

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago

August 11, 2009

By Ron Parks

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

Their Road to the Buffalo

In August of 1859 the Kansas were encamped on their favorite hunting grounds in central Kansas. Twice a year, in the summer and winter, the tribe would journey west from their Council Grove reservation to the plains to engage in a buffalo hunt. "While on the hunt, during the summer months," wrote Kanza agent Milton Dickey, "they get a good living, and are, to a great extent, comfortable."

The summer hunt of 1859 was especially important to the Kansas as they had suffered "a good deal of sickness and several deaths in the spring and early part of summer." Dickey said these diseases were "of a consumptive character," meaning tuberculosis.

Ordinarily, in winter and spring the Kansas were "subject to great suffering, on account of the destitute circumstances in which they are placed," wrote Dickey in September 1859. "Their annuities are so small that it is but a mere pittance towards their support."

The \$8,000.00 annuities the U.S. government paid to the tribe each year afforded \$10.00 to each of the 800 members of the tribe (in 1860), hardly an amount to meet their basic needs. Because furs and robes were the only trade commodities available to the Kansas, access to the requisite animals was crucial.

Access was provided by a well-established route known as the Kaw Trail. This one-hundred-mile-long track stretched from the Kanza Agency three miles southeast of Council Grove to the tribe's Cow Creek campsite in present Rice County.

Traced relative to modern features, the Kaw Trail passed through the village of Diamond Springs in Morris County; clipped one section of northwest Chase County; crossed Marion County diagonally two miles south of Lincolville, through the Marion Reservoir and Hillsboro; extended east-west in McPherson County a couple miles north of Moundridge, then passed near Inman; finally ending at the confluence of Big and Little Cow Creeks a couple miles south of Lyons.

The Kaw Trail ran roughly parallel to the Santa Fe Trail, the Indian route lying from three to nine miles south of the white man's road. Historian George P. Morehouse, author of "Along the Kaw Trail" (*Transactions of the KSHS*, 1904), asserted "this [Kaw] trail had better grass and water along it than the Santa Fe trail."

The Kansas journeyed *en masse* over this trail, leaving behind in their lodges those too frail or sick to travel and a few caregivers. In 1860 the Kansas possessed an estimated 350 ponies, so many of the 800 or so men, women, and children walked, sometimes traveling only ten miles per day.

The Indians traveled in single file, the men mounted on the best ponies. However, Morehouse observed that the trail was not a single path, "...but in places the ground was cut up for a rod or two in width, and had many evidences of long usage." As a laborsaving measure, the Kansas would often leave the wooden frames of their small lodges intact at streamside campsites.

A vacated camp was encountered by an Emporia man, J. H. Watson, traveling east on the Kaw Trail in late July of 1860. Upon reaching Turkey Creek a few miles south of present-day McPherson, Watson noted "The remains of their old tents are scattered all around. There is a great abundance of timber and grass, and in ordinary times of water."

A few miles further Watson engaged a band of Kansas encamped on the trail. Here he gave a dog to an Indian boy, then found "It was difficult to determine which was most pleased, the dog or boy. I left them manifesting much mutual endearment—the boy hugging the dog, and the dog licking the face of the lad."

Although Cow Creek was their preferred camping site, upon arriving in buffalo country the tribe often dispersed in bands across central Kansas. Among the many places the Kansas are known to have established hunting camps are the Little Arkansas River, Plum Creek, Turkey Creek, Smoky Hill River, Saline River, and Gypsum Creek.

The men were expert buffalo hunters who, although possessing firearms, often employed bows and arrows. On July 7, 1859, A. I. Beach witnessed the Kansas' prowess in dispatching a lone buffalo near Beach's "ranche" [trading post] at Cow Creek: "The four stripped themselves and sprang on their horses with bows and arrows and followed the buffalo...the Indians got ahead of the buffalo and ran him nearly back to the ranche and the buffalo was so worn out, that he stopped to give fight. The Indians then shot five arrows in the buffalo, all of which went through and before the buffalo was fairly down they were by the side of the buffalo and had all the arrows out, which was done to save them breaking the arrows in the field."

Often the Kanza women prepared large quantities of "Buffalo jerk" at their hunting camps. They stripped or "jerked" the meat into strips, weaved these into large mats, which were spread over willow frames surmounting a small fire, which would roast and dry the meat. Although these were desirable commercial articles in the white settlements, most of the dried meat was packed back to the Neosho River villages for the tribe's sustenance.

The winter hunts were especially crucial to the survival of the Kansas for two additional reasons: the buffalo robes and furs gathered during the winter earned the Kansas up to as much as \$12,000.00 a year in trade value; and in the winter the short buffalo and grama grasses of central Kansas were more nutritious than the bluestem grasses of the Flint Hills, thus providing vital nourishment at a critical time to the all-important pony herds.

Sometimes the hunts were successful. The winter hunt of 1857-58 netted the Kanza 1,800 robes, and in the winter hunt of 1865-66 the tribe killed nearly 3,000 buffalo. The return home was described by Morehouse: "...the pack ponies reeled under the weight of plunder or tugged at loads borne on two long

poles fastened to their sides and extending back like long shafts, dragging on the ground. Often on top of a load of fresh or dried meat a squaw and papoose would be perched, in all the glory of Indian life.”

One of the last successful hunts was conducted in the mild winter of 1868-69. The Kansas returned in April, “looking gaudy and feeling gay” according to the Council Grove newspaper editor. “They had plenty of robes” and had acquired a good number of ponies. When they got to their villages “they were met by an ovation.”

However, the 1859-60 hunt had not been so successful. Agent Dickey estimated that the tribe’s take of robes and furs that year was worth only \$2,500, which he attributed to the effect of a terrible drought. “The most of their time has been spent in hunting;” Dickey reported, “...at sometimes during the year [1860] they have been very destitute, not having a sufficiency to satisfy the demands of hunger.”

Although there were good hunts during the 1860s, the Kansas increasingly found themselves in a desperate and often violent competition with the powerful Cheyenne tribe for the prime buffalo hunting grounds of central Kansas. In December 1867 the Kanza agent reported “...as matters now stand the Kaws are not allowed to hunt on the plains as the Cheyenne are much the stronger party,....”

The early 1870s proved disastrous. Head chief Allegawaho stated that the winter of 1870-71 was “very cold we lost a large number of ponies and were thus hindered from bringing in the usual amount of robes, & dried meat.” In 1871-72 one third of their ponies succumbed to the cold and starvation and the Indians killed no buffalo. In 1872-73, the Kansas’ last winter in Kansas, few of the tribe took the trail west to buffalo country because of “their old hunting grounds being settled up by the whites.”

In June 1873 the 600 remaining Kansas were relocated to their new reservation in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). After the Kansas’ removal, the Kaw trail became a wagon road for white people, a route for cattle drives, and a starting-point to burn backfires to control prairie fires. As late as the 1890s unplowed segments of the trail’s margins were marked by rows of sunflowers.

In addition to the Morehouse article, sources are the *Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* and *Hunting and Trading on the Great Plains, 1859—1875* by James R. Mead. The Watson account is found in the *Emporia News*, September 22, 1860.