



NEWS

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By Barbara Brackman

Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History February 22 - 28, 1854 (2004)

As Americans reading about Congressional Debate over the new territory in their newspapers began to recognize the name Kansas, most believed the center of the continent to be a great desert, home to a few nomadic tribes hunting sparse game. In truth, the land organized into the Kansas-Nebraska Territories also supported settled residents who farmed, hunted and made a living from American travelers on the emigrant and trade trails. In 1854, many of the Native Americans there, the Shawnee, Delaware and Wyandot, had been born in the Ohio Valley.

One of the first spots in Kansas where eastern adventurers met Native Americans was Blue Jacket's Crossing on the Wakarusa River in the Shawnee (then often spelled Shawanoe) Indian Reserve. George Blue Jacket was the grandson of a famous Shawnee warrior. In 1791, long before General George Armstrong Custer's name became synonymous with an overwhelming Army loss to native tribes, General Arthur St. Clair lost his military reputation when he came up against Blue Jacket and several other warrior chiefs in what is now Ohio. St. Clair also lost nearly one thousand men while the Shawanoe, Miami and Delaware suffered an estimated thirty-five casualties. But one victory, no matter how impressive, did not win the war, and the Shawanoe were soon pushed west to Indiana. Blue Jacket's sons and grandsons later walked under Army escort to the unnamed land west of the Missouri.

George Blue Jacket charged a fee to cross the Wakarusa at a particularly low and stable spot, and he kept a hotel on the river. Traveler William Hutter described Blue Jacket's Crossing, "a sort of Shawnee boarding house." Blue Jacket's two houses, typical of Shawnee buildings, were "the most commodious and pretending houses that the best of the Indians have in this country, and consist of two or one and a half story log houses, built about 12 or 15 feet apart, gable to gable, and the roofs made to meet over the intervening space which is the only place on which any doors open. This space is floored or not, and more or less enclosed at the pleasure of the owner. The better ones have a kitchen placed immediately behind this space."

Using our present geography to locate Blue Jacket's Crossing, it was over the Wakarusa, a narrow river with rather deep, muddy banks that winds from Wabaunsee County, through Shawnee County to meet with the Kansas River at Eudora in Douglas County. All man-made evidence of the crossing is gone, but it was southwest of Eudora, just south of Kansas Highway 10, near Douglas County Highway 1057. On the south bank is a rocky cliff, which provided natural gravel underfoot for the horses and oxen pulling wagons. George Blue Jacket's grandfather, who dealt such a blow to the fledgling United States Army, was a familiar name to many of the people using this branch of the trade trail to Santa Fe or the emigrant trail to California and Oregon. (500 words)

Louise Barry (editor), "Scenes In (And En Route To) Kansas Territory, Autumn, 1854: Five Letters by William H. Hutter," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXV, 3, Autumn, 1969, Pages 312-336.