

The Kanza Reserve 150 Years Ago

By Ron Parks

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This is the 25th in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kanza Indians and the Council Grove area 150 years ago.

Roasting with the Drouth

“Yesterday the wind was very high, and the stronger it blew the hotter became the temperature,” reported the August 18, 1860 *Emporia News*. “It felt exactly as though emanating from a heated oven, and most fortunate was he who could find comfort in any place. At three o’clock the thermometer stood at 110 degrees in the shade!”

The country was blasted by hot, withering winds several times in the summer of 1860: “We had on Monday last,” a Topeka newspaper reported on July 14, 1860, “the severest storm of wind ever known in this country. Its...severity, lay in its temperature, being heated almost to suffication. Penetrating every crevice, it was impossible to escape, entirely, its baleful effects.”

Those working outdoors were driven inside by blinding clouds of dust, farm animals were “completely prostrated by it,” and young shoots of fruit trees were “literally *burned* by this terrible wind.”

Although singular events, these desiccating winds were symptomatic of one of the most horrific droughts in Kansas history. The dry spell extending from September 1859 to February 1861 devastated both the Kanza Indians and their white neighbors.

Reports of dry times began to surface in the spring of 1860. “We have not during the last five years seen a Spring which was wanting in rain,” observed the March 3 *Topeka Tribune*, “but at present there seems to be a scarcity of moisture in the soil—the want of which farmers are lamenting in right good earnest.”

A week later a Lawrence paper reported “A gentleman from Butler County tells us that everything is crisp and parched there.”

Over the next few months a horror show-like drama unfolded in Kansas during which it slowly dawned on the state’s newspaper editors and public officials that an insidious, life-sucking monster was in their midst and they needed help.

The July 30 *Council Grove Press* rejoiced “Glad! Glad! We had a very fine rain last Tuesday, worth thousands to our farmers hereabouts.” While in a different column on the same page, the paper lamented: “Our farmers are yet suffering intolerably with the drouth. Not only has the wheat and oat crops been entirely ruined but from present appearances the corn will, also, be an entire failure...”

That July some Topeka citizens concluded “they were being scourged on account of their wickedness, and Wednesday last was set apart as a day of fasting and prayer to the Giver of ‘every good and perfect gift,’ for rain.”

The August 6 *Press* declared “a perfect deluge of rain here...welcomed by all. It will save some of our crops that before were roasting with the drouth.” Three weeks later the Council Grove newspaper celebrated “The copious rains for a few days past, is advancing vegetation of all kinds; of course the corn crop must to a great extent be a failure.”

By late September denial became untenable; the monster, it was reluctantly conceded, was on the loose:

“Disguise it as we may, this part of Kansas is suffering dreadfully with the drouth,” conceded the September 29 *Press*. “Nine-tenths of the settlers have exhausted their all....Crops are an entire failure—business is at a stand still—no improvements are being made,...and the people must do one of three things—have help, leave or starve.”

In February 1861, a Kansan described the previous summer:

“Then everything was parched—literally burned up for want of water. Even our largest streams were dry, and the wells almost failed. The rays of the hot sun dazzled our eyes when we gazed out on the burning and dusty prairies. The hot winds and clouds of flying dust that rolled through our streets, and over our prairies, were almost suffocating.”

“The cattle lolled out their tongues and the poor animals of all kinds sought in vain for a cool place or a refreshing draught of water from the creeks. The leaves on the forest trees were shriveled, and fell to the ground in midsummer. Everything wore an air of feverish heat.”

The drought did not discriminate on the basis of race. The Kansas’ crop of corn, on which the tribe principally depended for food in mid-summer, “is proving,” in the words of their agent Milton Dickey, “to be almost an entire failure...on account of the severe drought that is now visiting us.”

Dickey worried that the destitute Kanza “would in consequence be roving about causing more or less trouble and annoyance, beside having to undergo a great deal of suffering for the want of food.” As an antidote, the agent recommended an early annuity payment to the tribe.

An unanticipated and favorable consequence of the drought that autumn was that bison extended their range further east than normal into the margins of the tallgrass region. Some came as far as western Chase and Dickinson Counties, significantly shortening the Kansas’ journey to their hunting grounds.

Nevertheless, the Kansas’ situation remained desperate. In October Dickey purchased four beef cattle for his Indians. On March 1, 1861, he filed this report:

“Owing to the unprecedented drought of the last year and to the severity of the winter that has passed the Indians must necessarily suffer to an extent beyond description & I fear actual starvation in many instances will take place, unless assistance is rendered them early this spring.”

In early June the government distributed to the 800 Kansas 1,800 pounds of corn, five barrels of pork, and nineteen sacks of flour. This, their agent reported, “undoubtedly saved the tribe from the horrors of famine, or from supplying their wants by unlawful means.”

Meanwhile, the Kansas were not the only ones in desperate need of assistance.

Area farmers had not gone down without a fight. When it was clear their wheat crop had failed, they plowed it up and planted corn. When this crop withered, they re-plowed and planted buckwheat. This too perished, yet another plowing ensued, and turnip seeds broadcast, but the dust yielded no turnips.

By late summer desperate Kansans were writing to eastern newspapers and philanthropists describing the appalling conditions on the Kansas frontier and begging for relief.

At first, Kansas editors were indignant. “The people repudiate, utterly, any such idea as begging, for the means of support from their Eastern friends,” declared the *Emporia News*. “Those who make such appeals do not represent the real sentiment of the people of Kansas, and belong to that class who ought to have remained at home tied to the apron strings of their mothers...”

As organs of the boomer spirit, newspapers were especially galled by the letter writers: “...one thing is certain, that they are inflicting upon Kansas a more lasting injury than all the border-ruffianism which overran the Territory. They are not only frightening away thousands of timid settlers, but are keeping away thousands who would otherwise come here to settle,” thundered the *News*.

“The fact is,” declared the *Topeka Tribune* on September 8, “we as a people are entirely competent to take care of and provide for ourselves.”

This they could not do. Prominent citizens on an investigative tour of Kansas confirmed the desperate plight of the settlers. In the autumn a Territorial Relief Committee was formed to address the “Kansas famine.”

“No one at a distance can form any idea of the actual condition of things here,” reported the *Council Grove Press* in early November. “Those who could, many of them, have left the county to winter; others cannot leave, but by making sacrifices of property, can live until next year. But a large number have raised nothing, and have no means to buy with; and unless they have help, and that soon, they must starve.”

Contributions of provisions and money poured in from the east. From November 14, 1860 to March 15, 1861, Morris County received 62,180 pounds of donated food and clothing.

Determining the county’s per capita distribution is difficult. In August 1860, the census counted 694 residents of Morris County. By the winter a significant percentage had left. Some residents did not need

assistance. Those who did and remained in the county probably received 150 to 200 pounds of provisions per person. These contributions undoubtedly saved many settlers from destitution and helped to stabilize the county's population.

Conversely, we can provide a rough estimate of relief the U.S. government provided to the Kanza: four beef cattle weighing 2,843 pounds, 1,800 pounds of corn, 1,900 pounds of flour (19 sacks), and 1,000 pounds in five pork barrels totaling 7,543 pounds. This amount distributed to 800 Kanza equates to 9.4 pounds of food per capita. There is no record of donated clothing.

Snowfall in the winter of 1860-61 was heavy. On February 8 warm weather set in, followed by heavy rains. The snow rapidly melted and the *Council Grove Press* was delirious: "The Neosho at the foot of Main street was fully capable of floating a seventy-four gunship. In all our uneventful life, high water had not such a pleasing effect upon our feelings."

SOURCES: *Emporia News*, 8-18-'60, 9-22-'60, 12-22-'60, 2-16-'61; *Kansas State Record* (Topeka), 7-14-'60, 10-6-'60; *Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*, Elliott West, 327; *Topeka Tribune*, 3-3-'60, 7-14-'60, 9-29-'60, 11-10-'60; *Lawrence Republican*, 3-22-'60, 8-30-'60; *Letters Received from the Kansas Agency to the Office of Indian Affairs, 1856-61*, 7-27-'60, 3-1-'61, 6-13-'61; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1860*, 337; *ARCIA, 1861*, 666; *Hunting and Trading on the Great Plains, 1859-1875*, James R. Mead, 80; "Economic Relief in Territorial Kansas, 1860-1861," Joseph G. Gambone, *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, (Summer, 1970), 150, 151, 173; "The Drought of 1860," George W. Glick, *Kansas Historical Collections*, Volume 9, 484; *Western Prices Before 1861: A Study of the Cincinnati Market*, Thomas Senior Berry, 154. (courtesy of foodtimeline.org).

