



Conference between Kansa Indians and the U. S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1857. (Courtesy of the The Kansas State Historical Society)

# Facts and Fiction

Do you know what one cowboy said to the other cowboy when he looked up and saw a bunch of Indians coming down over the hill?

He said, "Look! Here come the Indians!"

—Well, maybe that *is* a pretty old joke — and it probably wouldn't seem like a very *funny* joke if we were living in the Kansas of a century ago. Nonetheless, it will serve as the lead-in for this issue of *Heritage of Kansas*, which deals with the Kansa Indians.

Most Kansans know very little of the Indian tribe whose name lives on as the name of the state and of the state's largest river. This lack of knowledge is probably due at least partly to the absence of close contact with the tribe. The Kansa (or Kaws, as they are often called) were forced to leave Kansas more than three-quarters of a century ago. Few people now living can remember seeing any of this tribe in their native haunts here. From some 1700 population in the 1850's, the tribe had dwindled to a mere twenty-five full-bloods in 1950, and most of those lived not in Kansas, but in Oklahoma.

The name of this group of Indians—and consequently, the name of the state—has had many variations in spelling. In 1907, one authority, George P. Morehouse (former Morris county lawyer, and author of the bill making the sunflower the official state flower), had collected over 125 different spellings for the tribe's name. For example, the name was spelled Kan, Kaw, Kau, Kah, Can, Caw, and Kantha, Kansies, Kancez, Kanzasou, Kah-sah, Kau-sas, Canchez, Canceys, Canses, and so on.

Morehouse had the theory that the origin of the name came from the Spanish verb *cansar*, meaning to *molest*, to *stir up*, to *harass*. When Juan de Onate met this fierce and hostile tribe in 1601, he called them *Escansagues*, the *disturbers* or the *trouble-*

some. (The beginning *Es-* is merely a Spanish prefix.) If this really was the origin of the name, it is no wonder that so many early writers started the word with "C" rather than "K": they were following the Spanish root word, *Cansaque*.

Most historians, however, claim that the name is an Indian word of doubtful meaning. Some say it refers to winds, while others think that the Iowa Indians called the tribe *Kantha*, meaning *swift*. An Osage Indian once claimed that the tribe was called *Kaw* or *Kah-sah*, meaning *coward*, because the Osages at one time had wanted the tribe to join them in a war against the Cherokees; when they refused, the Osages ridiculed them by calling them *Kah-sah*. (A hundred years earlier, however, the French explorer Marquette had called the tribe *Kansa*, so the Osage explanation is probably invalid.)

J. Riley Aiken, a contemporary authority on Indian language, thinks the word is probably an Algonquian word, and not a Siouan word. In Algonquian there is an expression *Kam-sa*, or *Kan-sa*. *Kam* means a ridge; *sa* implies some distance over from where one is standing. *Kan-sa*, then, would mean the ridge across the way. (*Ak-kan-sa*, or *Arkansas*, is a related word; *Ak* or *Ake* in Algonquian means *land*. Thus, *Ak-kan-sa* is the land about the ridge over yonder.)

Whatever its meaning and origin, and however it has been spelled in the past, the state officially took the present spelling when it became one of the United States in 1861. Before that, *Kansas* had been used by the federal government and by some writers, but there was no overall consistency.

The word *Kaw*, with its varied spellings, apparently is a French abbreviation or nickname for the tribe and has no inherent meaning, such as *wind people* or *smoky water*.

On the basis of their language, the *Kansa* Indians are classed as a division of the Great Siouan linguistic group. They were close relatives of the Osage, Quapaw, Omaha, and Ponca, and distant relatives of the Oto, Missouri, Iowa, Dakota, and other Siouan-speaking tribes. Traditionally, the *Kansa*, Osage, Omaha, Quapaw, and Ponca were one single group, but they split up into separate tribes and each group went its own way.

The *Kaws*, like their fellow Plains Indians, were great hunters. Until about 1873, they went on annual buffalo hunts which lasted most of the winter. As they traveled to their buffalo hunting

grounds on the upper Kansas and Arkansas rivers from their Council Grove reservation year after year, they wore down a trail which became known as the Kaw Trail. It traveled along almost parallel with the Santa Fe Trail, a few miles to the south.

Closer to home they hunted deer, bear, elk, turkey, and other such small game as used to abound in the eastern part of the state. They had two special superstitions about killing, however, which were reported by Rev. Cyrus R. Rice, pioneer missionary: Neither the Kaws nor the Osages would shoot a coyote because they believed that they could never shoot anything else with their guns, and neither tribe would kill a rattlesnake because they feared that they might make enemies of the snake tribe. (These superstitions are no doubt tied up with their religion, and no doubt they had many other such taboos which the white man never knew about and therefore never wrote down.)

The Kaws also practiced some agriculture, raising maize, beans, pumpkins, watermelons, and muskmelons. When the white man tried to teach them white-man farming methods, however, they tended to resist, just as they resisted his interference in other areas of their lives.

An interesting custom of the early Kansa people was their use of dogs as work animals. Before the eighteenth century, horses seem to have been virtually unknown to them. Dogs were used to pull the much-used travois (a vehicle consisting of two trailing poles serving as shafts, with a platform or net between, upon which the load was carried). M. Etienne Venyard de Bourgmont in 1724 mentioned being accompanied from his visit to the Kansa village by 300 dogs to help transport baggage and supplies (See p. 7). He claimed that a single dog could drag around 300 pounds, but this may be an exaggeration. Besides being used as beasts of burden, dogs sometimes were kept as watchdogs, and also were considered to be quite a delicacy as food.

("Well, everybody to his own taste," said the old lady as she kissed the cow.)

On the immediately following pages is a brief historical review of the Kansa tribe. The last section is concerned with some early eye-witness accounts of the Kaws in action.



Two Kansa Indian boys, dressed up in their "Sunday best." (Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society)