every morning and evening to the graves, where they would sit for an hour or more, with their backs to sun, weeping and wailing so they could be heard for miles. The tears rolling down their haggard faces showed that their grief was sincere."

According to Emporia historian Dr. Orville Mosher, for several years after their removal to Indian Territory, Kanza made yearly trips to the Neosho Valley to visit these graves.

The Kanzas, however, were not alone in being drawn to their ancestors' graves. "After the departure of the Kaws for Oklahoma," Mosher wrote, "searchers after relics opened Indian graves, and, in coarse humor, stuck skulls on fence posts."

SOURCES: "A Trip to the Great Plains," J. H. Watson, *Emporia News*, 8-18-60; *The Indian Journals*, Lewis Henry Morgan, 90, 92; *Explorations in the Basin of the Mississippi*, J. V. Brower, 52; *Warneke Stories*, unpublished manuscript compiled by descendents of John and Barbara Warneke, (courtesy of Ken and Shirley McClintock); "The Kaw or Kansas Indians: Their Customs, Manners, and Folk-Lore," Joab Spencer, *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 10, 378; "The Kansa Indians," Waldo Wedel, *Transactions Kansas Academy of Science*, v. 49, 26-27; "Indian Missions in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 16, 230, 263; *The Lyon County Historical Museum*, Dr. Orville W. Mosher, 65, 67; *Pioneer Life and Lore of McPherson County, Kansas*, Edna Nyquist, 132; "The Lyon Creek Settlement," Clara Shields, *Kansas Historical Collection*, v. 14, 157; *Tomah-Shingah*, Frank A. Smith, (courtesy Geary County Historical Museum), 13; Dorsey, *American Naturalist*, v. 19, 670-680; "Reminiscences of Frederick Chouteau," Franklin Adams, *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, v. 8, 429; "Material Concerning Kansas Indians," *Addison Woodward Stubbs Manuscripts*, Kansas Historical Society, 6-7; Mosher, *Emporia Gazette*, 10-25-'56.

