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Butler County's Kafir Corn Carnivals

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Butler County's Kafir Corn Carnivals



TOP: KAFIR ENTRANCE
ABOVE: KAFIR CORN CARNIVAL CASTLE

All images courtesy Butler County History Center and Kansas Oil Museum

Another day has passed and still no rain. Another follows and still another until it seems that the skies have turned to brass and the fountains of heaven have dried up. Indian corn for so many years called King, wearies of his crown, rolls, twists, shrivels and dries, beneath the pitiless rays of the burning July sun. The meadows turn brown, cattle break fences in search of water and greener pastures. The farmer turns pale under his coat of tan as he wonders how he will provide for his family, feed his stock and meet his obligations in the neighboring town. The debtor avoids the society of his creditor and the creditor seeks out the affairs of his debtor. It seems that gloom, despondency, and hard times like a dark mantle are about to settle over the landscape that looked so promising and fair in the early days of June.

But lo! again the scene shifts. The mantle is lifted. Kafir corn, the Queen of Kansas prairies, has during these days of heat and drought, of burning and scorching wind been contentedly biding her time. Until drenched by the autumn rains she lifts in maidenly modesty, yet in royal splendor her golden and silvery plumes, soon to be converted into real gold and silver; and confidence, peace, happiness and prosperity reign throughout the land.

On October 18-19-20 we of Butler county, pay homage to our Queen. Let the entire county of Butler meet as one great family and take part in the festivities. Let these days be days that will live long in the history of our country because of the pleasure that they bring.

Manley Arnold, Walnut Valley Times, 1911



KAFIR WAGON

Arnold's tribute to the predecessor of milo put romantic words to the ardent feeling of his fellow 1911 Kafir Corn Carnival boosters. Just as ardently, however, festival boosters supported oil and cattle when they eventually supplanted kafir to become the area's economic kings. Both kafir and oil, and the countywide festivals that celebrated them, were merely means to an end. That end was economic development for El Dorado. A community had to appear vital, exciting, "wide-awake," "up-and-coming" to attract investors. In the second decade of the twentieth century, El Dorado businessmen recognized that the economic strength of their county lay with the family

farm. They promoted their town by transforming downtown El Dorado into Kafirville in a series of carnivals framed as harvest festivals held in 1911, 1912, 1914, 1915, 1924-1927, and 1929.

Kafir, commonly known as "kafir corn," was scientifically known as *Sraorghum saccharatum var.* It belongs to the same species as broom corn, dura or Jerusalem corn, and the grain and ensilaged sorghums. Liberty Hyde Bailey's *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture* noted, "The common word 'corn' has been transferred from maize or Indian corn to these kafirs and durras in some regions, and confusion has resulted. Although called kafir-corn, kafir is a member of the sorghum, not the maize, family."

Kafir was introduced to the United States in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition by a small South African country. The United States Department of Agriculture obtained seed for trials in various states. The Kansas Experiment Station announced

in 1889 that kafir was able to withstand heat and drought conditions and made an excellent general feed grain for livestock and poultry.

Shortly thereafter seed reached Butler County. W. H. Ruckle claimed to be the first person in Butler County to plant and reap a crop of kafir. "I got a handful of seed from Indianapolis," he told the *Walnut Valley Times*. "A magazine offered it for sale and I bought some." What he harvested the first year he planted the next, until soon he was sharing with his neighbors.

The new crop, which thrived in the county's dry climate, could be exploited as an advertising gimmick. Kafir became a symbol of local prosperity.

The idea for a Kafir Corn Carnival has been credited to Ralph B. Ralston, judge and state senator, as early as 1908. Other public-spirited citizens moved the idea to reality. Harvest festivals, agricultural fairs, street fairs, and grain and corn shows were common, but this was the first such fete devoted to kafir.

Kafir was grown throughout the Flint Hills as well as other areas of Kansas. Butler County, however, was the only county to hold a series of Kafir Corn Carnivals and festivals celebrating this key prairie crop.

Adapted from "The Queen of Kansas Prairies: Butler County's Kafir Corn Carnivals," *Kansas History*, summer 1995. Printed with permission.

Joyce Thierer, a fifth-generation Flint Hills landowner/steward, was one of the founders of *Symphony in the Flint Hills*. She is a co-owner of *Ride into History* and an Associate Professor of History at Emporia State University. She holds a PhD from Kansas State University.



KAFIR CAR