



# NEWS

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## Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History February 15 - 21, 1854 (2004)

An advertisement in *St. Joseph Gazette* on the 15<sup>th</sup> offered \$500 for return of a “Negro Man Runaway. Sam about 20 years of age, six feet high, weighs about 170 pounds, has a slight stoppage in his speech and formerly owned by John H. Whitehead of St. Jo.” Sam had disappeared months earlier, possibly heading for the free states of California or Iowa. The \$500 reward was about half of a young man’s sale value, an enormous amount when daily wages for free labor were often counted in cents rather than dollars.

If Sam’s destination were California, he probably followed the usual trail that cut across the northeastern part of the proposed Kansas Territory up to the Platte in Nebraska. Traders and immigrants who took that route past Fort Kearney were among the few American citizens who knew firsthand about land west of Missouri. One who called himself White Bear wrote a letter to the *Gazette* describing his experiences. Those looking for a “sylvan fountain of the wilderness” would be disappointed. The soil seemed “good as far as the Big Blue but the timber. . . seems to have a natural abhorrence for all portions of the country except the creeks [where the trees] remind one of a young man’s mustache.” His advice: adventurers should stay east of the Big Blue lest they “might wish themselves at home and become disgusted with the country.”

Few people could read the landscape well enough to understand why the scruffy trees thrived only near the waterways. C. W. Boynton believed his scientific studies contradicted the common idea that Kansas was “a land of drought, unfit for agricultural purposes.” The 30 inches of rain he measured at Fort Leavenworth in 1853 was about equal to precipitation in Wisconsin, St. Louis or the British Isles. Kansas, he declared, did not suffer from a deficiency of rain. “The soil is of a character that renders it a vast reservoir of the water which falls. It sinks deep, and remains to supply the roots of plants when the surface is dry.”

Boynton failed to realize that Kansas’s 30 inches of rain, which fell in isolated torrential events in contrast to England’s steady drizzle, would not support traditional European-American farming practices. Optimistic boosters of western expansion ignored the implications of a boom and bust rain cycle. Many relied upon a principle of the era’s popular science that claimed rain followed the plow.

The theory hypothesized that prairies like Kansas were dry because the soil was untilled. Once farmers turned the grasses over, the soil would attract rain clouds. If rain fell primarily in agricultural areas, why not classify farming as the cause of the rain, rather than the reverse? (450 words)

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Letter from White Bear, Fort Kearney on the Oregon Route, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1854, printed in the *St. Joseph Gazette* March 15, 1854.

C. B. Boynton and T. B. Mason, *Journey Through Kansas with Sketches of Nebraska* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach, Keys, 1855) Pages 62-3