

The Kansas One Hundred Fifty Years Ago

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By Ron Parks

Kanza Agent Montgomery and Westport

On the first day of autumn, 1858, the agent for the Kanza tribe, 23-year-old John Montgomery, left his Council Grove home to begin a 450-mile journey east to Saint Louis. Here on October 2 he would pick up \$9,780.28 in silver and gold coins, carefully packed in “five specie sacks and two specie boxes,” the term “specie” referring to coinage. On October 15 Montgomery would be back in Council Grove, preparing to distribute \$8,000.00 of this money to the Kanza Indians in payments known as “annuities.”

Montgomery began his journey east on the much-traveled trade and supply route known 150 years ago as the Santa Fe Road, since morphed into the modern “Santa Fe Trail.” The first night out from Council Grove, he stayed on 142-Mile Creek (near present Allen) in the comfortable home of his wife’s parents, Charles and Dorinda Withington.¹

John Montgomery and Mary Ellen Withington married on December 17, 1856, about one month after Mary Ellen’s 15th birthday. In September 1858, Mary Ellen was either carrying Montgomery’s child or nursing an infant, for the June 1860 census lists their daughter, one-year-old Mary Ellen Montgomery.

Montgomery left the Withington residence on September 22, charging the U.S. government \$1.00 for lodging and fifty cents for dinner, and proceeded east in the company of his 14-year-old brother-in-law, George Edward Withington, who was paid \$9.00 to provide conveyance for the Indian agent to Westport, Missouri.²

John and George spent the night of September 22 in a cabin about fifty miles from Council Grove at the station of McGee and Stand near the crossing of 110-Mile Creek. Here they paid the customary \$1.00 lodging and fifty cents dinner fees. The station’s owner, Fry P. McGee, was a slave owner, and during the “Bleeding Kansas” period he was a notorious partisan of the pro-slavery forces.

Although the Kanza agent’s views on the slavery question remain somewhat obscure, inferences on this question can be made. For one, he was a native of Tennessee, a slave state. And he was appointed as Kanza agent in 1855 by the administration of President Franklin B. Pierce, a pro-slavery Democrat. Finally, in October, 1858, A. I. Baker reported that Montgomery had “...damned the people as a set of Abolitionists, and said that he would...drive them from the country.”³

On September 23 the young men paid \$1.50 each for lodging and dining at Bull Creek, some 30 miles east of 110-Mile crossing. Later that day, after logging another 23 miles on the Santa Fe Road, they arrived at Westport, located in present Kansas City, Missouri, some six miles south of the Missouri River.

In 1858, Westport was a thriving trade center with a population of about 2,000. It was the eastern portal to three overland trails: the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California. Merchants and tradesmen prospered by outfitting wagon trains preparing to travel these trails. But the primary reason for the town's prosperity was the Indian trade.

In the 1830s and 1840s it was the policy of the federal government to relocate tribes from their homelands in the East to reservations in "Indian Country," lands in present eastern Kansas and Oklahoma. Since the inception of Westport in 1843, members of neighboring emigrant tribes, and the native Kanza and Osage, were frequent visitors.

In 1846, historian Francis Parkman observed:

"Westport was full of Indians, whose little shaggy ponies were tied by dozens along the houses and fences. Sacs and Foxes, with shaved heads and painted faces, Shawanoes and Delawares, fluttering in calico frocks and turbans, Wyandots dressed like white men, and a few wretched Kansas wrapped in old blankets, were strolling about the streets, or lounging in and out of the shops and houses."⁴

Not only did Indians spend their annuity money in Westport, they also channeled a great number of animal peltry there, most prominently buffalo robes. In 1858, the Kansas supplied Council Grove traders Hays, Conn, Hill & Company 1,800 robes worth four dollars each. The Council Grove merchants shipped these hides to Westport, where they were taken to the Missouri River, to be carried east by steamboat for processing and marketing.⁵

Both economically and culturally, Westport was Council Grove's parent. Separated by 120 miles on the Santa Fe Road, both towns were centers for overland trail outfitting and the Indian trade. Westport merchants Albert Gallatin Boone, Cyprien Chouteau, and Joseph Chick established the earliest and most dominant commercial operations in Council Grove. From 1846 through the Civil War, newspaper references to Council Grove merchants "going to the river" meant trips to Westport to pick up their goods. And Westport's pro-slavery, border-state sensibility became Council Grove's conventional wisdom.

John Montgomery stayed one night in Westport's Harris House Hotel, a three-story brick building famous for its hospitality and cuisine. The next day he took a hack stage from Westport to Kansas City for fifty cents, dined in Kansas City for fifty cents, then on September 28 he paid

a fare of \$12.00 and boarded the steamboat “Peerless” for a five-day journey down the Missouri River to St. Louis.⁶

One can imagine the youthful Indian agent sitting on the deck of the “Peerless,” gazing at the great comet—some newspapers called it the “comet of the century”—that in late September shone brightly above the western horizon. This river trip to St. Louis must have seemed like a holiday from the difficulties he left behind back at the reservation. There the Kansas awaited the return of their agent and the distribution of annuities, after which they would journey to central Kansas on the tribe’s annual winter bison hunt.

1. Montgomery’s First Quarter Report, 1859. *Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, Kansas Agency*.
2. Don Schiesser of Allen, Kansas, generously provided background information about the Withingtons and John Montgomery.
3. *Kansas News*, (Emporia), October 16, 1858.
4. Francis Parkman, Jr., *The Oregon Trail* (New York, Putnam, 1849), p. 40.
5. *Border-Star* (Westport), February 11, 1859.
6. Montgomery’s Fourth Quarter Report, 1858. *Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, Kansas Agency*.