

## **The Kanza Reservation 150 Years Ago**

**By Ron Parks**

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*This is the 22<sup>nd</sup> in a series of monthly articles by Ron Parks about the Kaw Indians and the Council Grove area 150 years ago.*

### Speaks Volumes for the Future

One hundred fifty years ago Council Grove was a bustling commercial center for the New Mexico trade. From April 24 to June 24 “there passed the Grove” en route to Santa Fe 1,400 wagons, 372 horses, 3,868 mules, 11,705 oxen, and 65 carriages bearing 3,562 tons (7,000,000 lbs.) of freight.

But in May 1860, Colorado rather than New Mexico was the primary destination of most of the traffic on the Santa Fe Road and, rather than commercial operators, most of the travelers were emigrants.

“Pike’s Peak emigration through Council Grove is now numbering about fifty wagons a day,” observed the May 14 *Council Grove Press*. Two weeks earlier on a single day over 150 wagons bound for Pike’s Peak had passed through Council Grove.

The editor of the *Press* proudly described Council Grove in the April 30 issue: “Walking up street the other day, we noticed five or six wagons of Pike’s Peakers fitting out at each of our stores. Just then a new Mexican train of some thirty wagons, 40 men, and over 200 mules came in from the West, and another outgoing train about the same size, came in from the East.”

“Our streets were a perfect jam. It was truly a great sight, and speaks volumes for the future of our place. This is almost an every-day occurrence here, and is worth a trip up from Emporia or Americus just to witness it.”

The discovery of gold in July 1858 in the vicinity of Cherry Creek 30 miles west of the future site of Denver was a transforming event not only for the Rocky Mountain front-range region but for the central plains as well. The first massive wave of emigration to the gold fields had come in 1859. During that year over one hundred thousand people journeyed across the plains en route to the Colorado diggings.

Many traveled along the Platte River Road through Nebraska. But new trails popped up in the central and northern regions of Kansas heretofore relatively untrammelled by white people. The shorter but dangerous Smoky Hill Trail, short-lived Leavenworth and Pike’s Peak stage line, and Parallel Road all had their champions as the best routes to the gold fields.

The thousands who followed the well-established Santa Fe Road were still over five hundred miles short of their destination when they passed through Council Grove.

Few of these travelers kept diaries. One who did, Charles C. Post, described Council Grove on May 22, 1859, as “the last point where supplies can be had and there is everything here that a man wants if he has got money enough to buy it with.”

He also jotted down a typically contemptuous description of the Kaw Indians:

“Here is the Kansas tribe Indian reservation. They are very numerous here, numbering in all about one thousand. Some of them are becoming a very little civilized, but most of them are mean, lazy devils....We went to bed tonight and were lulled to sleep by the howls of wolves and yells of Indians, which is the only use or good or hurt they can be put to or do.”

At the time the Kaws, as all the central plains tribes, were reeling from the “ripple effect” of the gold rush.

Only two years earlier the Arapaho and Cheyenne occupied long-established winter villages in the gold field region almost undisturbed by white presence. Now these tribes were forced to relocate their winter camps east onto the plains, especially in the valleys of the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers, presumed remote from the transportation routes of the white invaders.

But the massive influx of white emigration, combined with the long-standing impacts of Indian pony herds and bison hunting for the robe trade, degraded the plains environment, much to the Indians’ despair. Buffalo herds diminished, prairies were overgrazed, streams stripped of their timber, white hunters and trappers appeared in places previously considered inviolate, and there were the new trails to contend with.

Some of the younger Indians, especially Cheyennes, responded to these threats with militancy, their aggression aimed not only at white intruders but other tribes competing for the dwindling supply of game. Prominent among the latter were the Kaws, who for many years had hunted bison and other game in what was soon to become central Kansas.

Between 1859 and 1868, the Cheyenne were the scourge of the Kaws. “Agent Milton Dickey reported in February 1860 the Kaws were “not able to cope with the wild Indians on the plains and by hunting obtain their living.” This led to the tribe being, in Dickey’s words, “in such a destitute condition in this season of the year.”

The devastating consequences their massive emigration visited on the Indians was of no concern to Post and his company of Pikes Peakers as they pushed on through Council Grove heading west. Although Post traveled with a well-organized train moving overland by ox-drawn wagons, the modes of conveyance of the gold-seekers varied considerably.

“Emigration to Pike’s Peak is on the increase,” reported a Council Grove observer on March 19, 1859. “...some with teams, some with hand-carts; while others are on foot with their packs on their backs. They seem to be in such a hurry they can scarcely stop to light their pipes.”

A week later “a wonderful outfit entered our town, en route for the Peak, consisting of seven men with a small cart drawn by a young bull...They left their team however, here, thinking they could travel faster, propelling their cart with about twelve hundred pounds load, themselves. There was one independent man in their company, carrying his outfit, amounting to a hundred and fifty pounds, on a wheelbarrow.”

During one day in 1859, 325 vehicles bound for the gold mines crossed the ford on Elm Creek east of Wilmington (in western Osage County). By early May a reported 400 to 500 wagons per day were passing Diamond Springs headed for Pike’s Peak.

These emigrants and their animals impacted the plains environment. In May 1860 a traveler near Turkey Creek “found grass along the Santa Fe road eaten off close by the numerous trains that have passed over it to and from Santa Fe and Pike’s Peak.” A couple days later, he reported from Cow Creek “a number of Pike’s Peakers resting their teams and engaged in killing buffaloes.”

A high percentage of these 1859-60 gold seekers failed to find their fortunes in Colorado. Thousands returned east over the same trails after having “busted” in Colorado.

“THE PIKE’S PEAK EMIGRANTS are RETURNING BY THOUSANDS,” headlined a June 1859 *Kansas Press* article written like a screenwriter’s script for a Hollywood spectacular. “*In fact, a perfect panic has seized the whole emigration...*”

“As we approached Council Grove...we were in full view of the Great Santa Fee Road, and it was literally lined with returning Pike’s Peakers. Hurrying into town, we found it jammed full of men, women, and children; WITHIN ONE HOUR, WE COUNTED OVER ONE HUNDRED WAGONS ON THEIR RETURN.”

“A month ago, with joyful countenances, and bright hopes for the future, they left all, and set out for this ‘*Modern Ophir!*’ But now, with dejected countenances, some of them the very picture of despair, are returning to their homes, *one half of whom are ruined men.* [Caps., spellings, italics original.]

“About half who started the trip turned around along the way or after only a brief stay on Cherry Creek,” wrote Elliott West, author of *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado.*

But the Colorado mines did produce gold and wealth for some. Between \$200,000 and \$500,000 in gold was taken out in 1859, at least one million in 1860, and five million in 1861.

One of Council Grove’s enterprising sons found success in the Colorado mines. An employee of Seth Hays and keeper of the town’s first hotel, Charles Gilkey and friend J. W. Ratliff set out for Pike’s Peak in March 1860. By July it was reported locally that Gilkey had already made over \$5,000.

Beyond its financial output, the Colorado gold rush transformed the way Euro Americans understood the central plains they had traversed and their vision of this region’s future. Elliott West articulated the shift of white people reimagining the plains:

“The new developments demanded a continuous current of commerce and supply between the Missouri ports and the mountains. When people in the East looked toward the Rockies, the plains

appeared less like a place to suffer and pass through. Suddenly that land seemed the middle ground of an economic whole, a vital membrane of exchange.”

By October 1860 the population of the Pike’s Peak region was estimated at about 95,000. The population of Kansas Territory as defined by the Wyandotte Constitution (today’s boundaries) was 109,421.

But the far-reaching impact of the gold rush on Council Grove is more difficult to measure. It clearly put money in the merchants’ pockets, prompted newspaper bombast about the town’s prospects, and created extraordinary scenes of frenzied commercial activity on Council Grove’s main street.

Measured by basic demographic indicators, however, town growth was negligible. The government surveyor reported in January 1861, Council Grove “contained about thirty houses and 130 inhabitants,” numbers unequal to the “volumes for the future” prophesied by the *Council Grove Press*.

SOURCES: *Kansas State Record* (Topeka), 7-28-’60; *Kansas Press* (Cottonwood Falls), 5-30-’59, 6-13-’59; *Kansas Press* (Council Grove), 4-30-’60, 5-14-’60; *To the Pike’s Peak Gold Fields, 1859*, edited by Leroy R. Hafen, p. 33; *Emporia News*, 3-26-’59; 4-2-’59, 6-2-’60, 7-14-’60; “Early Settlement of Dragoon Creek,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, Vol. 13, p. 351; West, pp. 175, 178, 179, 192, 232; *The Old Santa Fe Trail from the Missouri River*, Dean Earl Wood, p. 226; *Topeka Tribune*, 10-27-’60; *Letters Received from Kansas Agency to Office of Indian Affairs, 1856-’61*; Kansas Society of Land Surveyors, Disk # 23.