The Queen of Kansas Prairies

Butler County’s Kafir Corn Carnivals

by Joyce Thierer

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. Kaffir corn, the Queen of Kansas prairies, has during these days of heat and drouth, of burning and scorching wind been contentedly biding her time. Until drenched by the autumn rains she lifts in maiden-
ly 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 county because of the pleasure and profit that they bring.

—Walnut Valley Times, 1911

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The author would like to thank the staff of the Butler County Historical Society, El Dorado, for access to their archives.

1. Manley L. Arnold, “Kaffir is Queen,” Walnut Valley Times (weekly), October 13, 1911.
Manley Arnold’s *Walnut Valley Times* tribute to the predecessor of milo put romantic words to the ardent feelings 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 “kaif corn,” was scientifically known as *Sorghum saccharatum* var. It belongs to the same species as broom corn, dura or Jerusalem corn, and the grain and ensilage 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 durus 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 Natal, a country in southern Africa. Its name was derived from the Kafir tribe. 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.

Three main varieties of kafir were grown—white-, red-, and black-hulled. The hulls or glumes surrounding the seeds contained the color. Kafir heads were slender, cylindrical, and ten to fourteen inches long. The egg-shaped seeds were grown on spikelets, topping stems about one to two inches in diameter. These stalks, of twelve to fifteen nodes with alternating leaves, attained heights of five to eight feet depending upon the quality of soil and level of moisture.

Kafir corn was the direct genetic mother of today’s milo and grain sorghums. Kafir produced larger crops than did corn in dry years and did well on thin-soiled upland fields. Bankers even gave away kafir seed packets and encouraged its planting in an attempt to keep farms economically viable during drought years. Butler County’s early agricultural statistics showed corn and kafir alternating as the top grain producer. In 1911, the year of the first Kafir Corn Carnival, corn had an average value of $10.62 per acre while kafir produced a whopping average of $15.00 per acre. Butler County farmers’ expanded interest in livestock during this period was leading...

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5. Vol. P. Mooney, *History of Butler County Kansas* (Lawrence, Kans.: Standard Publishing Co., 1916), 266; “Ruckle Claims Honor First Kafir Grower,” *Walnut Valley Times*, September 22, 1911. There appears to be controversy concerning who was the first to grow kafir as later articles claim others to have been the first.
Between 1911 and 1929 downtown El Dorado periodically was transformed into Kafirville in a series of carnivals framed as harvest festivals. In its first year, the carnival attracted an estimated twenty thousand visitors.

One visitor who passed under the ornate triumphal arch commented, "Once you walk through, not only were you inside Kafirville, but you were in another world."
to a proportionally increased demand for feed grains on local markets that in turn led to a rise in the value of kafir. Not only did the value of kafir increase, but production relative to corn also increased.

Adhering to the theory that rain was more likely where ground had been broken ("rain follows the plow"), businessmen envisioned Butler County's virgin grassland becoming a garden of flourishing crops. Increasing numbers of family farms would plow increasing numbers of fields, and increase precipitation in the area. Until the lush garden was achieved, local businessmen recognized kafir's potential to portray Butler County as economically viable for farmers. 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. On the last day of the 1911 county fair, Joseph C. Powell, president of the El Dorado Merchants' Retail Association, called a meeting of fellow public-spirited citizens, and the Kafir Corn Carnival moved from idea to reality in just a few months. Harvest festivals, agricultural fairs, street fairs, and grain and corn shows were common, but this was to be the first such fete devoted to kafir.7

Although the first Kafir Corn Carnival was to have lasted four days, the organizers quickly consolidated it to three, October 18–20. With a little less than two months to work, promoters quickly established committees. John Bunyan Adams became the carnival's chairman. Adams' occupations included farmer, teacher, banker, lawyer, legislator, businessman, publisher, and owner of the Walnut Valley Times, and later half-owner of the El Dorado Times. His connections through both his diverse background and his memberships in several fraternal organizations proved valuable in promoting the carnival. Adams had lauded kafir since 1886, considering it crucial to the county's commercial interests. His ultimate goal was to make El Dorado a city of consequence.8

The other committee members of 1911 were not far behind Adams in boosterism. William F. Benson, Harve L. Haines, Lee Scott, and Joseph C. Powell were members of the executive committee. Other committees and their chairs included: Queen Committee, Corah Adelaide Mooney; Advertising and Decoration Committee, F.A. Pielsticker; Dance Committee, Robert H. Bradford; Finance Committee, C.H. Pattison; Publicity Committee, C.M. McCaughan; Decoration Committee, J.H. Sandifer; Premium Committee, W.F. Benson; Parade Committee, L. Haines; Agricultural Displays and Booths, J.C. Powell; and Music Arrangements, Lee Scott. In addition, each township had a committee to coordinate its own activities. All committee members were businessmen; no farmers were included.9

Adams saw to it that his newspaper boosted the carnival at every opportunity. He published weekly articles on the Kafir queen contest, highlighting a different township each time and encouraging competition among them. He conducted a contest for creative writing to extol the attributes of kafir. Even articles on weather and food were used as vehicles to remind readers of the glories of the upcoming carnival.


7. Jessie Perry Stratford, Butler County's Eighty Years, 1855–1935 (n.p.: 1937), 96; "Kafir Corn Carnival Set for October 15, Walnut Valley Times, September 1, 1911; "Kafir Carnival Dates Reset," ibid., September 8, 1911.

8. Stratford, Butler County's Eighty Years, 177–78; "Business Men Arranging for Biggest Celebration in Butler County History," Walnut Valley Times, September 1, 1911; "Smile and Tell Everybody About the Resources of Butler County," ibid., October 20, 1911; other articles in the Walnut Valley Times discuss his activities.

9. "Kafir Corn Carnival Set for October 10–13; Business Men Arranging for Biggest Celebration in Butler County History," ibid., September 1, 1911; "Kafir Carnival Color Will Be Red, Yellow, and White—Committees Busy," ibid., September 29, 1911; "Arnold is to Aid Kafir Carnival," ibid., September 15, 1911; "Committees are Named in 17 Townships to Manage Exhibits at Big Carnival," ibid., October 6, 1911.
Walnut Valley Times articles chronicled the boosters’ avid pursuit of chances to promote their project: "Automobile Trips Planned for Douglas and Cassoday Fairs," "W.F. Benson to Boost Carnival at State Fair," "Carnival is Talked by Boosters on Auto Tour: Southern Butler Knows Kafir Show is Sure Go." Boosters even enlisted the aid of the Kansas Real Estate Dealers Association to promote the carnival, El Dorado, and the county with a booth at Chicago’s winter land show. They solicited funds from various livestock commissions that worked in the county and further solidified that involvement by publishing their letters of participation in Adams’ paper.  

As depicted in the Walnut Valley Times, boosterism gained intensity as the carnival dates neared. Advertisements were larger, some going to full page and including such titles as "Kafir Corn Carnival Sale: A Great Sale of Interest to everyone attending Butler County’s Carnival." Some announced a wide range of goods, such as Missouri Pacific Railway "Home Seeker Tickets," while collections of smaller ads might sport large headlines proclaiming "Booster Advertisers—It’ll Pay You to Trade With These." An article in the Walnut Valley Times promoted the Kafir Corn Carnival as a whirlwind affair:

There will be something doing every minute, there’s to be a big bunch of prominent men here to speak, bands and outdoor attractions of every kind, a lot of shows for the young folks to enjoy—and Kafir Corn everywhere. Booths will be erected in the streets—it’s to be a regular carnival, with all the excitement and fun that mark such affairs and a lot of good, solid educative entertainment thrown in."  

They boasted that electric lights would be placed on the Kafirville triumphal arch and bragged of the technological luxury of two phones to be installed at the information booth. The Woman’s Relief Corps even planned a tent for country women. The tent provided a place for women from out of town to rest, diaper a baby, or give a child a nap at a time when slower transportation meant that trips between home and town were not feasible.  

That first year the executive committee selected the national colors as the carnival colors. All store fronts and floats were to use the official colors and kafir products. The lighted triumphal arch, which stretched from sidewalk to sidewalk, was decorated with red, white, and blue bunting and with kafir seeds, stalks, and leaves. The arch’s ornateness promised that, according to an eyewitness, "Once you walked through, not only were you inside Kafirville, but you were in another world." Bunting with carnival colors continued as far as the eye could see, draping the booths that obscured the storefronts on both sides of the street. Through the crowds one saw kafir and other agricultural products displayed in intricate designs as twenty-seven of Butler’s twenty-nine townships vied for prizes. Booth designers were to use primarily kafir. They used heads especially, but also made creative use of stalks, leaves, and kernels. The Walnut Valley Times described some of the booths: "The [Lincoln] booth is literally banked with kafir, heads of both colors are arranged in artistic displays on all sides. Pictures of Lincoln and the United States ensign enhance the view." The Douglas booth had a fence in front, "a handsome Kafir bell overhead and

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11. "Kafir Corn Carnival Sale: A Great Sale of Interest to everyone attending Butler County’s Carnival," ibid., October 20, 1911; "We Sell Home Seeker Tickets," ibid., October 27, 1911; "Booster Advertisers—It’ll Pay You to Trade With These," ibid., September 29, 1911; "Kafir Corn Carnival Set for October 10-13: Business Men Arranging for Biggest Celebration in Butler County History," ibid., September 1, 1911.
12. "Gorgeous Triumphal Arch with 1500 Dazzling Bulbs of Light to be Kafir Carnival Feature," ibid., October 6, 1911; "Phones Installed in Kafirville During Carnival," ibid., October 20, 1911; "Bring Landless Men to Our Manless Land to Raise Big Kafir Crop," Benson Says," ibid., September 8, 1911; "Carnival Advertises Butler County as a Model of Progressiveness," ibid., October 27, 1911.
Using kafir and other agricultural products, Butler County’s townships created intricately designed displays. Behind them, storefronts were decorated with kafir seeds, heads, stocks, and leaves to create “some of the prettiest store windows in El Dorado.”
a flag, with Kafir dyed blue for the star field." The Rosalia booth, built by the Ladies Aid Society of the Christian Church, contained a cottage, a steer, rabbits, sunflowers, and artistic designs—all in kafir. Lincoln Township won first prize (fifty dollars) for the best booth, Douglas Township received second prize (twenty-five dollars), and Rosalia Township collected third prize (ten dollars).19

Kaffirs ville stood in the one-hundred block of East Central, and behind the booths were the stores. Among the storefront decorations were Al Spain’s display of kafir heads in the billiard hall; B.A. Kosanky’s tailoring establishment’s tasteful combination of kafir corn, autumn leaves, and carnival-colored bunting; and A. Wiedemann’s music store’s employment of glue, kafir seed, and wood to make a guitar nearly six feet long. These were “some of the prettiest store windows in El Dorado,” according to the Walnut Valley Times.14

The queen contest was conducted by the only committee headed by a woman. The rules stated that the queen could not come from El Dorado but was to be selected from outside the town by voters paying one cent per vote. The money thus acquired was used to defray costs of the contest. Ballot boxes were placed in stores and banks in every town in the county. The contest ended at 9:00 P.M. Saturday, October 7, to allow time to count the votes. The young woman receiving the most votes would be the queen, with the eight runners-up as her maids. The 1911 Kafir Corn Queen was Geneva Houser of Cassoday. The queen and maids reigned over the carnival, rode on the royal float in all three parades, were entertained by El Dorado families, and received a variety of prizes.15

In addition to other prizes, businesses from throughout the state awarded premiums such as “$25 for the best drilled Woodmen drill team,” “a large $10 wool bunting American flag to the school putting the largest percentage of its enrollment in school children’s parade,” “$10 for the best masked costume worn at the mask ball,” “$5 for best thirty heads of white kaffirs,” “$10 for the best essay of not more than 500 words on ‘Kafir Corn and its Uses,’” “$10 Thomas lawn mower for the best decorated residence in El Dorado,” “$10 for best decorated auto,” “$10 for best decorated carriage or buggy,” and “$5 for best decorated saddle horse.” The carnival’s principal link to agricultural fairs and harvest festivals was awarding premiums to a diversity of crops that represented local farm production. Prizes were presented for both white and red kafir, milo maize, cane, yellow Indian corn, white Indian corn, and oats.16

Each of the three days of the carnival had a different theme and a set program. The 1911 Walnut Valley Times carried the following line-up of events:


Thursday, October 19, Queen’s Day: Morning—Grand Carnival Queen’s parade, headed by Carnival Queen and 13th U.S. Cavalry band, with agricultural and trades display floats. Afternoon—Address by John Fields, editor Oklahoma

13. Tommy Orton, interview, Flint Hills Oral History Project, Lyon County Historical Society, Emporia, Kans.; “Lincoln Wins First Prize for Booth,” Walnut Valley Times, October 27, 1911; “Kaffirs ville Booths are Decorated Artistically,” ibid., October 20, 1911. While the premium list says that national colors were to be used, conflicting information suggests that the official colors were red, yellow, and white—chosen to create a suitable background to display Kafir. “Kaffir Carnival Colors Will Be Red, Yellow, and White—Committees Busy,” ibid., September 29, 1911; “Premium List: $500 in Premiums Given to Winners of Exhibitions, Butler County’s Kafir Corn Carnival, El Dorado, Kansas, Oct. 18–19–20 [1911],” Kafir Corn Carnival Collection.


15. “Queen Must Come From Other Town,” ibid., September 29, 1911; “Plan for Choosing Queen of Kaffir Corn Carnival Announced by Committee,” ibid., September 15, 1911; “Queen Neva Will Have Busy Time at Carnival,” ibid., October 20, 1911.


Friday, October 20, School Children's Day: Morning—Barbecue starts at 9 a.m. and continues all day. Afternoon—Parade of school children and school floats at 1 p.m.; address by W.R. Stubbs, governor of Kansas. Evening—Bal Masque; Landes Bros. Carnival Shows.17

Each day of the carnival also had a parade. Only floats from townships, fraternal organizations, and private floats from outside El Dorado could compete for prizes, but many floats representing El Dorado also participated. The first year, the Robinson Township float won the first place prize of fifty dollars and two books. Fairview Township's second prize was Frank W. Blackmar's forthcoming four-volume History of Kansas. The 1911 parade also had categories for decorated cars. horseback riders, and best decorated buggy or carriage. The third and final day of the carnival was highlighted by the School Children's Parade. The county superintendent closed schools so that all schoolchildren could march—and most did. The Walnut Valley Times outlined the parade route as "fairgrounds south on Main to Metropolitan hotel, west on Third to Denver, north on Denver to Central, east on Central to Main, north on Main for dispersion."18

The last kafir corn kernel had hardly been swept from Kafirville before plans were being laid for the next year. The 1911 Kafir Corn Carnival had surpassed the dreams of its boosters. The opening-day crowd had been estimated at twenty thousand, the largest to that date to assemble in the town of 3,036. Attendance remained high throughout the carnival. The committee structure, three-day plan, township booths, displays, queen contest, program schedule, and Kafirville had proven so successful that they were carried over into later carnivals.19

The boosters decided to add more events, contests, and band concerts to the 1912 carnival. In its enthusiasm, the executive committee hit on the idea of having a baby parade as one of the second day's main events. They defined babies as children too young to march in the School Children's Parade. Parents spent hours preparing costumes and converting baby buggies, tricycles, doll buggies, and coaster wagons into crepe paper- and kafir-decorated miniature floats for their offspring.

No Kafir Corn Carnival was held in 1913; however, the 1914 and 1915 carnivals followed the precedents set by those of 1911 and 1912 with a few exceptions. The most-remembered aspect of the 1914 carnival was a special guest. William I. Joseph, originally of the Whitewater-Potwin area of the county, returned from his new home in South Africa with a young Rhodesian boy, who was soon dubbed "Kafir boy." He rode a float in the carnival, clad in a loincloth and carrying a spear.20

One of the most interesting aspects of the festival was the 1915 founding of the Knights of Mapira. This fraternal organization, unique to El Dorado, was organized only for the promotion and production of the carnival. It comprised the same businessmen who formerly had identified themselves as the carnival's boosters and planners and was similar to other fraternal organizations.21 Joseph Adams was the founder. According to their ritual, the members underwent an initiation that took them as symbolic

18. "Premium List: $500 in Premiums Given to Winners of Exhibitions; "Lincoln Wins First Prize for Booth," Walnut Valley Times, October 27, 1911; "With Beaming Faces Children's Army Marches in Great Parade on Last Day of Kafir Carnival: Pageant is Cheered by Big Throng," ibid.; "Thursday Parade Order is Named," ibid., October 20, 1911; many other articles discuss other floats and parades; for example, see ibid., October 27, 1911.
19. Mooney, History of Butler County Kansas, 264; Kansas State Board of Agriculture; Eighteenth Biennial Report, 7–8.
travelers to Bulowayo and other sites in southern Rhodesia, the original homeland of kafir. Each initiate carried in his right hand a perfect stalk of the great Mapira (African name for kafir corn), grown from selected seed, to light his way and warn the Great Lomagundi of his approach. Each traveler, or Wakupolata, took a secret oath to be faithful to the interest of Mapira, promote its cultivation and improvement, support the other brothers, and maintain the secrets and mysteries of the Great Council. The ritual booklet pronounced itself, by its cover, “a ceremony pertinent to, and exemplified only in connection with, the annual Butler County Kafir Corn Carnival.” Each member wore an orange fez with a black tassel and “Kafir Corn Carnival” inscribed in black. These fezzes were worn proudly by the knights as they acted as parade marshals. Mapira knights escorted the queens and provided information for visitors. Initiations were held every evening of the carnival. By 1927 the brotherhood had 450 members. The knights were familiar sights in all the carnivals from 1915 on.22

After the fourth successful carnival, Butler County entered its oil-boom era. Elmer T. Peterson, editor of the Wichita Beacon and later of Better Homes and Gardens, lamented that “Kafir was obscured by oil, and the shocks of corn gave place to huge and grotesque derricks and gargaritan monsters in the form of tanks.”23

For nine years oil, then World War I, overshadowed and discouraged celebrations of the county’s premiere crop. These appear to be the general reasons that a carnival was not held between 1916 and 1923. Although additional reasons were probable, they were lost with the businessmen of the era. Then, as the agricultural depression of the 1920s deepened, businessmen once again turned their attention to kafir. In 1924 Joe Davis Turner, secretary of the chamber of commerce, moved that the carnival be reinstated. The motion passed. Elmer Peterson praised this resurrection saying, “The black gold is still there and is making wealth. But the everlasting wealth [is] of the gray gold of kafir and the yellow gold of corn and wheat. . . . Butler again is recognized as fundamental to the prosperity of the great agricultural area of which El Dorado is the center.”24

The 1924 Kafir Korn Karnival departed from tradition with a spelling change, but retained the three-day concept, designating October 8 as Fraternal Day, October 9 as Queen’s Day, and October 10 as School Day. A major departure from previous years was the make-up of the carnival committee. The 1924 Kafir Korn Karnival Committee included three farmers—Wallace Cameron, Harrison Sluss, and D.E. Powell, and one stockman, R.E. Templeton. Each served on either the township booth committee or the parade committee. The queen’s contest was now handled by a committee of men. Women were represented only on the baby parade committee.25

The queen contest both resembled and differed from those of previous years. Contestants still had to reside in Butler County outside of El Dorado, votes remained one cent apiece with no numerical limit that a voter could cast, and ballot boxes remained scattered. Differences included voting by mail and the introduction of a nomination form. The form gave a nominee five hundred free votes. Each candidate could be so nominated only once. Thelma

22. Ritual: The Knights of Mapira (n.p.; Knights of Mapira, 1926). The Knights also were active in other community events, see for example William Galvani and L. M. Stallbaumer, Main & Central: El Dorado, Kansas, 1860–1985 (El Dorado, Kans.: Butler County Historical Society, 1988), 37–39; Zachary Lamb, “El Dorado’s Kafir Corn Carnival,” manuscript, Butler County Historical Society, 6; J. W. Kirkpatrick, [Kafir Corn Carnival], 16 mm (videocassette, El Dorado, Kans.: Butler County Historical Society, n.d.), which shows the Knights of Mapira acting as marshals of the kafir carnival parade.

23. Stratford, Butler County’s Eighty Years, 97; large oil deposits were first hit at Stapleton #1 on October 6, 1915.

24. Ibid., 97.

25. Kafir Korn Karnival, 1924 unpagd program, Kafir Corn Carnival Collection. Butler County experienced an active Ku Klux Klan membership in the mid-1920s. The Butler County Historical Society has a photograph of their parade entry that also appears to be of the mid-1920s. It is interesting to note the rise in KKK activity and the resulting spelling change, see “Kafir Korn Karnival Committees” list, Kafir Corn Carnival Collection.
Joseph won the queen contest and a "royal coronation gown, beautiful afternoon frock, hat to match, two pairs of slippers, a pair of hose, and seventy-five dollars in gold," as noted in the 1924 program. This cash gift was a first. The queen and her maids continued to be entertained in the homes of El Dorado residents during their reign, rode on the queen's float leading each parade, and participated in a tight schedule. From ten in the morning until late at night they ruled over nonstop entertainment including bands, novelty performers such as "Captain Hugo's High Dive" and "Chefalo Leaps the Fiery Chasm," a free street dance, the Boys and Girls Club show, a grain exposition, and multiple parades.

Queen's Day events included three parades, as evidenced in this day's lineup: 10:00 A.M. band concerts; 11:00 A.M. baby parade; 2:00 P.M. queen's parade; 4:00 P.M. old-fashioned fiddlers contest; 4:30 P.M. political speakers from the state speakers bureau, including candidates for governor; 7:00 P.M. band concerts; 7:30 P.M. illuminated (electric) parade (the first and last such for the carnivals); and 8:30 P.M. street dance. Something was happening every minute.

Parades were another carryover from the earlier carnivals. The 1924 program indicated the "line of march" for all parades except the baby parade as "From at Olive and Washington, east to Main [street], north to Fourth, west to Washington, south to Olive, west to Washington and disband." Cash prizes for the queen's parade were awarded in three categories: business floats, township floats, and saddle and driving horses for ladies. The 1924 program stated, "Business Floats entered for prize competition are to carry no advertising matter. Firm name permitted. Advertising floats are not barred but are not entitled for prize competition. All Butler County business houses cordially invited to enter with floats." The Fraternal Day parade offered three cash prizes for each of the two categories of fraternal floats and decorated cars.

School Day, the third and last day of the carnival, was held on Friday, October 10. Its events included: 10:00 A.M. band concerts; 10:00 A.M. to 12:00 midnight free attractions, which included "top notch circus thrillers and death-defying stunts, specialties for the children"; 1:00 P.M. school parade, where almost every schoolgirl and schoolboy in Butler County and her or his teacher marched, accompanied by school yells, cheers, and floats; 3:30 P.M. vaudeville and sports, including free acts downtown and an El Dorado versus Florence football game at the athletic field with free admission to parading schoolchildren; 4:30 P.M. political speakers; 7:00 P.M. band concerts; and 8:00 P.M. street dance. Parade boosters encouraged all floats and decorated cars to participate in all parades.

In addition to these three days of events, Kafirville replaced the humdrum of Main Street storefronts with magnificent township booths and their displays. The front of each booth was decorated with kafir corn, and only farm products produced in that township could be used for display purposes. Cash prizes were awarded for originality of design, artistic arrangement, variety of products, and quality of products displayed. First prize had increased to two hundred dollars in 1924. The 1924 program stated that earlier prize-winning booths had been "reproduced at the International Dry Farming Congress in Wichita and at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco."

Agricultural displays in Kafirville were established in the McClure Building on South Main Street and the Dillenbeck Building, 401 South Main Street. Classes of and rules for showing agricultural animals, grains, and garden produce paralleled those of modern-day county fairs. However, kafir and several other crops and animal breeds shown in 1924 are no longer produced on today's farms.

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
Each year the carnival was highlighted with the School Children's Parade, and school was closed to allow children to march in the event. For children too young to participate, a baby parade was created, and parents spent hours decorating baby buggies, tricycles, and wagons into miniature floats.
The 1925 Kafir Corn Carnival (with a return to the original spelling), was promoted as “Butler’s Biggest Blowout.” The two major economic interests were the focus as October 14 was designated Oil Day and October 15 Farm Day, while the third day, October 16, was retained as School Day. Oil Day included skill exhibits featuring oil workers—contests for rig building, boiler loading, wire rope splicing, and standard bandaging for broken legs. Hog and chicken calling were among the Farm Day contests. Other new attractions were tortoise races, boxing, and more circus, carnival, and vaudeville acts. Kafirville diversified from strictly township booths to include booths of schoolwork displays related to kafir.31

Times continued to change rapidly in Butler County. The 1926 carnival—October 20, 21, and 22—blended the old with the new. Butler County had outgrown its boomerism. While the carnival followed the scheduling patterns of previous carnivals, it boasted more contests, more Kafirville booths, and more premiums. Special interest groups sparked the addition of a second parade on the first day, with both a morning fraternal parade and an afternoon Oil Day parade. Increased involvement in ranching and a rise in the mythic image of the cowboy was evidenced in listing a mounted cowboy class premium for the first time. As was the tradition, “All prizes amounting to $5.00 or more were paid in gold.” Women’s organizations were instrumental in increased “comfort” during these later years of the carnival. For example, the program boasted drinking fountains and restrooms among the carnival’s amenities.32

These modifications reflected changes throughout the United States. Also occurring was a changing vision regarding rural society and a movement away from the traditional yeomen farmer. Rural life also was characterized by rapid change, more mechanization, a decrease in geographical isolation, and modified farm culture giving rise to increasing urban values and institutions. Less distinction was seen between rural life and town life. The accompanying shift to agribusiness is evidenced by the role of commercial interests in the agricultural productivity promoted by the carnival.

The carnival continually gained broader coverage in newspapers, newsreels, and private company newsletters such as the Skelly News. The latter carried a description of the company’s booth and of its float, “The Good Ship Skelly,” and listed roles played in the carnival by some of its many employees. Iva Ferrier, queen of the 1926 Kafir Corn Carnival, for instance, was crowned by Fred A. Pielsticker, vice president and general manager of the Skelly Oil Company, in a ceremony preceding the queen’s ball.33

“Pausing in its hurried rush of industry, the Old Kingdom of Butler will lay aside the cares of the farm, the field, and the town, on October 19, 20, and 21” intoned the 1927 Kafir Corn Carnival program. This program included the usual events, plus the “most pretentious and expensive feature ever brought to a Kafir Corn Carnival”—a U.S. Cavalry exhibition of spectacular cavalry maneuvers, a sham battle, and concerts by the U.S. Military Band.34

The 1929 Kafir Corn Carnival and Fall Round-up program reflected another transition of feelings in Butler County. The changing emphasis on the cowboy, round-up, and rodeo events, and the increasing role of the livestock industry began to overshadow the traditional patterns of the Kafir Corn Carnival. This changing consensus of what the Kafir Corn Carnival should embody re-

31. Kafir Corn Carnival, 1925 unpaged program, Kafir Corn Carnival Collection.
32. Kafir Corn Carnival, 1926 unpaged program, ibid.
34. Kafir Corn Carnival, 1927 unpaged program, Kafir Corn Carnival Collection.
reflects the breakdown of the original vision held by the boosters. The new group of promoters looked at other shows and saw theirs as portraying outdated principles. From the executive committee's file came a report stating that eighty-seven letters of inquiry were sent to all township officials following the carnival. Only thirty bothered to reply. Two favored continuing the Kafir Corn Carnival in the traditional manner; sixteen opposed the Kafir Corn Carnival and favored a grain show; seven opposed the Kafir Corn Carnival but stated no preference; five registered indifferent or doubtful replies. In other words, two favored continuing the Kafir Corn Carnival, twenty-three were opposed, and five were indifferent. The 1930 program was still held under the auspices of the Butler County Kafir Corn Carnival and Fair Association, but was entitled the "Second Annual Fall Roundup and Terrapin Derby." 35

The first group of Kafir Corn Carnivals, 1911-1915, directly reflects the boosters' image of the Edenic aspects of the central Great Plains, while the second round of carnivals, 1924-1927, mirrors the rising influence of agribusiness. The third group of carnivals, 1929-1930, illustrates the diverging values of the promoters, and emphasizes the diversity of Butler County's economy and of its citizens' lives, their vision of the county's future modified by a changing popular culture. No longer was kafir king. Changing crops, changing farm cultural practices, changing interests, and a new infatuation with the rodeo killed Butler County's claim to fame, the Kafir Corn Carnival. 36

In 1976, however, bicentennial fever, as evidenced by a nationwide increase in nostalgia and a desire to identify with past glories, led to one last resurrection of the Butler County kafir carnival. El Dorado Jaycees, philosophical successors of the carnival's original sponsors, and the local bicentennial committee sponsored a Saturday-to-Saturday, October 9-16, Kafir Corn Carnival. A few events, such as the single parade, queen contest, and circus reflected the carnival's past, but also included were a tractor pull, art association-sponsored art and craft show, parent and teacher organization-sponsored fun night, Kiwanis-sponsored town meeting and political gathering complete with voter registration, Jaycee's bicentennial burger feed, Jaycee western show featuring the Nashville News Band and KBUL radio personalities, high school football game, and car show. 37

Business and economic interests were more subtle in the new, week-long celebration. Events were held on more sites than just downtown, and most were in the evening. An effort to re-create Kafirville was made in the one-hundred block of East Central. The old Kafirville arch was reduced in 1976 to a banner, donated by the El Dorado Rotary Club, that stretched across Main and Central. 38 Milo took the place of kafir in the sixteen Kafirville booths, just as the easier-to-harvest grain had replaced kafir in area fields. Booth holders included three 4-H clubs, Kansas Jaycees Cerebral Palsy Camp, the Business and Professional Women's Club of El Dorado, two churches, the folklore class, the gymnastics class at El Dorado High School, Home Interiors and Gifts, the Butler County News, MID-KAP, the Desk and Derrick Club, Terramara, Inc., the Butler County Democratic Party, the Butler County Republican Party, and Consuelo's Taco Stand. Trophies were awarded, and official Kafir Corn Carnival buttons were sold to defray expenses and serve as souvenirs. 39

35. Kafir Corn Carnival and Fall Roundup, 1929 unpagd program, ibid.; transactions of the 1929 Kafir Corn Carnival committee, ibid.; Annual Fall Roundup and Terrapin Derby, 1930 unpagd program, ibid.

36. While the opening quote calls Kafir "queen" most sources call it "king," an interesting engendering of a crop.


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The 1925 and 1926 kafir carnivals focused on a second major interest booming in Butler County—oil.
Local newspaper coverage included photographs of the approximately 125 to 140 entries in the two-hour parade, and an announcement of the winners.\(^4\) The paper also ran a series of brief news spots and historic photographs and carried advertisements utilizing the Kafir Corn Carnival theme.\(^41\) These ads were not as numerous, however, as were those of earlier years.\(^42\)

The boosters of the Kafir Corn Carnival of 1911 openly stated that they were using the carnival to advertise El Dorado and Butler County. They hoped to attract settlers and increase land values, while at the same time showing what a dandy town El Dorado was. If nothing else, on a more short-term basis, the carnival would bring money into El Dorado. Butler County from the beginning added boosterism to kafir to create a new county product. That product, the Kafir Corn Carnival, was created to promote Butler County through creative advertising. Portraying the Edenic farmscape of the county would encourage farm immigration, increase land values, and heighten the overall standard of living of the county.

Was the carnival successful? In a September 1927 letter to the general manager of Capital Enterprise in Kansas City soliciting prize money, the carnival chairman boasted of the involvement of everyone in the community. Farmers, the railroads, and five thousand children had participated, in addition to “125 business men” who were “actively engaged” in “furthering the success of the Butler County Kafir Corn Carnival . . . Butler County’s only celebration.”\(^43\) The result was “the financial support of every local business man, without exception” and “[m]ore than 50,000 visitors” the year before.\(^44\) Rainfall in the county did not increase, and grazing replaced farming as the more economical use of much of the land. Oil became the primary industry. As the fortunes of oil ebbed, many of the town’s residents commuted to Wichita to work. However, the fortunes of the town have persisted over the years.

When longtime Butler County residents are asked about the Kafir Corn Carnival they refer to the carnival of their youth, not that of 1976. The recreation was a fine event, but not the same. Earlier carnivals had much less competition for a person’s attention, for it was the premiere entertainment of its day, and the carnivals’ focus on that which was central to the livelihood of the community was total. And as a festival unique to the county it remains a good source of conversation with outsiders, poor souls who may not even know of the existence of kafir, much less how important a grain could be to a community. Today, diverse interests and endless sources of entertainment mean that an annual Kafir Corn Carnival is definitely a thing of the past.

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42. Ibid., October 4-12, 1976; these advertisements replicate Christmas style ads with the Kafir Corn Carnival theme.

43. Unidentified author to Charles Branham, September 30, 1927, Kafir Corn Carnival Collection.