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CHIEF WASHUNGA
Wade Parsons

The Kanza: Travelers on a Hard Trail

Before the famous adventurers Lewis and Clark had returned to St. Louis from their exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, another expedition was already deep into the American wilderness. On September 12, 1806, the small command of U.S. Army Lt. Zebulon Pike expedition advanced under a shadow of international intrigue and treason.



Pike's commander, General Wilkinson, was a known double agent who along with Aaron Burr was involved in a conspiracy against the United States. Lt. Pike seemed unaware of their intentions but understood an "unofficial" part of his mission was to gather intelligence about Spanish controlled territory. Other goals included the return of 51 Osage, who had been captives of the Potawatomies, the negotiation of peace

among the Kanza, Pawnee, and Osage, plus establishing relations with the Comanche tribe.

From the hills east of his camp, Pike viewed a verdant grassland and wooded river valley filled with wildlife. Even though no white man's cabin would appear in Chase County for almost 50 years, severe changes soon impacted the native populations along his path. Pike was unaware of the many cultures that once inhabited this place. His





WOLF ROBE
Wade Parsons

Osage guides knew they were in Kanza territory and wanted to slaughter all visible game to hinder their distant kin. The Kanza were recent arrivals who told of an ancient migration down the Ohio River valley. During that journey a large body of Dhegihan Sioux split into the Quapaw, Omaha, Ponca, Osage, and Kanza nations which scattered into several major river systems. The Kanza traveled up the Missouri River and established a dominant presence as they moved west. In 1673 Marquette

made the first mapped record of the Kanza, and Etienne de Bourgmond visited the tribe on the Kansas River in 1724. In 1796 the Kanza had resettled up the Kansas River east of Manhattan, Kansas. These migrations occurred to avoid aggressive eastern tribes, epidemics, environmental depletion, and to improve economic opportunities. The Kanza now claimed use of a territory extending from Kansas City, west up the Smoky Hill and down to the Great Bend of the Arkansas River. They also roamed south to the upper Neosho River and north into Nebraska. The Kanza were formidable warriors and fought all neighboring tribes. They also occupied strategic trade routes and shrewdly exploited the rivalries among England, France, Spain, and the U.S. The world powers knew that allies like the Kanza were necessary to control trade. In spite of those advantages, the Kanza would soon struggle under the weight of civilization.

Beginning in the 1820's the Kanza

began to see their 20 million-acre domain across the northern half of Kansas rapidly reduced. By 1846 various treaties had shrunk their reservation to 2 million acres which the government now demanded they sell for less than 11 cents an acre. Indian Superintendent T. Harvey bragged to his superiors that, "in five days he could work out a new deal with the degenerate and docile Kaws." By 1847 the tribe was relocated on a 250,000-acre reservation promised to their use "forever" at Council Grove. Another forced reduction of the Kanza reservation was set in motion when it was realized the town of Council Grove sat within the reservation and 30 white families had established homesteads on Kanza land. Pressure for more land cession came from settlers, merchants, railroad promoters, and the U.S. Government. By 1859 the tribe was restricted to 80,000 acres of the reservation's poorest land. The Kanza had survived numerous tribal enemies, disease, loss of territory, dishonest

traders, whiskey, and cultural erosion. Now they were facing an adversary that was never far away, crippling starvation. Between the years of 1848 to 1860, the Kanza population plunged from 1600 to 800 people. In 1861 Kanza men were forced to serve as troops in the Union Army, risking the loss of their vital young men. In spite of their sacrifices in the Union Army, the Kanza were forbidden in 1864 from hunting on the plains. They were warned that if found they would be attacked by the very army they had served.

A drought that summer virtually destroyed Kanza crops leaving them destitute. The fall hunt was necessary for their well-being, but that year there would be no journey down the Kaw Trail to the bison herds. One map shows branches of that trail passing through Chase and continuing west into Marion County or south toward El-Dorado.

In December of 1866, the Kanza were allowed to hunt and camped near Great Bend. A group of Cheyenne

visited the Kanza, initiating a friendly discussion about the strained relations between them. It appeared an agreeable understanding had been reached, and the Cheyenne departed. While still within sight of the camp, the Cheyenne killed and scalped a lone Kanza herder and then stole his horses. The infuriated Kanza engaged the Cheyenne in a four-hour battle. Fourteen Cheyenne and two Kanza lay dead with many wounded on both sides. The Cheyenne rushed to their village for reinforcements while the Kanza fled back to their reservation. About 60 Kanza died from hunger and exposure during this retreat across the frozen prairie. Unable to hunt, the Kanza were completely dependent on annuities or the credit of merchants.

In June 1868 wildly exaggerated reports of Indians on the warpath swept eastward like a prairie fire. This would be one of the biggest Indian scares to ever occur in Kansas. Many settlers in Marion, Chase, and Lyon counties abandoned their homesteads and banded

together for protection. The Southern Cheyenne were advancing toward Council Grove to exact revenge on the Kanza and take whatever supplies they wanted from homesteads along their path. When the battle began, spectators watched from the surrounding hilltops. In the audience was a very young Charles Curtis, who in 1924 became



FOOL BULL
Wade Parsons

the first and only Native American to become Vice President of the United States. The Kanza fired from behind cover, but the Cheyenne wanted a fight on horseback. Lead and insults flew during a four hour skirmish with no fatalities to either tribe. Satisfied that their honor had been restored, the Cheyenne returned to the plains.

The dust from this incident had barely settled when merchants spread rumors about more marauding Indians. This believable lie was intended to keep the Kanza near Council Grove and dependent on white merchants who would then hand the government a bill for the credited goods. In the early 1870's hundreds of squatters settled on Kanza land. No one listened to the Kanza objections against this illegal activity. In 1872 the government told the tribe they were to be moved to yet another reservation in Oklahoma. Chief Al-le-ga-wa-ho in protest said, "You whites treat the Kon-zey like a flock of turkeys; you chase us from one stream,

then to another stream... soon you will chase us over the mountains and into the ocean."

Two hundred years after French explorers first documented their existence, the Kanza began their last journey to a 100,000-acre reservation just south of the Kansas border in Indian Territory. From that time forward the direction of the tribe would be determined by the currents of white civilization. In spite of the havoc wreaked upon their culture by nature and humanity, the Kanza endured. After an absence of 130 years, the tribe purchased 160 acres near Council Grove where they plan to develop an educational visitors' center.

Wade Parsons grew up on the Tallgrass Prairie and is a former teacher in USD 259. A talented artist and writer, Wade now combines those talents by working as an archaeologist in the plains, deserts, and mountains of the American West. He has written two articles for this publication and done many of the drawings.

NOTES





The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night

I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.

Carl Sandburg