

## The Kaw Reservation 150 Years Ago

By Ron Parks

April 20, 2010

*This is the 21<sup>st</sup> in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kaw Indians and the Council Grove area 150 years ago.*

### Mere Intruders upon Their Soil

One hundred fifty years ago the fledgling town of Emporia, located seven miles south of the southeast corner of the Kaw Reservation, received visits by two groups indigenous to the Flint Hills.

“A party of ten or twelve Kaw ‘braves,’ gaudily dressed, and mounted on fleet ponies, came in from the west on Thursday morning,” noted the April 14 *Emporia News*. “After spending a few moments in town, a cloud of dust to the east marked their departure towards the land of the Osages.”

“A drove of antelope have been making ‘calls’ in the upper part of town for several mornings past,” reported the April 28, 1860 *News*. “One of our sporting friends, unable to resist so strong a temptation, fired into the drove the other morning, and probably they will not be seen again this season. The same herd has made its appearance on the same spot for three springs past.”

The Kaws had hunted antelope—biologists now call them *pronghorns*--in the Flint Hills for at least two hundred years before the founding of Emporia in 1857. When government officials persuaded the tribe to locate their reservation in the upper Neosho valley in spring 1848, one of their selling points was that game was still relatively abundant in this land of upland prairies and well-timbered streams.

And although at least ten generations of Kaws and about 600 generations of “Indians” could claim a 12,000-thousand-year presence here, humans are, compared to antelopes, but recently arrived.

“The pronghorn is a purely North American evolutionary product,” wrote author and scientist Paul Johnsgard. The ancestry of this mammal can be traced back through the fossil record on this continent 20 million years. Upstart bison, in contrast, evolved from Siberian ancestors a mere three hundred thousand years ago.

A smattering of facts about this remarkable species:

--It is the only living member of its family in the world.

--When it encounters a fence a Pronghorn will usually crawl under it.

--It was as numerous as bison in early historic time with population estimates of 40 to 50 million.

--Its vision is comparable to eight-power binoculars, allowing it to see a small object in motion four miles away.

--For distances beyond a few hundred yards, it is the fastest land mammal in the world, sprinting as fast as 60 mph and sustaining a speed of 30 mph for miles.

--It prefers living in the open wind-swept ranges of the western half of America. The Flint Hills were close to the eastern extent of its pre-European settlement distribution.

When explorer Zebulon Pike came to present Chase County in September 1806, he "stood on a hill, and in one view below me saw buffalo, elk, deer, cabrie [the French word for pronghorn antelope], and panthers." Rivals of the Kaws, the Osage and Pawnee Indians accompanying his party informed Pike "it was the Kans' [Kaws'] hunting-ground, therefore they would destroy all the game they possibly could."

Josiah Gregg, who traveled the Santa Fe road in the 1830s, noted "the antelope of the high prairies...is sometimes found as far east as Council Grove....The antelope is most remarkable for its fleetness; not bounding like the deer, but skimming over the ground as though upon skates. The fastest horse will rarely overtake them."

Scientist John Kirk Townsend's description of antelopes he first encountered near the Big Blue River in 1834 reflects an aesthetic appreciation the animal often induced in sensitive observers:

"The latter [antelope] is one of the most beautiful animals I ever saw. When full grown, it is nearly as large as a deer. The horns are rather short, with a single prong near the top...The ears are very delicate, almost as thin as paper.... The legs are remarkably light and beautifully formed, and as it bounds over the plains, it seems scarcely to touch the ground, so exceedingly light and agile are its motions."

Traveling the trail in 1846, Susan Shelby Magoffin encountered "a timid though curious antelope" near Bluff Creek, twelve miles east of Council Grove. "It did not run, but all curious as we were about it at first, to know what great objects we were coming toward it, it advanced to its own destruction, poor creature."

The Antelopes' habit of lingering near objects of its interest was put to good advantage by Clark's Creek settler John Warneke, who "crawled on hands and knees to get close enough for a good shot. To lull the antelope every little distance he would raise a foot and leg in the guise of an antelope head until he was close enough to make a kill."

Josiah Gregg wrote of the same fatal tendency: "Meeting a stranger, they seem loth to leave him until they have fully found him out. They will often take a circuit around the object of their curiosity, usually approaching nearer and nearer until within rifle-shot, frequently stopping to gaze."

Gregg dismissed the palatability of antelope meat as "like that of the goat, rather coarse, and but little esteemed." Others disagreed.

Encamped near the confluence of the Saline and Smoky Hill rivers in October 1853, Solomon Carvalho observed Indians preparing antelope meat:

“The Indians...bring out straight green sticks, the size of a small walking-cane, and proceed to divest them of their outer peeling—also pointing them at both ends.---The stick is then inserted in the meat, one end of the stick is then stuck in the ground, near the fire, and the process of roasting is complete....I think it is the most preferable way to cook game. The breast of a fat antelope prepared thus is a most fitting dish for a hungry man.”

Five years later another traveler on the Smoky Hill river, C. H. Gran, met “wolves, antelopes, and for the first time on our road, met a buffalo” in the uplands a few miles west of Fort Riley.

“All these animals acted as though they were masters, and we mere intruders upon their soil; especially the symmetrical and graceful antelope, which would graze very quietly, sheep-like, within a very short distance of us, on these rich, heaven-bound prairies.”

Meanwhile, however, forty miles to the southeast trouble was brewing on the Kaw Reservation. Increased traffic on the Santa Fe Trail and reservation encroachment by white squatters were taking a toll on the game of the upper Neosho.

Speaking to government officials in Washington D.C. on July 22, 1857, Kaw chief Hard Hart proclaimed: “There used to be plenty of game in our country, but there is none, and my children must do something else, besides hunting, to live.”

It would get worse.

“There is no game on the Reservation and not one single means of support left them,” reported Kaw agent E. S. Stover on May 14, 1868. “They now are surrounded on every side with white settlers....the government must furnish subsistence or many of them must starve.”

Stover’s assessment was borne out by the statement of Cheyenne chief Little Robe, leader of a war party who came to the Kaw reservation in June 1868 “for the purpose of striking the Kaws.” The Cheyennes “found the country entirely devoid of game and that the consequences was that they were very hungry...therefore they killed seven head of cattle belonging to the whites.”

“You know our condition,” wrote Kaw chiefs Allegawaho, Wahshungah, and Nopawia in a July 14, 1870 letter to a member of Congress. “The game is all out of the country and we are hard pressed to provide our subsistence.”

As the post-Civil War settlement boom spread rapidly westward into central Kansas, the fortunes of both Kaws and antelopes spiraled downward.

In 1868 “19 antelope in one bunch” were sighted on the divide between the Whitewater and the West Branch in northwest Butler County. But by 1871 Kansas naturalist J. A. Allen reported antelope, though still common in central and western Kansas, had receded from their former range in eastern Kansas.

It is likely, then, when the Kaws were removed to Indian Territory in June 1873, antelope had been extirpated from the Flint Hills.

Their numbers in Kansas continued to decline. In 1912, the only antelopes reported in Kansas were three sighted in Stanton County. A 1925 census reported a band of eight in Morton County. The species was considered nearly extinct in Kansas from the 1930s through the early 50s.

A July 1962 Kansas Fish and Game Commission survey counted 37 pronghorn in Wallace and Sherman counties. Restocking programs ensued, and today slightly fewer than 2,000 antelope live in Kansas, most in the far western counties.

Nationally, their numbers declined to 12,000 by 1915. Today there are about one million pronghorn, most living in Montana and Wyoming.

In 1979, 98 pronghorn were released in Chase County. However, efforts to reestablish a viable population in the Flint Hills failed.

---

SOURCES: *Emporia News*, 4-14, 4-28, 1860; *Prairie Dog Empire*, Paul Johnsgard, p. 80; Great Plains Nature Center, Wichita, [www.gpnc.org](http://www.gpnc.org); *Sportsman's Guide to Game Animals*, Leonard Lee Rue III, p. 526; "Pike in the Kansas Flint Hills, 1806," Leo Oliva, *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal 2009*, p. 37; *Commerce of the Prairies*, Gregg, pp. 15, 147; "Pronghorn on the Santa Fe Trail," Phyllis S. Morgan, *Wagon Tracks* (August 2002), pp. 6-8; *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River*, Townsend, pp. 45-46; *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*, Magoffin, p. 15; *Warneke Stories*, unpublished manuscript compiled by descendents of John and Barbara Warneke, (courtesy of Ken and Shirley McClintock); *Incidents of Travels*, Carvalho, p. 34; *Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence), 5-22-1858; *Letters Received from the Kansas Agency to the Office of Indian Affairs, 1856-'61; 1865-'68, 1869-'71*; *Butler County's Eighty Years*, Jessie Perry Stratford, p. 41; "Historical Biogeography of the Pronghorn in Kansas," Mark Sexson and Jerry Choate, *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Sciences*, 1981, pp. 128-133.