

Council Grove 150 Years Ago

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By Ron Parks

### The Silence Was Too Much for Us

“Desperately determined to do something desperate,” Arthur Inghram Baker went for a walk in Council Grove one February night 150 years ago. He climbed a steep ridge he called Fountain Hill, today’s Belfry Hill, looming high over the west side of the Neosho River Valley. It was “cold as blue Blixen,—it was cloudy, too, and dark.”

Standing there alone in the night, Baker felt disconsolate. In January he had become editor and publisher of the *Council Grove Press*, but his start in the newspaper business had been hampered by the vicissitudes of Kansas weather. During the previous four weeks one snowstorm after another had swept through. Emporia reported two feet of snow. Travel on both the Santa Fe and Fort Scott roads, Council Grove’s lifelines to the outside world, was impossible.

“The Fort Scott and Butler mail has failed again this week, those mails have been brought here but once in thirty-two mortal days, wrote Baker. “The mails don’t come according to law, and our exchanges in consequence don’t get here.”

Seeking solace, Baker “climbed up Fountain Hill near the ledge, . . . and from thence contemplated, we did.” Not long after taking up his lonely vigil, Baker concluded: “The silence was too much for us,” and began his retreat down the steep slope.

The quality of silence Arthur Baker experienced that winter night on Belfry Hill would be unimaginable today. In fact, most sensory experience in the 1861 Council Grove—a village of 30 houses and about 130 people--would have been radically different from ours.

The rhythmic “chock-chock-chock” of a procrastinate woodcutter’s axe on wood, a creak of iron wheels marking the slow passage of a wagon along a snowy road, a dog’s bark, an occasional whiff of wood-smoke, these might have drifted up from the valley. Perhaps down low among the houses he detected a gleam of lamp-glow cast through a window, over there a flickering light signaled a trip to the wood pile, or maybe the outhouse.

More likely Baker stood unseeing and still, helpless in the relentless grip of a black, cloud-wrapped night.

At the time most of the inhabitants of Morris County, population 775, lived in log huts tucked out of sight in the timbered margins of streams. A few miles southeast along the Neosho, about 800 Kanza Indians were hunkered down in their lodges.

If he turned west and peered into the darkness, Arthur Baker could imagine the vast prairie wilderness stretched out all the way to the mining towns at the foot of the Rockies. Come spring, wagon trains

would once again roll out across the road to Santa Fe. Soon emigrants would come, lands settled, prairie tilled, the land transformed.

But for now all that was but a distant dream, and Arthur Baker confronted the isolation and loneliness of a snowbound village on the Kansas frontier.

Baker was no stranger to the rigors of pioneer existence. He had come to Kansas in 1846, settling in today's Franklin County as the government-appointed blacksmith for the Sac and Fox Indians. In 1854, he relocated eight miles east of Council Grove on the Santa Fe Road crossing of Rock Creek.

Here he took up farming as well as being an attorney, postmaster, slave owner, probate judge, storekeeper, hotel proprietor, land agent, town promoter, homebuilder, county fair organizer, and politician.

Conflict and inconsistency dogged Baker's political career. He was an advocate for both the proslavery and free-state causes, a member of both the Republican and Democratic parties. He led the losing side of a lengthy and bitter Americus-Emporia county seat fight that in November 1860 was resolved in Emporia's favor.

About three weeks after his Belfry Hill vigil, his wife, Susan, died of pulmonary failure. He continued to operate the Council Grove newspaper through October, 1861. That autumn he joined the Confederate army, was arrested as a secessionist, but released from a Fort Scott prison when the charges against him were mysteriously dropped.

He returned to his Rock Creek home, where soon he incurred the wrath of his neighbors, the Anderson family. On May 11, 1862, he shot and killed in self-defense "Old Bill" Anderson at Baker's home. Two days later he remarried. Early in July, Anderson's sons, Jim and "Bloody Bill," murdered Baker and burned his house.

He lived a tempestuous life. Considered by his enemies as an unprincipled political chameleon, one of his contemporary friends described Arthur Baker as "a bold, rough, open-handed, large-hearted man, a warm friend and an open foe; a TRUE TYPE OF THE PIONEERS of the border."

The psyches of the generations that had settled America was the subject of a letter written in the 1920s by novelist Sherwood Anderson: "Is it not likely that when this country was new and men were often alone in the fields and the forest they got a sense of bigness outside themselves that has now been lost?" Anderson wrote. "I can remember old fellows in my home town speaking feelingly of an evening spent on the big empty plains. It had taken the shrillness out of them. They had learned the trick of quiet."

Although a frontiersman, Arthur Baker found "the trick of quiet" elusive. He was naturally a gregarious man, prone to personal and political agitation, not solitude.

The silence had been too much and he was tired, but as he descended Belfry Hill that February night, Baker felt “somewhat mollified and ameliorated.” Then, suddenly, his fleeting experience of the sublime turned into slapstick comedy.

His “delightful reverie was broken in upon” by “dorgs,” thirteen canine whelps “composed of all the canine species, from the butchers bull, down to the snarling fist.” They came on him “like a pack of hungry wolves.” Frightened, he began to run, “which seemed to aggravate and madden ‘em more.”

In desperate flight, he struck his leg against a saw log near Aiken’s mill, “tore our pants, and crippled ourself to a considerable extent.”

“Henceforth,” he warned, “‘Dorgs’ had better be chained up, or we may hurt ‘em. We will give five cents apiece for ‘Dorg’ scalps.”

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SOURCES: *Council Grove Press*, 2-16-1861; Survey Notes, January 1861, Kansas Society of Land Surveyors, Compact Disk # 23, Range 8 to 9 East (DWIGI, Leavenworth); Federal Census of 1860, Morris County, available on microfilm at Council Grove Public Library; William Michael Shimeall, “Arthur Inghram Baker: Frontier Kansan” (master’s thesis, Emporia State University, 1978); Sherwood quote from Tony Hiss, “Introduction,” *The Experience of Place: A New Way of Looking at and Dealing with Our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside* (New York: Random House, 1990): XV.