OSCAR WILDE IN KANSAS

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INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde was brought to America for a lecture tour in January, 1882, by Col. W. F. Morse, the American representative for Richard D'Oyly Carte. It was Morse's shrewd conclusion that the 27-year-old Wilde, already somewhat notorious in London as a leader of a "cult of the ineffable" with affectations in manner and dress to match, would be "an advance poster" for the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera, Patience, which opened in New York September 22, 1881. In England, Wilde was widely believed to be the model for the character of Reginald Bunthorne, the "perfectly precious" aesthetic poet of the opera.

The so-called aesthetic movement was really no movement at all, but a vague outgrowth of the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood dating back to the late 1840's and spawned by the painters and poets Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Thomas Woolner. These four young London Royal Academy students banded together to fight the restrictive dogmas of the academicians, particularly in the matters of using nature more freely in their subject matter, and a return to the simple ideals of Botticelli, as opposed to what they termed the shallow sensuality of the Renaissance painters, especially Raphael. Long before Oscar Wilde graduated from Oxford (1878) the peculiarities of aesthetic behavior were being ridiculed in England, particularly by George Du Maurier in his cartoons for Punch. Du Maurier even created a series of moon-eyed young men worshipping flowers, wearing knee breeches, and soulfully admiring volumes of poetry and antique china. His most famous creations were the droop-shouldered, long-haired poet named Postlethwaite, and the chubby painter, Maudle. While it is true that Du Maurier cheerfully fastened on young Wilde as the model for the aesthetic type, it is equally true that Wilde patterned his own behavior and life-style on this already existant type, primarily to draw attention to himself as quickly and blatantly as possible.

From his arrival on the Arizona in New York, where he was reported to have said the Atlantic disappointed him and where at customs he had nothing to declare but his genius, Wilde was free game for the American press—as indeed he had been for the British press. The tone on both sides of the Atlantic favored ridicule of the aesthetic viewpoint, and the press seemed delighted to find at last a single figure on which to focus their jibes. Even before his first public lecture at Chickering Hall in New York on January 9, the "national publicity had been tremendous," and after the lecture a literal barrage of generally negative views had flown by telegraph over the country. Some typical reactions in January, 1882, came from the following newspapers: Chicago Tribune, "Wilde is a twittering sparrow come to fill his maw with insects"; New York Herald, "His real position is that of a penny Ruskin at the head of a band of so-called aesthetic enthusiasts . . ."; The Nation, New York, "Mr. Wilde is essentially a foreign product and can hardly succeed in this country." Favorable, even defensive, views included the Cincinnati Enquirer, "The stranger among us is a young apostle of beauty against a decaying age of trade and swap"; and Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, "Oscar Wilde is a success."

For the next 10 months Wilde literally lectured himself into near exhaustion, "racing along tied to an ugly tin-kettle of a steam engine." His route took him from New York to California, from Louisiana to Canada. The point was, Oscar's lecture tour was a success—if for the wrong reasons. Long before he reached such diverse places as Fort Wayne, Ind., or Pawtucket, R.I., the newspaper caricatures, lampoons, and hard ridicule had been spun out ahead of him by the Associated Press and other sources. Wilde was marked for satirical attacks by editors and reporters hiding behind the conventional journalistic anonym-

3. Ibid., p. 60.
4. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
This Thomas Nast cartoon in *Harper's Bazar*, June 10, 1882, depicted Oscar Wilde making his tribute to Western miners as the "only well-dressed men I have seen in America." On his tour of the United States in 1882, Wilde was attacked by the press for his outlandish dress and his arty and obtuse lectures. The cartoonists had a field day picturing him as a money-grabbing fake. In this example the lily and sunflower, symbols connected with the aesthetic movement, are evident, and Wilde is depicted in an effeminate pose with a bag of money protruding from each pocket.
ity of the time. At first Wilde had either gaily ignored or played down the more scabrous American attacks, writing on January 15 to his friend, Norman Forbes-Robertson: “Great success here; nothing like it since Dickens, they tell me. . . . I wave a gloved hand and an ivory cane and they cheer. . . . Rooms are hung with white lilies for me everywhere. . . .”

But by the time he reached St. Louis in February he was injecting into his lectures such attacks on the press as this: “Make it a law that no newspaper be allowed to write about art at all. The harm that they do is not to be overestimated—not to the artist, but to the public. To disagree on all points with the modern newspaper is one of the chief indications of sanity.” Such remarks were not to sit lightly with Yankee editors, particularly in the smaller cities.

Understandably, much of the criticism of Wilde was, from an American viewpoint, justified. His doctrine of aestheticism, buried in the extremely arty and obtuse lecture with which he began his tour, was either of little interest to the average American listener or, more likely, incomprehensible to him, and therefore it was not really what Wilde said that served as bait for bloodthirsty editors, but the way in which he said it. As a poseur he infuriated them. The moment he stepped on the newspapers depicted Wilde as a money-grabbing fake outlandishly dressed up to intimidante and exploit honest Americans. The New York Evening Post wrote: “Wilde is among us for business purposes . . . on the Chicago Tribune called him “the uncouth adventurer.” The cartoonists had a field day with this side of the Wilde invasion. He was pictured in the New York Daily Graphic tenderly holding up a large disk boldly marked with a dollar sign and staring aesthetically at it. In June of the same year, Thomas Nast’s cartoon in Harper’s Bazar pictured Wilde in an effeminate pose with bags of money protruding from each pocket. Another aspect of Wilde’s “posing” were the flamboyant clothes he wore for most of his lecture appearances. It it were a fault, it was a calculated one. Wilde arrived in New York with trunks containing 18th-century-styled knee-breeches, a specially tailored, fur-lined, bottle-green overcoat flowing Byronic cravats, lace-fringed shirts, and stage jewelry. He was taken almost immediately by Colonel Morse to the studio of the famous Sarony, “the most spectacular photographer of celebrities . . . .” where he was arranged in various costumed poses before the camera—poses associated in the public’s mind with the languorous attitudes of an aesthete. Despite Wilde’s rather feeble, straight-faced efforts to defend the return of knee-breeches, most hostile editors saw such costumes as simply another facet of Wilde’s total superficiality.

Aside from scattered attempts to welcome Wilde to the United States (California was warmest to him and he to it), the overwhelming majority of newspapers took pains to deride him—even long before he arrived in their towns or cities to lecture.

And so it was in a journalistic atmosphere of amused and sour contempt for this young Britisher, “an eccentric, a wit, and the great apostle of Aestheticism,” that Oscar Wilde crossed the Missouri river from St. Joseph on April 19, 1882, to give four lectures in as many days in the state that would officially become, in 1903, ever associated with that Wildean symbol of the aesthetic movement, the sunflower.

7. Lewis and Smith, Oscar Wilde Discovers America, p. 208.
8. “The English Renaissance of Art,” a very long essay much more suited to reading than hearing: it is crammed with references to poets, painters, and events of Europe’s cultural past and present (1882). It early became evident to Wilde that this lecture was over the heads of the majority of his audiences.

11. The flowers associated with the aesthetic movement were the lily and the sunflower. Both figured strongly in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites and the decorative designs of William Morris. In an interview Wilde called the sunflower the most “purely decorative” flower in existence, and added, “Its form is perfect.” —Philadelphia Press, January 17, 1882. Throughout his lecture tour in America he was greeted with masses of sunflowers from both his admirers and detractors. It seems odd that not more was made in Kansas over the sunflower connection when Wilde visited. The sunflower had decorated the bottom of the original state seal and was officially proclaimed the state flower in 1863. Part of the law making Kansas the “Sunflower State” could have been written by Wilde himself: “Whereas, Kansas has a native wild flower common throughout her borders, hardy and conspicuous, of definite, unvarying and striking shape, easily sketched, molded, and carried, having armorial capacities, ideally adapted for artistic reproduction, with its strong, distinct disk and its golden circle of clear glowing rays—a flower that a child can draw on a slate, a woman can work in silk, or a man can carve on stone or fashion in clay.” As if to confirm Wilde’s view that art could be practical as well as decorative, the Kansas National Guard (1903) was ordered to adopt the device of the sunflower for collars, full-dress, drill and service coats for both officers and enlisted men.—Kansas Lays, 1903 (Topeka: State Printer, 1903), ch. 479, p. 725.
LEAVENWORTH

THE FIRST stop in Kansas for Wilde was Leavenworth. Although an ad in the April 11 issue of the Leavenworth Daily Times had run a week in advance cheerfully telling the citizens that "The chart for Oscar Wilde's appearance in this city is now open at Crew Brothers, and choice seats are being taken rapidly," and another ad appeared the following day, the lecture itself was poorly attended. The April 21 issue of the Kansas City Daily Times reported that only about 60 of Leavenworth's 16,000 inhabitants turned out the evening of April 19 and then dispersed without any applause.

On the morning of April 19, the same day Wilde was to lecture, the Leavenworth Daily Times ran one of the Sarony photographs of Wilde (head and shoulders, with his chin cupped in one hand of gracefully curled fingers) and a very long advance publicity article, possibly written by Wilde himself. At the end of the article was a noncommittal statement: "Oscar Wilde will lecture at the new opera house to-night, on the subject, 'The English Renaissance.' He will arrive this afternoon from St. Joe."

The next day, buried on the fourth page of the Daily Times, appeared a long account of Wilde's arrival and lecture in Leavenworth. The April 20 article was entitled "Oscar Wilde," and a preview of the reporter's opinion of the lecture was contained in a smaller heading: "His Lecture Falls Flat." In part, the article said:

On arriving, Oscar alighted and walked up the steps [of the Planters hotel] preceded by his agent and valet, the latter bearing the skins and other aesthetic ornaments with which Oscar is wont to adorn his room. The great aesthete himself was completely enveloped in a long black cloak, extending to his feet: on his head was a broad brimmed, black slouch hat, from beneath which his long, black hair escaped and fell around his shoulders. In his hand he held a little yellow volume of poems.

Because of the way Wilde was dressed when he arrived, the paper stated that despite his "extremely boyish face," the poet was more "a prototype of Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, or any of the tall, long-haired heroes of wild western border life." The article complained that Wilde or his managers abruptly changed the price of the lecture from 75 cents to a dollar "to make people remember him," then changed the lecture topic from "The English Renaissance" to "Decorative Art." Wilde appeared on the lecture stage "attired in a black velvet court suit, long cutaway coat and knee breeches. On his shirt front was a large pearl, almost hidden by a rich lace tie, and from each coat sleeve peeped a lace band." The small audience was not "as aesthetic as it might have been" since "only one sunflower appeared. . . . and only one lily to relieve its lonesomeness." While some of the audience were "listening very attentively and maintaining a respectful silence, others seemed to be, from the position of their heads, asleep. . . . to be dreaming of a long, dry sermon, that being the only way to sit it out."

As for the content of Wilde's lecture, the Daily Times wavered between faint praise and damnation:

Some of the ideas advanced were commendable, but many of them nothing but trash, used to fill in and enable the speaker to string out a lecture of reasonable length. After listening to the speaker a very few minutes one becomes convinced that, although Mr. Wilde thinks the American people have the ability, and the natural resources for study to make their nation one conservatory of art, he is disgusted with our manners, habits, style of building, etc., and the

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12. The tone and detail of this promotion piece suggest either the heavy hand of Wilde or of his brother, Willie, then art critic for the London World. The piece begins by lying about Wilde's age and continues in great laudatory detail about Wilde's parents, his schooling, his "much quoted" poetry, etc. In one of the chapters that Colonel Morse wrote about Wilde's lecturing he merely says: "There were prepared a short biographical sketch of Mr. Wilde's parents, biographical sketch of his school days, etc. -- Oscar Wilde, The Works of Oscar Wilde, Sunflower edition (New York: Lamb Publishing Co., 1908), pp. 75-76.
14. Earlly in February, 1882, Colonel Morse hired an agent, J. H. Vale, and a "liver-colored" negro valet, John, to accompany Wilde on his tour.
15. This is probably the first American edition of Wilde's Poems (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1881) since yellow was one of the three colors of this edition. The British editions up to and including Wilde's American tour were not bound in yellow. See Stuart Mason, Bibliography of Oscar Wilde (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1914), items 304-311.
16. Because of his shoulder-length hair, Wilde was compared many times to William "Buffalo Bill" Cody and other famous long-haired Western figures, this comparison being part of the "fun" of kidding Wilde. For example, a reporter from the Omaha Bee saw Oscar off at the depot and wrote that in his slouch hat, cloak, and long hair, Wilde looked like "Big Nose George, the famous mountain bandit."
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Irish poet and dramatist, gave four lectures in Kansas on his American tour in 1882. Like journalists elsewhere, Kansas editors welcomed him with amused and sour contempt to the state that would later become associated with that Wildean symbol, the sunflower. This photograph of Wilde by Sarony of New York was in the Leavenworth Times, April 19, 1882, along with a long advance publicity article, possibly written by the lecturer himself.

“Much of his lecture was delivered in clear-cut English, bold, incisive, poetical, graceful and almost winning in the beauty of his sentences and the delicacy of his periods.”

On April 20 the single German-language newspaper in Leavenworth, the Kansas Freie Presse, ran a two-paragraph review of Wilde’s appearance, saying that “Herr Wilde” expressed his opinion that all the art forms such as paintings, sculpture, etc., should be commissioned and produced as cheaply as possible so that the proletariat can decorate their parlors with such works. The German reporter noted that Wilde wore violet stockings, that his knee-breeches made his legs look large, that his coat was cut like a minister’s, and that his long hair reminded one of “Buffalo Bill.” The Freie Presse also took Wilde to task for making money by “humbugging” Americans, but added that America has no other goal than to be humbugged! The paper called Wilde a “love-sick swain.”

On hindsight, perhaps the most dramatic, certainly the most startling, newspaper headline to appear in any American newspaper of the entire Wilde lecture tour appeared on April 27 in the Leavenworth Weekly Times after Wilde had left Kansas. In bold headlines it was announced: “OSCAR WILDE IN PRISON.”
In smaller headlines the paper explained: "He Stops Over at Lansing and Then Comes on to This City and Visits the Fort." The one-paragraph story read:

The famous aesthete, Oscar Wilde, who lectured to and bored such a small audience in this city on Wednesday night last, came through from Lawrence on a freight train yesterday morning, stopping over at Lansing and spending about twenty minutes in the state prison. At the conclusion of that time, the engine having taken on coal, he again boarded the train and came on to this city where he was the guest of Major Broadhead at the Planters. The major took him up to the fort in the afternoon and showed him around, returning in time for the 6 o'clock train on the Missouri Pacific, on which Oscar left for Atchison where he lectured last night. He was very well pleased with the penitentiary and the fort, though it is strange that he should find anything in America to suit his aesthetic taste.

**TOPEKA**

In a way the Leavenworth Daily Times was right in suggesting Topeka would be more aesthetic and thus more friendly to Wilde. Topekans were well aware of the poet's California, Colorado, and Utah swing, and the Topeka Daily Capital was filled with both serious and light-hearted items about Wilde at least a month ahead of his arrival in Kansas. On April 3 in the "Plays and Players" regular column of the Capital this sober (and erroneous) item appeared: "It is said Mr. Oscar Wilde has been engaged by a theatrical manager and will make his debut in San Francisco as 'Bunthorne, the aesthetic sham.'" Another item appearing on April 11 stated: "Oscar Wilde so pleased the Californians that they have named a town 'Too-Too.' What more could any foreigner ask than to have his memory perpetuated in this way?" And this on April 12: "Oscar Wilde has been found. He is now in Denver and will leave for this section of the country next Friday. He has written a new lecture on the 'Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century.'" And finally on April 13, this: "Oscar Wilde will be here the 22nd."

18. Maj. Josiah Allen Broadhead was the U.S. army paymaster at Fort Leavenworth. The 1892 city directory for Leavenworth lists his residence as the Planters House. His office was at the First National Bank Building. — Edwin Green, City Directory of the City of Leavenworth (n.p., 1983), p. 54. A Civil War veteran from New Hampshire, he died in 1884. The Kansas City (Mo.) Times reported that a "delegation" from the fort attended Wilde's lecture; this no doubt included Broadhead.

19. The lecture was never formalized into writing. Probably it grew out of an extemporaneous talk Wilde had given on the occasion of a St. Patrick's day celebration in St. Paul, Minn., March 17. The crowd was huge and quite Irish, and they gave Wilde a tremendous ovation.

With the approach of Wilde, an announcement ran in the Capital that he would lecture at Crawford's Opera House (prices: 25¢, 50¢, 75¢, and $1.00), and again in the "Plays and Players" column this friendly but snobbish observation appeared on April 17: "Oscar Wilde, the apostle of the Beautiful, is here Wednesday night, and there is no doubt that he will have a full house. Topeka is essentially aesthetic, and to hear the great exponent of true culture is an opportunity which may never occur again." On that same day and in the same paper a similarly hopeful note was struck for Oscar: "Oscar Wilde promises to draw largely at Leavenworth."

However, all was not tea and sympathy. Wilde continued to be the butt of jokes and advertisement schemes. On April 19 the Capital printed: "OSCAR WILDE designates California as an Italy without Italy's art. By the way, it may be said that the Kansas City Journal designates Oscar as an idiot and says, 'he fails utterly to reach the plane of Plato and Socrates.' This is bad. However, if Oscar does the best he knows how, he may climb and finally reach the coveted altitude." Less intellectual was this ad in the April 23 issue of the Capital: "The aesthetic wave seems to flourish and continue to roll, under the management of Oscar Wilde, and under the management of every person Dr. Hill's Cough Syrup will have the same success."

The humorist, Bill Nye, wrote an account of his meeting with Wilde for the Wyoming Boomerang, and the piece was picked up by many newspapers, including the Topeka Capital on April 19. It is by far the best satirical look at Wilde by an American journalist during his tour, its dozen paragraphs being full of soft humor toward both Wilde and the author: "We told him that our name was Nye, the great Wyoming aesthete. He smiled like a rolling mill and shook hands." Wilde was described as having "high and intellectual" shoulder blades, and a face that "is thin and when buried in a piece of pie must be a ghastly sight." Nye said the poet's teeth are "evidently his own . . ." and that he "spoke on
Oscar Wilde’s first stop in Kansas was at Leavenworth where advance advertisements in the Leavenworth Times announced that “choice seats are being taken rapidly.” But the lecture was poorly attended, and the newspaper’s review April 20, 1882, was headed “Oscar Wilde, His Lecture Falls Flat.” Daniel R. Anthony (1824-1904) was the outspoken editor of the Times during this period. Advertisement from the Leavenworth Times, April 12, 1882.

Wilde was further described as “full of soul” and “with a large growth of hair on his head, which falls in grateful festoons over his shoulders like a horse’s tail over an olive green dashboard.” Nye concluded his satire with more gentle fun: “He smiles every little while like a colicky baby in its sleep, and sighs and places himself in statuesque positions, as though something had given away in his apparel and he was trying to keep his ethereal pantaloons on till people looked the other way.”

As certainly a conscious (and profitable) preparation for Wilde’s visit to Topeka, the “justly celebrated” Holman English Opera Company planned to appear on April 7 in the Crawford Opera House for performances of both Pinafore and Patience. However, due to the death of the son of Mrs. Holman a week before in Missouri, the opera company disbanded and the Topeka performance never took place.

Wilde arrived in Topeka from Leavenworth on the afternoon of April 20, and took rooms in the Windsor Hotel. The same day the Capital announced that Wilde would deliver a lecture that evening at Crawford’s and that Wilde had been “too universally advertised and commented upon to require lengthy mention.” The brief article said the lecture Wilde would deliver would be “to a great extent, devoted to an exhibition of the origin and progress of the new movement for the cultivation of the Beautiful as it has manifested itself in the best circles of English society . . . .” and that his talk would be “peculiarly valuable as indicating what is certain to be, sooner or later, repeated here.” The article slyly concluded with: “He is assured of a good house and the audi-

21. On April 6, 1882, the Topeka Capital ran a huge ad for the open company. For “Two Nights and ONE SATURDAY MATINEE” the company would perform with “30 BRILLIANT ARTISTS,” Pinafore and “The latest sensation,” Patience. The Saturday matinee would be “the most amusing of all burlesques, Millard’s new comic opera, ‘UNCLE TOM’S CABIN.’” featuring “La Petite Patti of America, LITTLE ELLIE LEWIS, FOUR YEARS OLD.”

22. The Holman English Opera company disbanded in St. Joseph due to the death by “congestion of the brain” of nine-year-old Georgie Holman. On April 8, 1882, the Topeka Capital ran the disappointing news, and quoted the St. Joseph Herald’s dolorous words: “Death had spread its sable wings over the little sufferer’s couch.”
ence will be in many respects pleasantly disappointed."

The following day, under the title of "AH, OSCAR," the Capital ran a very long account of its reporter's "pleasant conversation" with the poet in the Windsor, and of the lecture the evening of the 20th. The reporter found Wilde "reclining on a sofa drinking his tea from a blue-flowered china cup. His dinner, some strawberries and some cigars lay on the marble top table before him." Of Wilde's appearance, the reporter wrote: "Mr. Wilde has a handsome soft womanish face, around which his long wavy hair fell in the finest decorative art. He is a very pleasant conversationalist, has a wonderful command of words, and expresses himself in a very clear lucid manner, much contrasted with the soulful utterances of his burlesques." Later the reporter added:

He is narrower, by a good deal, at the top than the sides of his head, and his cranium, surrounded by a heavy shock or mane, parted in the middle, is indeed a vivid sight. He has, evidently, too many teeth altogether, and this becomes apparent the very moment he opens his mouth. His face is a broad expanse of anything save alert intellectuality; in fact it expresses inert consciousness of having a fat thing in the lecture business more than anything else. There is nothing strong about the features—except the mouth ... ; the forehead is narrow, the eyes neither bright nor particularly expressive; the chin is long and inclined to taper, which is no evidence of strength of any kind, being simply the way that part of his face happened to be formed.

The reporter noted the "black plush suit now so familiar and famous," and a white silk handkerchief knotted rather carelessly about the poet's throat, the "lustrous incandescence of the famous diamond," and "lace ruffles at the sleeves." As had been noted before by apparently surprised journalists, Wilde was not all that effeminate up close: "He wore knee-breeches, and while his leg is small, he has a foot like a deck-hand on a Mississippi steamboat and a hand like a blacksmith, although he "ever and anon ... wiped his lips with a silk handkerchief in a sort of an ecstatically subdued sort of a way. ..." As for his gestures, they "were confined to an extension of the right arm; his posturing was Florentine or more properly speaking, perhaps, early English. One of HIS FAVORITE ATTITUDES was the placing of either the right or left hand just abaft the small of the back, as

Anna Dickinson does when she goes through the soliloquy in 'Hamlet.' The reporter returned to the Shakespearian allusion a bit later when commenting on Wilde's publicized inability to speak well during a lecture: "When Oscar starts in at 8:15 and ceases about 9:25, there is no relief; it is a dreary monotony of unbroken waves of sound, like the rising and falling of the pendulum in an eight-day clock. ... The lecture is an unrelieved waste of words, words, words; like a great desert of sand with the edges all around touching the sky and no green thing in sight."

The same reporter's conversation with Wilde in the Windsor resulted in "the talented young Englishman" talking about a variety of topics with much less "affected soulfulness" than the reporter had expected. The responses were probably more or less routine for Wilde by now; he did get in a couple of nasty digs at newspaper reporting by saying that "when he landed in New York and read what the newspapers had to say about him, he thought that he was about to travel in an extensive lunatic asylum composed of the whole country ..., and that "the newspapers of this country were far from representing the true public opinion of the American people on art questions. ..." He praised the "charming cosmopolitan people" he had met on his travels, saying that he had, in fact, "met as intelligent, appreciative, sympathetic people ... as in the highest art and social centers of England."

Wilde talked to the Capital reporter in an aesthetic vein about modern life, saying there could not be "anything useful which was not beautiful, and if ugly, it might be put down as of imperfect usefulness." He said "the life of a business man who ate his breakfast early in the morning, caught a train for the city, there stayed in the dingy, dusty atmosphere of the commercial world, and went back to his house in the evening, and after supper to sleep, was worse than that of the galley slave—his chains were gold instead of iron."

23. Anna E. Dickinson, the "Queen of the Lyceum," was an early leader of women's rights and a pleader of the Union cause. Tremendously successful as an orator, she developed a passion for acting, but failed miserably.
As for the lecture, the Capital reporter wrote that "The lecturer was not early, but rather late in fact, it being nearly half-past eight when the apostle entered." The stage setting at Crawford's was also not very aesthetic for Oscar's entrance:

A door was swung open, exposing to view a most unsympathetic expanse of rough and whitewashed wall, a broken board standing out in bold relief . . . so when the gentle Oscar came in it appeared to his auditors as though he was emerging to view from a garret. Acknowledging by a most thoroughly ungraceful bow the faint attempt at rapturous applause, he threw himself into a half-despairing attitude of Ajax-defying-the-lightning style and spoke a prologue, its main feature being its brevity. This, however, is more than can be said of the lecture.

The Capital reporter gave some of the highlights of Wilde's lecture, saying that he spoke "in his gentle Irish way, a sort of cross between a provincial accent and a national brogue, the whole incorporated into or overslunged [sic] by a stage tone acquired, probably, since he took the lecture platform . . ." The reporter noted that Wilde "criticized mercilessly the city architecture of America, and said it was simply horrible," but that the poet said nothing "about the new Government building being erected in Topeka, and nobody had the temerity to ask him about it, for they were afraid of the effect it might have upon his nerves." The poet several times "acted as though he would have liked to become enthusiastic, but evidently enthusiasm as an art among the aesthetes is either a lost one or one yet to be acquired, for Oscar positively refused to enthuse." At the lecture's conclusion, Wilde "bowed in an half-earnest, semi-deprecatory way and ambled off the stage, while the audience, half doubting as to whether or not the entertainment was over hesitatingly arose and wended its way out."

The Daily Kansas State Journal, Topeka, ran a two-paragraph item on April 21, noting that Wilde had come and gone, and that his arrival "was attended by no particular demonstration by the people here." The pithy account also noted that Wilde "appeared before a good audience . . . which was rather happily disappointed . . .," that he "expressed some very beautiful and noble thoughts, which, if practiced, would lead people into a higher, better life . . .," that he did not particularly please lecture-seasoned Americans with his "accent and monotone . . .," and that although his manner was "easy and graceful . . . part of the time a nervous timidity was indicated by his twirling the charm of his watch chain." The Journal briefly described Wilde's stage costume, and added: "His loose flowing hair at times partially concealed his face, giving him an effeminate [sic] look. But his eyes, his one redeeming feature, indicate a great soul." The paper concluded with: "Upon the whole he made a very favorable impression on his Topeka hearers."

That Wilde had made some general impression on the consciousness of all Topekans is proved by the advertisement which appeared in the April 22 issue of the Capital:

Oscar Wilde Don't give out any aesthetic picture cards, but at the store of the Light Running, "New Home," 237 Kansas avenue, they give you a too too, utterly aesthetic card, free of charge. Call before they are all gone.

A curious side issue, political in nature but involving a satiric use of Wilde and the aesthetic craze, was pursued in the Capital both before and after Wilde's appearance. The three items were concerned with a political feud between the Capital and its rival, The Daily Commonwealth. The papers vied with each other as leaders of the Republican party's ideals. Wilde is mentioned in the Capital on April 15 in a column devoted to newsy items by the suggestion that he "stump the State for the party by the name of Johnson" 24 who imagines that he is a candidate for Governor against St. John." 25 The argument is advanced that Wilde "wouldn't cost much," and would attract much attention, "which is more than the alleged candidate is doing now."

The other two items were long political satires run in the Capital: the first, "The Color of a Necktie," on April 13; the second, "The Two Too," subtitled "A Most Historical Confab," on April 23. Both pieces were attacks on the "Aesthetic Editor" of the Commonwealth, picturing him as more concerned with how to wear a necktie and carry a cane than in the state's real problems. The "Two Too" piece presented Topeka readers with an imaginary

24. J. B. Johnson (1841-1889) was a Kansas legislator and the speaker of the house in 1881. He opposed Governor St. John's bid for a third term at the Republican state convention and offered himself as an alternate candidate. He received 13 votes to St. John's 287 and S. O. Thatcher's 62.

25. John Pierce St. John (1833-1916) was the eighth governor of Kansas, an ardent Republican, and a firm temperance man. Governor for two terms, 1878-1882, he was defeated for a third-term bid by the Democrat, George W. Glick.
interview between Wilde and the Commonwealth editor. The satire was topical, with the humor running in a predictable vein. For example, Wilde is presented saying, "if the people of the present day are unwilling to accept the beautiful in nature and art they should be forced—" and the editor breaking in with, "You could mandamus 'em." The choice of a necktie and the manner of carrying a cane are made much of again in this second political in-fighting piece.

At least one citizen of Topeka struck back at the august critical power of the press. On April 22 the Capital printed a lengthy letter from one Kittie M. Sipple, in which she attacked the paper's review of Wilde's lecture in particular and the "American people" in general for not appreciating Wilde. "Oscar Wilde is fine looking," she wrote. "No one can deny that; and so the male population are nearly green with jealousy, hence the ridicule." Kittie continued by challenging the Capital's physical description of Wilde point by point. Although she admitted that Wilde's foot was "not very symmetrical," she insisted his long-haired head "contains brains that many an American youth might be proud of." She defended the ideas Wilde offered, particularly the advice offered American youth: "He spoke of teaching our boys how to carve in their idle moments. Would it not be better for them to be making things to beautify their homes than to be loafing around some street corner?" She shrewdly observed that "If Henry Ward Beecher had delivered the lecture . . . people would

The Crawford Opera House, Topeka, was typical of the theaters and halls in which Oscar Wilde spoke in many small cities in America. Topeka was Wilde's second stop in Kansas, a town which the Leavenworth Times suggested would be more aesthetic and thus more friendly to the lecturer. But newspapers there were critical also, and Wilde's lecture on April 20 was poorly attended. The Irish poet spoke at Liberty Hall in downtown Lawrence the next night, where he changed his lecture topic from the "English Renaissance" to "Decorative Art." Although newspapers in the university town had printed favorable reviews from other cities, attendance at the lecture in Lawrence was again sparse.

Advertisement from the Kansas Daily Tribune, Lawrence, April 21, 1882.
have thought it very brilliant.” She concluded: “Oscar Wilde is by no means faultless, nor does he claim to be, but he is far superior to those who have no better taste than to ridicule something they do not understand.”

The following day in the Capital appeared an equally lengthy quasi-rebuttal of Kittle Sipple’s pro-Oscar letter, this one unsigned. It was entitled “THE MISTAKES OF MR. WILDE,” and the author began by saying he was in agreement with still another writer “who heard Oscar Wilde when he was being invited and entertained by the upper social circles of New York City,” the agreement being that the newspapers have made “the great mistake” of criticizing Wilde’s appearance instead of “what he says.” The Capital writer then admitted that Wilde was probably aware of his personal ugliness, but that nevertheless he “has evidently mistaken grotesqueness for picturesque.” If women can make themselves more attractive, so can males, the writer contended, but Wilde made himself unattractive by smothering his “naturally lordly bearing” under a few angling attitudes.” Some may have thought Oscar aesthetic on the Topeka lecture platform, but to the writer or any “ordinarily sensible observer, the backward pose of his [Wilde’s] head only added to a stretch of neck and made his upper lip look as if it had not been dusted for a week.” To be fair, the writer said, Wilde cannot be blamed for his “innate ugliness” any more than one should take “personal offense that George Elliot should have had a face very much resembling his, with eyes set close together and all the other features totally out of harmony with them.” And yet Wilde can be faulted for plastering down his hair and letting it “bulge out around a jaw of massive proportions.” By such an appearance, “One’s idea of Apollo-like symmetry is turned completely topsy-turvy.”

As for the content of Wilde’s lecture, the Capital rebuttal said the poet spoke one “unoriginal truth” (that poor people should adorn their houses through the “moral agencies” of artistic handcraftsmen) but that the word “renaissance,” as used by Wilde, was “a misnomer . . . since there is no such thing as an English renaissance.” The writer coyly insisted he was not trying to differ with “our fair correspondent of yesterday” (i.e., Kittle Sipple) because his “paramount feeling” toward her was “pity.” The writer continued by saying Oscar was wrong to say that no lady should ever wear an artificial flower, because many artificial flowers are “much more imitating nature than many a Swiss boy’s carving of a leaf.” In conclusion, he wrote: “We may all be benefited by seeing and hearing Oscar Wilde, but it will be mainly by avoiding the mistakes of an Irish cockney who set out to make an example of comeliness for his American cousins, and instead made a homely caricature of his ugly self.”

A final entry in the Capital, appearing on April 24 in “Plays and Players,” was printed two days after Oscar had left the state. The article summed up both fairly and a bit wistfully the great aesthete’s brief sojourn in Topeka: “Oscar Wilde’s lecture Thursday evening upon ‘The English Renaissance,’ was poorly attended. The young gentleman has brains, and there was much in what he had to say which was useful as well as ornamental, but the people here were evidently not in the humor, and patronized him but sparingly.”

WILDE came to the university city of Lawrence under threatening skies, and the rain followed him on to Atchison. On April 19, two days before he arrived, the Lawrence Daily Journal ran this notice: “Remember that Oscar Wilde lectures at Liberty Hall on Friday night. Here is an opportunity to see and hear the man who has created such a furor in the east by his devotion to the sunflower and the lily. His subject Friday night will be ‘The English Renaissance.’ ” The following day in the same paper appeared a reprint from the Chicago Inter-Ocean entitled “Mr. O. Wilde’s Dress Reform”: it was a self-amused piece about Wilde’s argument on behalf of knee-breeches, saying that even the farmers are
The Darwinian Theory Illustrated.

AS HE APPEARED WHEN FIRST CAPTURED.

AS HE APPEARS AFTER BEING TRAINED.

The Darwinian theory of evolution, which was first promulgated in 1859 by Charles R. Darwin (who, by the way, died last Thursday), was at first received with derision by the world, but gradually grew in favor, and is now accepted by most of the leading scientific men of the world, including Grey, Tyndall, Herbert Spencer and others. The evidences in support of the theory have been steadily accumulating in recent years, and the evolution theory which has been introduced by naturalists and laborers in the fields of science have been sufficient to establish its truth in the minds of students and thinkers everywhere. It is now a tenet of orthodox science that man was evolved by a process of natural selection, from the lowest animals. Another proof of this has recently come to light. There has recently been found in England a creature who presents many of the features of the quail or quail-like quail, known to savants as a dromedary. The quail-like quail is the common distinction between the pithos and the vulpius or "ape." A common distinction between the pithos, but to the vulpius or "ape," is that the first has a long and prehensile tail, the second a short one and the third none at all. The pithos, which is even short and one and the third none at all, is the genus, which is ever short and one and the third none at all. The pithos is a creature who presents many of the features of the quail or quail-like quail, known to savants as a dromedary. The quail-like quail is the creature who presents many of the features of the quail or quail-like quail, known to savants as a dromedary. The quail-like quail is the creature who presents many of the features of the quail or quail-like quail, known to savants as a dromedary.

Edgar Watson Howe
(1853-1937)
coming around to the “sensible” notion that wearing such breeches every day beats “the idea of rolling up trousers and tucking them inside the boot leg, as is done now in plowing. . . .” The one-paragraph satire concluded that after knee-breeches would come “the good old-fashioned waistcoats and the George Washington frock . . . [and] Then we shall begin to live again.” Under general notices in the same edition appeared: “Oscar Wilde is going to have a big audience.”

On April 21, the day of Wilde’s arrival, the Journal softened its ridicule of Wilde by briefly analyzing and partially reprinting (under the title, “Oscar Wilde and the Critics”) a Kansas City Journal article entitled “Fair Play,” in which the big-city critic castigated people for being “unable to appreciate anything out of the regular line of their own matter of fact existence.” The critic suggested that Wilde will have the last laugh because he “shall win in the future” with his aesthetic theories. Also, Wilde was not to be dismissed as a mere “pet of an English drawing room. . . .” He was British, after all, and “John Bull is brave ever” and with plenty of “pluck and energy” in a crisis. The critic concluded that Americans should “advance and extend the hand of welcome to the foreigners,” such as Wilde. In the same edition appeared a notice of the evening’s lecture: “The subject of Oscar Wilde’s lecture tonight has been changed from the English Renaissance to ‘Decorative Art,’ and in this subject our people will be more ready perhaps to hear him than the other.”

Also on the day of the lecture, another Lawrence paper, the Daily Kansas Tribune, reprinted portions of the Leavenworth Standard’s generally favorable review of Wilde’s lecture, saying that Wilde had lectured in Leavenworth “upon his great hobby, art culture,” then quoting generously from the Standard’s review. The Tribune concluded even more generously with: “From this elaborate report we gather that the lecture as well as the man was exceedingly attractive and well received in Leavenworth.”

That Friday evening Wilde lectured in the heart of downtown Lawrence in Liberty Hall, a structure dating back to 1860. It was cold and rainy and the old auditorium was poorly ventilated. On April 22 the Journal reported that it was this “threatening state of the atmosphere that kept many away from the lecture of the disciple of aestheticism.” The review continued: “Mr. Wilde came upon the stage in his ideal costume, black velvet waistcoat, George Washington frock and knee breeches, black clocks, and buckle shoes. He wears long reddish brown hair, rather curly, smooth face with the chin and lower part of the face heavy.” The paper described Wilde’s speech as one who seemingly never hurried and “would be in a degree horrified at anyone who should. . . .” He delivered his lecture in “a calm, unimpassioned manner, with a perceptible though not disagreeable sing-song, perhaps what an aesthete would call rhythm.” His ideas were primarily “good, sensible statements” about improving home decoration, but the reporter complained that Wilde “made no attempt” to tell his audience what to do about their existing bad decor, adding: “If we were to discard all these things, with what would we replace them?” The lecture was timed at an hour and a half in delivery.

With his manager and valet, Wilde left Lawrence the next wet morning heading for his final lecture appearance in Kansas: Atchison. It was during this train ride Wilde briefly stopped at Lansing and Leavenworth, with the resultant startling headline about prison already mentioned.
Atchison

If Wilde had been treated by the press with mild indifference and good-humored sport for his first three Kansas appearances, the Atchison Globe and the Atchison Champion more than made up for their sister papers' reluctance to castigate the hapless poet. Long before Wilde arrived in Atchison, the editor of the Globe, "Ed" Howe, had taken great pains to discredit Wilde. As far back as February, 1882, Howe had written: "A nation which has produced such natural curiosities as Walt Whitman, Joaquin [sic] Miller and Col. Nicholas Smith could hardly have been expected to get so much excited about Oscar Wilde as to give him $300 a night for showing his calves." This was before Wilde was even scheduled to speak in Kansas. When the fact loomed large that Wilde would appear in Atchison, Howe delighted in reprinting on April 18 an adverse account of the poet's appearance in Kansas City. Among other things, the Kansas City Journal told its readers that Wilde's audience "carried away nothing which they did not take with them." The lecture was, "in fact, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound, and trash, signifying nothing." The article, dripping with derision, concluded with: "People will, of course, continue to go to see him as they do to view sideshow curiosities and monstrosities. We can assure them that they will see the biggest fashionable fraud that has ever come to us from over the sea." The following day Howe ran another review about Wilde's appearance in St. Joseph (even proudly print-

ing the author's name—"Young Jim Burnes, in the Gazette"). The review was harshly negative, pointing out that Wilde was "a man who never put forward a practical or original idea," that Wilde's "drawling delivery" of a "senseless lecture, combined with the senseless airs and silly affectations of the alleged apostle of aestheticism fell flat and stale."

On April 21, the day before Wilde's arrival in Atchison, the Globe ran this: "A gentleman who came off the Topeka this morning says that Oscar Wilde lectured there last night to a fifty-dollar house. The aesthete has been poorly patronized at every point on this circuit, as a dollar and a half is too much for a look at a man dressed in knee breeches."

But it remained for the arrival of Wilde for the Globe to finish off whatever doubts Atchison readers might have entertained about Howe's position toward the poet. Wilde was to lecture the evening of the 22d, and so the afternoon Globe ran a very long imaginary interview with Wilde, written by Howe. It was probably meant as an example of good American humor, in the vein as Nye and the others, but the tone was so deeply malicious that the spurious interview drifted at the end toward awkward, almost tongue-tied silliness. The "interview" began with a reporter who "kicked down the door" of Wilde's room on the third floor of the Otis House and found "a person bearing a marked resemblance to the drunken women seen occasionally in the police court. . . ." Wilde was pictured as "engaged in trimming his corns with a razor"; the room was in great disorder with food on a chair and on the window sill a chewed cigar which "resembled the weed a drunkard brings home with him on returning from a night's debauch." The wash basin was being used as a spittoon, and a half-drunk bottle of beer had spilled on the marble top of the dressing case, making it "foul, sticky and wet."

In Howe's only faintly funny interview, the reporter demanded to know why Wilde was "making a jackass" of himself, and further demanded, "in the great name of THE PRESS that you tell the honest truth . . . is it lunacy or money which induces

29. Edgar Watson "Ed" Howe (1833-1917) was about to become an important literary figure, with the publication in 1853 of his novel, The Story of a Country Town. He loved American culture, but had a sharp journalistic touch for foreigners peddling their own culture here. He called Sarah Bernhardt, whom he saw in St. Joseph, "distressingly ugly and scrobbish. See Calder M. Pickett, Ed Howe: Country Town Philosopher (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1968), for more on Howe's reaction to Wilde, Bernhardt, and others.

30. This presumably is Capt. Nicholas Smith (1836-1919). A Harvard educated attorney, Smith owned the weekly Lawrence Republican, and through his columns and speeches helped elect James H. Lane to the U.S. Senate. Smith was a Civil War veteran and returned to Lawrence in 1864. He wrote one much-printed poem, "Mater Dolores," but was best known as a lecturer. The title of one of his most popular lectures, "The Inconvenience of Being Named Smith," is oddly suggestive of Wilde's future—and greatest—comedy. The Importance of Being Earnest, A Contemporary Photograph shows Smith as a nattily dressed, slightly long-haired "esthetic" type.

31. In his autobiography, Howe wrote: "Oscar Wilde drifted in as a lecturer. I disliked him before he arrived, and dislike his memory to this day, and my interview with him was unfriendly."—E. W. Howe, Flat People (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929), p. 135.
you to exhibit yourself over the country like a woolly horse or hairy elephant?' Wilde took a
chew of black navy tobacco, chewed a hunk of it "meditatively," then admitted to his fraud:
"I am, as Artemus Ward would say, hogging the public. I usually receive reporters lying on
a velvet lounge, holding a book of poems in my hand, but by an accident at the hotel office you
came upon me while I was enjoying myself, and the only thing I can do is to throw myself
at your feet, and solicit the charity of your silence." The reporter then insisted that the
poet admit "that you are a plagiarist and a jackass to appear before intelligent audiences in knee breeches and advocate that they give up the honest business of making a living, and turn their attention to art, which has made every nation poor which has ever been noted for it, and that you are no poet, for though this is a reading people, a bookseller in this town has advertised your complete poems for sale for months at ten cents, and has not sold a single copy."

Wilde admitted it all—"and more." He said he was "an English adventurer, and having heard that Americans are easily humbugged, I came over to humbug them. I have made $25,000 at it, but I will shortly return to my own country again, as the attendance at my lectures is falling off. In Kansas City, St. Joe, Leavenworth and Topeka we scarcely paid expenses."

Wilde airily admitted to the reporter that he knew "no more about art than you do; I doubt if as much, and I believe the commonest paper hanger would scorn to put my ideas into practical use, for except for long hair and bandy legs, I do not amount to much." Wilde went on to say that American homes, particularly those in the West, were much superior to the "squalid cottage in which I live at home," that then when he returned to England he intended to "build a house after the style of those I have seen in America," but that for the moment he must continue to sneer at "everything American" because "it pays."

Wilde then admonished the reporter that nothing he had said should be reported. The reporter agreed, and Wilde hedged, suggesting that, after all, even bad publicity was better than no publicity at all. The made-up interview concluded with: "At this moment the hotel fell
down, and the poet and reporter were killed. There will be no lecture tonight, and no paper will be issued from this office tomorrow."

As if that malevolence were not enough, Howe added another paragraph following the interview: "There is good reason for believing that Oscar Wilde went among the merchants to-day offering to mention their business during his lecture tonight for fifty cents each, but as far as we can learn only two or three invested. The idea is not new with Mr. Wilde; it was invented by a circus clown."

But Howe was not finished. In that same edition of the Globe, he ran a huge cartoon depicting a monkey holding a rock and below it Oscar Wilde holding a sunflower. The
cartoon was captioned: "The Darwinian Theory Illustrated." Below the monkey was written "As he appeared when first captured," and below Wilde, "As he appears after being trained." Howe rewrote the original material below the cartoon, arguing in a pseudo-scientific jargon the merits of the Darwinian theory, and interjecting this:

The GLOBE, which is ever laboring in the cause of science, has procured, at the expense of four dollars, express added, two pictures which are above presented, one representing the 
pithecus and the other the British What-is-it, which has been on exhibition in this country for some months past, and which is at this precise moment said to be sequestered in a sky parlour at the Otis house, hiding from the curious gaze of the female guests of that caravansary.

As for Wilde's lecture that evening, probably neither Howe nor any of his staff attended—and no review of the lecture was printed the following day. However, on April 24, a social item did mention Wilde's name: "As Oscar Wilde would say, a delightfully joyous time was experienced at the residence of Charley Seip Saturday evening, the occasion being Mr. and Mrs. Seip's tin wedding. Apparently, Howe never changed his opinion of Wilde."

The account in the April 23 issue of the Atchison Daily Champion was better written than Howe's unfair attack, but still quite negative. The reporter told of a little burro with a sunflower between his "drooping ears" trudging along that afternoon "unwillingly" in the Atchison rain "wearing on either side a large placard, with the words 'I lecture at Corinthian

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32. This cartoon first appeared in the Washington Post, January 22, 1882.
33. See footnote 31.
Hall tonight.’” The reporter added, “We think the burro, at least, was ashamed of himself.”

Corinthian Hall was described as a horror that evening by the Champion reporter, “intensified by emptiness and loneliness,” with “heavy-footed boys who acted as ushers” and who lit the footlights with pieces of burning paper and made “mysterious journeys back and forth.” Mention was also made of the ticket-taker,34 a “young gentleman of British extraction,” whose voice bothered the people assembling in the hall because he could be heard “bewailing the barbarousness of the ‘blawsted country.’” Oscar was late coming on stage “to so thin a house” (about 30 people) but finally “the curtain rose and revealed a bare, cold, cheerless, inartistic and generally dreadful light stand, and on it a perfectly unornamented tumbler of water. . . .” When Oscar entered, his costume was described as one which only brought out “his physical defects.” His “small clothes . . . make Mr. Wilde’s legs look like those of a cottage bedstead,” and all-in-all his dress reminds his audience “of some vendor of corn-salve or eye water, standing on his dry goods box rostrum at the corner of Fifth and Commercial streets.”

As for Wilde’s delivery, the Champion reported that he had every bad fault imaginable: “His attitudes are ungraceful; . . . his voice is monotonous; each short sentence ending in a high note, and the effect of listening to him is that of reading a book without a period in it.” In other words, “with his nose in the air, his hand on his hip and those dreadful legs always in view, Mr. Wilde illustrates all that is not beautiful on the platform.”

The Champion admitted that “Mr. Wilde’s lecture in itself was well enough” and that if he had been dressed in “ordinary costume” he might have had “great acceptance” in a parlor. The reporter went on to give the substance of Wilde’s lecture, then coyly admitted: “Having seen Mr. Wilde and heard him, we withdraw

34. This was probably the agent, J. H. Vale.
from the position heretofore taken, that he is a pronounced and irreclaimable and gorgeous colored, and rainbow-hued ass; yet his theories are idle.

The article concluded: "Mr. Wilde should dress like a gentleman, cut his hair, learn to speak plain, stop calling everything 'lovely' and 'joyous,' or 'stoopid' and 'dreadful,' and so convince the world of the existence of the good stuff there really is in him, buried beneath a heavy weight of idle affection."

CONCLUSION

ACCORDING to Hart-Davis's collection of over a thousand Wilde letters, only one has come to light that was actually written from Kansas — and that to Norman Forbes- Robertson, from the Windsor Hotel in Topeka. The brief letter is as follows:


DEAR NORMAN, The summer is just breaking in Kansas, and everything looks lovely. I took a long drive by myself yesterday afternoon and had a delightful time in what they call a "spider buggy and fly-up trotter." No one knows the pleasure of driving till one drives an American trotter. They are absolutely perfect.

The local poet has just called on me with his masterpiece, a sanguinary lyric of 3000 lines on the Civil War. The most impassioned part begins thus:

36. According to the Leavenworth Times, April 20, 1882, Wilde arrived in Leavenworth from St. Joseph at 4:30 on the afternoon of April 19. Since he stayed at the Planters, perhaps it was Major Broadhead who offered him the horse and buggy to ride in.

37. I am indebted to Eugene H. DeGruy, curator of special collections at Pittsburgh State University, for identifying for the first time this "local poet" and the poem Wilde refers to. He was Thomas Brower Peacock (1852-1919). Born in Cambridge, Ohio, the son of Thomas William and Naomi Carron Peacock, he moved with his parents to Zanesville, Ohio, ca. 1861, where his father ran the Zanesville Aurora. In 1865 he moved again with his parents to Dresden, Ohio, where he and his father published the Monitor, to which he contributed "three romances in prose and a number of small poems." In 1870 he moved to Texas, where he taught school for one year, and ran a hotel for another, his patrons including Cole Younger, Jesse James, and W. F. Cody. He moved to Independence, Kan., in 1872, and to Topeka in 1874, where he was associate editor of the Kansas Democrat for eight years.
These examples of the Oscar Wilde fad in 1882 include, left, the "Oscar Wilde" pen-wiper; below left, advertising card with reference to the aesthetic movement; and below right, sheet music of the "Oscar Wilde Galop." The pen-wiper pattern was published in Peterson's Ladies National Magazine, Philadelphia, Pa., June, 1882. In presenting the pattern, the magazine commented on Oscar Wilde, the "cheeky young Irishman" and his American lecture tour. The comments on Wilde's dress, his ideas on home decoration, and the "pot of money" he received for his performances were yet another example of the press's hostility toward the poet's motives during his American tour. The 1882 advertising card, published by Donaldson Brothers, Five Points, New York, poked fun at the "aesthetic" movement, while at the same time hoping to cash in on Wilde's notoriety. The "Oscar Wilde Galop" sheet music was published in 1882 by the National Music Co., Chicago. The galop in "allegro brillante" by (?) Snow is another indication of the widespread awareness of Wilde's visit, and an attempt to profit on the public interest in him.
“Here Mayor.” Simpson battled bravely with his Fifteenth Kansas Cavalry.”

What am I to do? I enclose this morning’s interview. Ever yours.

OSCAR

Wilde left Kansas forever on April 24. However, he continued to lecture until October 13, delivering his last formal lecture in St. John, New Brunswick. He sailed from New York back to Liverpool on December 27, 1882, aboard the SS Bothnia. No doubt in the 28 years remaining of this remarkable man’s life—in his brilliant conversations, his thoughts and memories—his brief visit to Kansas was touched upon. Unfortunately, with one exception, the subject of Kansas is minimized in the great number of books written to date about Wilde. The exception was an unfortunate one for the image of Kansas. It began with a letter Wilde wrote in March, 1882, from Griggsville, Ill., and it is the youthful Wilde at his best—that is, full of witty invention and satiric nonsense at the expense of a staid figure of Victorian art: Sidney Colvin, Slade professor of fine arts at Cambridge. Wilde did not like Colvin, and in the letter mocks how, since an “art movement” has started in Griggsville, Colvin will probably soon be arriving there to lecture: “At present the style here is Griggsville rococo, and there are also traces of archaic Griggsville, but in a few days the Griggsville Renaissance will blossom: it will have an exquisite bloom for a week, and then (Colvin’s fourth lecture) become ‘debased Griggsville,’ and the Griggsville Decadence.”

In time this small town of Griggsville, Ill., became Griggsville, Kan., in the anecdotal humor concerning Wilde and his American tour. Just when or how the error was made is uncertain, although Wilde himself may have either forgotten or deliberately changed the location to increase the humor of a cultureless hinterland yearning to be “aesthetic.” The anecdote is this: While touring America, Wilde received a telegram from the citizens of Griggsville, Kan., asking him to come deliver his lecture on the “Beautiful.” Wilde telegraphed back, “Begin by changing the name of your town.” According to the French writer, Henri Mazel, Stuart Merrill is the source for the story—although in the very last writings Merrill did about Wilde, he refers to the anecdote but says that the town was Griggsville, Ark. At any rate, Kansas has been the favorite location for the writers who have mentioned the story, and it was not until after the publication of the Illinois letter in Hart-Davis’s book that the error was corrected.

It must be said that nowhere in his writings about America, including “Impressions of America” (1883), “The American Man” (1887), and “The American Invasion” (1887) did Wilde ever say anything derogatory about Kansas. Considering the treatment he received at the hands of the press, perhaps this reticence is even more remarkable than Frank Harris’s doubtful observation about Wilde: “He disliked to hear any opinion that differed from his own and it never came into his head that Oxford was no nearer the meridian of truth than Lawrence, Kansas, and certainly as far from Heaven.”

38. The line is misquoted. It should read “Major Simpson” rather than “Mayor Simpson.” It is a line from Peacock’s The频频es of the Border Woman (New York: G. W. C. Robinson & Co., 1880), which the poet almost surely presented to Wilde that day in the Windsor. Either Wilde misread the line or, more likely, Wilde’s difficult handwriting was misread for the Vvvan Holland typescript of the letter in the Library of Congress, the one used by Hart-Davis. The Major Simpson was E. F. Simpson—according to Peacock’s footnote in the original edition of the poem, “present U.S. Marshal, March 1, 1880.” In a later book, Poems of the Plains and Songs of the Solitudes, 3d edition (New York: C. F. Patnam’s Sons, 1889), pp. 309, 326, Peacock twice quotes from references he says Wilde made to his poetry: “Mr. Peacock certainly writes with great vigor, freedom, and enthusiasm, and these are admirable things,” and from “Oscar Wilde’s letter to a Topica gentleman, published in the Capital” this: “Topica has a poet, which seems to me a feather, perhaps I may call it a Peacock’s feather, in the city’s cap.”

39. If this is a reference to the “Ah, Oscar” interview in The Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 103. The letter was written to Mrs. George Lewis, an old friend of Wilde’s, and wife of attorney Sir George Lewis.

40. Hart-Davis, The Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 103. The letter was written to Mrs. George Lewis, an old friend of Wilde’s, and wife of attorney Sir George Lewis.

42. Ibid., p. 469.
43. The Kansas location appears in Lewis and Smith, Oscar Wilde Discovers America, in Harvest, Pearson’s excellent biography, Oscar Wilde, His Life and Art (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 96, as well as in the works of other authors.