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The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

The Kaw Nation

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Kaw Beaded Awl Holder
Kansas Historical Society

THE KAW NATION

Following the loss of the tribe's homeland in northern and central Kansas, the tribe went from a thriving and healthy people, strong in spirit and body, to a small group of destitute people that relied solely on the United States government for survival because everything had been taken from them.

The following is a narrative of the Kaw Nation from 1800 to their final forced relocation to a small tract of land in Indian Territory.

By the mid-18th century, the "Wind People" — as they were known to white traders and explorers — were in possession of most of present-day northern and eastern Kansas. Demographers have estimated that, as a consequence of the white man's diseases (principally smallpox, cholera and influenza), their population had been reduced perhaps to less than 50%, down to about 1,500 men, women and children by 1800. Even so, the Kaw presented a formidable obstacle to American expansion into the trans-Missouri West following the U.S. acquisition of this vast region by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. From their villages and small vegetable farms in northeastern Kansas and later along the Kansas River west of present-day Topeka, Kaw warriors maintained control of the lower Kansas valley against both the white man from the east and tribes to the west. Kaw hunters also engaged in semi-annual hunting expeditions onto the plains of western Kansas. But with a major change in United States Indian policy in the early 19th century, all of this changed dramatically.

Beginning in 1825, formalized by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and continuing well into the mid-1840s, the federal government forcibly transplanted nearly 100,000 people comprising tribes such as the Shawnee, Delaware, Wyandotte, Kickapoo, Miami, Sac and Fox, Ottawa, Peoria and Potawatomic onto lands claimed by the Kaw and Osage. This action required Kaw to sign treaties whereby vast acreage was ceded to the government in return for annuities and promises of educational, agricultural and other forms of material assistance. Underlying these treaties was the invader's strategy for rapidly changing the Kaw from an independent, semi-sedentary people into individual family farmers on the model of white agricultural society in Missouri, Illinois and other so-called "settled" states in the East. But the treaties made it clear that during the period of transition the Kaw would remain in a state of dependency under the watchful and supposedly benevolent scrutiny of their government agent.

The first and perhaps most devastating Kaw treaty was negotiated in 1825 following the admission of Missouri to statehood in 1821, the opening of the Santa Fe Trail that same year, and especially the need to establish reservations for the emigrant Shawnee, Delaware and Kickapoo. The Kaw agreed

to a reduction of their 20-million-acre domain, covering roughly the northern half of future Kansas, to a two-million-acre reservation 30 miles wide beginning just west of future Topeka and extending west to a line to be marked by government surveyors. For this huge cession, the Kaw were awarded a \$3,500 annuity for 20 years, a quantity of cattle, hogs and domestic fowl, a government blacksmith and agricultural instructor, and schools to be funded from earlier Kaw land sales in the Kansas City area.

As a special concession to Chief White Plume's vigorous support of the treaty, 640-acre plots along the Kansas River just east of the new reservation were granted in fee-simple terms to all 23 half-bloods of the Kaw tribe. The rest of the tribe received no such benevolence, and factionalism was thereby greatly encouraged. Life for the Kaw between 1825 and the Mission Creek Treaty of 1846 was anything but easy. Whiskey merchants on the Santa Fe Trail exploited the Kaw annuity fund through sharp trading practices, while the bison supply on the plains diminished dramatically and little progress was made in agriculture. Most Kaw parents refused to allow their children to attend distant government boarding schools. The periodic eruption of smallpox and cholera epidemics continued to decimate the Kaw population.

Poverty-stricken by the failure of the 1825 treaty and weakened by continuous government (and private) pressure for yet another land cession — this time to accommodate railroad, town and land speculators — the Kaw leadership went to the treaty table again in 1846. Arrogantly, and tragically indicative of racial attitudes of that time, Indian Superintendent Thomas Harvey in St. Louis boasted to his superiors in Washington that he could work out a new deal with "the degenerate and docile" Kaw in a matter of five days. This he did with the help of Indian Agent Richard W. Cummins in 1846. The 1846 treaty required the sale of the two-million-acre reservation to the government for just over 10 cents an acre. The money received was to be divided between a 30-year annuity at \$8,000 per year, \$2,000 for educational and agricultural improvement, a \$2,000 grist mill and a concentrated 256,000-acre reservation at present-day Council Grove, extending south into Lyon County, Kansas.

As Professor William E. Unrau has emphasized in his book, "The Kaw People," no longer were the Kaw being encouraged to become sedentary farmers; "now they were being forced to change their way of life."

But urged on by railroad developers, the Council Grove bankers and merchants, and even some members

of the Kansas Territorial leadership, the white land-jobbers could not be contained. A census in 1855 revealed that at least 30 white families had located illegal claims in the very heart of the new Kaw reservation, but when a federal agent attempted to evict the squatters, his cabin was burned and he and his family were forced to flee to Missouri. Then when it was discovered that the Council Grove town site was actually on Kaw reservation land, the need for yet another treaty was apparent — certainly not to the Kaw, but to land-hungry white farmers, the Council Grove merchants, promoters of the Union Pacific Southern Branch Railroad and the United States government.

The U.S. government began talking about a complete removal of the tribe from Kansas. The consequent Kaw treaty of 1859 (ratified in 1860) allowed the tribe to keep only 80,000 acres of the poorest land, to be subdivided into 40-acre plots for each family head with the remaining 176,000 acres to be held in trust by the government for sale to the highest bidder. Forty acres of marginal Kansas land was wholly insufficient to support one Kaw family, and by the late 1860s, the government was obliged to authorize emergency funds to prevent outright starvation of the Kaw people. Finally, on May 27, 1872, in a measure strongly opposed by Chief Allegawaho

and most of his people, a federal act was passed providing for the removal of the Wind People from Kansas to a 100,137-acre site in present-day northern Kay County, Oklahoma, which was carved out of former Osage land and for which the Kaw eventually paid \$70,000, mostly from the sale of their trust lands in Kansas.

With the enactment of the Kaw Allotment Act of July 1, 1902, the legal obliteration of the Kaw tribe was accomplished. The act provided approximately 400 acres of land under government trusteeship to 249 persons whose names were placed on the final allotment roll. The act was largely the work of Charles Curtis — a distinguished one-eighth blood member of the tribe who eventually served as vice president of the United States under President Herbert Hoover, and who in 1902 was a Kansas congressman and member of the powerful House Committee on Indian Affairs — and a small group of Kaw leaders headed by Chief Washungah. A significant minority of full-bloods, whose political power in the tribe had declined dramatically since the forced removal from Kansas, opposed the Allotment Act, and, until the tribe was reorganized under federal authority in 1959, factionalism and political struggles over tribal affairs were commonplace.

Following allotment in 1902, the Kaw people retained 260 acres near the Beaver Creek confluence with the Arkansas River until the mid-1960s, when their former reservation land was inundated by the Kaw Reservoir constructed by United States Corps of Engineers on the Arkansas River just northeast of Ponca City, Oklahoma. Here, dating to the late 19th century, were located the tribal council house, the old Washungah town site and the tribal cemetery. After much negotiation with various federal and local officials, the cemetery was relocated to Newkirk, Oklahoma, and the council house to a 15-acre tract a few miles northwest of the former Beaver Creek trust lands. By subsequent Congressional action, the new council house tract was enlarged to include approximately 135 acres, which presently are administered by the Kaw Nation as official trust lands.

Primary source, William E. Unrau, “The Kaw People,” reprinted with permission from The Kaw Nation.



Little House Effect
Norman Akers