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THE DEPOPULATION OF THE DHEGIA-SIOUAN KANSA PRIOR TO REMOVAL

WILLIAM E. UNRAU

Leslie Fiedler's clever title, The Return of the Vanishing American, is symbolical of ameliorating conditions that have characterized the Native American community in recent years. It cannot be denied, of course, that many of the old problems persist. Abject poverty, lack of jobs, chronic disease, and shockingly short life expectancies are still the destiny of too many American Indians. Nevertheless, the availability of more professional health services, a recognition that traditional cultural practices are worthy of further development, and the enjoyment of an increasing share of the national government's socio-economic cornucopia, indicate that the lot of the Indian will continue to improve. And that he will be with us in greater numbers seems apparent. Certainly it requires no expert analysis of contemporary population statistics in juxtaposition to those of the nation as a whole to realize that the "vanishing American" trend of the nineteenth century has been radically reversed.

Calculating the trend in Indian demography is a worthwhile endeavor. However, a preoccupation with its implications renders obscure all but the most monumental tragedies of the past. It is doubtful, for example, that the great smallpox epidemic of the late 1830's, which caused the virtual annihilation of the Mandans, the obliteration of entire Aricharee, Assiniboin, and Crow villages, and the death of two thousand Pawnees in less than a year, will soon be forgotten. Or who can easily ignore the devastating epidemics in sixteenth-century Mexico, or in Canada, New England, and New York during the early years of the French and Indian War?
But the less spectacular, the more sustained, and, in view of the time spans involved, the more insidious patterns of population decline have too often been ignored. It is instructive to note that two recent and widely read books dealing with the so-called “subjugation” of the plains Indians in the nineteenth century—Ralph Andrist’s *The Long Death*, and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*—do not even list the word “smallpox” in their respective indexes.  

This is not to say that the basic thrust of Indian demography has escaped the attention of competent investigators, for surely the calculations of Angel Rosenblat, A. L. Kroeber, James Mooney, and Henry Dobyns are evidence of significant accomplishment. While they offer a variety of explanations for the substantial reduction of the Indian population in the wake of the white invasion—epidemic disease, ecological imbalance, and so on—their major focus nevertheless is on the quantitative dimension, i.e., how, on the basis of historical data, may we calculate the number of people inhabiting the New World on the eve of the white invasion? Dobyns’ work is doubtless the most significant and controversial.

Building his case on a trenchant analysis of the tendency to underestimate the aboriginal American population, he proposes that, 

Approximately accurate estimates of aboriginal American population may be achieved by comparing the population of a given area at two or more times in order to establish population trends expressed as ratios of the size of the population at one time to its size at another. . . . Applying it [postulated depopulation ratios of 20 to 1] to more or less well-established historic nadir populations suggests that the New World was inhabited by approximately 90,000,000 persons immediately prior to discovery.  

Responding to the “nadir population” thesis, one critic emphasized the difficulty of defining an Indian, since “the census definition is generally a cultural or a social one, not a biological one, but it is the ‘biological Indian’ with whom we must be concerned in making estimates.” His point is well worth remembering, as anyone who has examined the role of the mixbloods in North American Indian history at the time the alleged nadir pop-
ulation levels were reached. This is only one example of the seemingly endless debate which engages the attention of the estimators, and it prompts one to wonder if ever the aboriginal population of the New World will be known with any degree of precision. Perhaps it does not really matter.

Meanwhile, barring the discovery of new documentary evidence and the construction of an estimative theory that can accommodate all the variables, might not the energies of aspiring ethnohistorians and demographers be more productively applied to an appraisal of the evidence at hand, with the thought of determining not only how, but why particular groups of Indians at particular times were reduced in number? Given the simple fact that most tribes declined in population following the white invasion, is it not appropriate to inquire if these tragedies were, for the most part, unavoidable consequences of contact between alien cultures? Or, if the invading culture had the means—technical or otherwise—to check depopulation rates, why were these not more widely deployed? When it was apparent that a particular tribe had failed to accept or adjust to the cultural values of the invader, was this the signal for the frustrated "civilizer" to view the tribe's declining population with less concern, and, perhaps, to rationalize it as a normal consequence of indolence and "savagery"?

The tragic experience of the Kansa Indians suggests that tentative answers to some of these questions may be possible. One of the five tribes comprising what ethnologists have designated the Dheghia-Siouan linguistic group, the Kansa began their migration from the lower Ohio valley to present northeastern Kansas no later than the early seventeenth century. Whether they were fleeing in the face of some ominous threat to their survival, and whatever may have been their lot in prehistoric times, there is no doubt that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, depopulation for them came to be an almost routine part of their existence.

While Marquette's cartographer recorded their residence in the trans-Mississippi West as early as 1673 their first known population count was that of the French colonial official, Pierre Lemoine
Iberville. In an official mémoire dated June 20, 1702, Iberville noted that “1,500 familles” of “Les Canses” were living in the lower Mississippi valley. Utilizing Zebulon Pike’s 1806 count of 1.2 children for each adult female as a guide, and assuming that each child had living parents at that time, it is reasonable to calculate the aggregate 1702 population at about 4,800—if, in fact, Iberville’s informant, unlike subsequent recorders, counted families and not individuals. Based on the only other reliable account of the eighteenth century, the next half-century was exceedingly tragic. Writing to his superiors on December 12, 1758, Governor Louis Billourat de Kerlerec of French Louisiana reported that the Kansa had once been a “very numerous” people, but “war that they have had with the Pawnees and small-pox have extremely weakened them. There remain today only two hundred and fifty to three hundred men.” Again, applying Pike’s later ratio between children and living parents, and in view of Perrin du Lac’s 1802 count of 450 warriors, even a conservative estimate suggests that the tribe may have been cut in half in less than two generations.

With the nineteenth century came the authority of the United States, a decline in the European fur trade that had dominated the Kansa economy for nearly a century, and more regular population counts. As we have seen, Pike counted 1,465 persons in 1806—465 warriors, 500 women, and 600 children. George C. Sibley, the government factor at Fort Osage, estimated the Kansa population at 1,000 in 1808, and in 1801 John Bradbury reported a total of 1,300. These figures seem conservative, particularly in view of Sibley’s revised estimate of 1,600 in 1816. In any case, until the second half of the nineteenth century, when their number declined drastically, the Kansa population remained nearly constant at an average of about 1,600. Isaac McCoy, the Baptist missionary-surveyor, reported 1,500 Kansa Indians in 1831, 1,200 the following year, and 1,750 in 1840. Indian Agent Richard Cummins submitted a figure of 1,602 in 1839, and on January 16, 1843, recorded the most detailed count to that time: 290 males under ten years of age, 346 between ten and forty, and 159 over
40; 288 females under ten, 369 between ten and forty, and 136 over forty, bringing the total to 1,588.21

One is tempted to conclude that the consistency of these statistics points to population stability for the first half of the nineteenth century. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In contrast to the turbulent conditions accompanying the international fur trade of the eighteenth century; some natural increase should have taken place as a result of the Indian Bureau's self-imposed obligation to provide economic assistance and technical instruction for becoming self-sufficient.22 Yet this probable increase is difficult to measure. A comparison of Cummins' statistics with those of Pike leads to the conclusion that there were approximately 200 more children and adolescents in 1843 than in 1806.23 On the other hand there is no doubt that the tribe's population was in part sustained by intermarriages with the Osages. White Plume, for example, a prominent Kansa chief in the 1820's, was an Osage by birth.24 In 1811 Sibley observed that the Kansa had made such "extensive connections with the Osages by intermarriages that it is scarcely probable that any serious differences will occur again between them,"25 and an 1819 report advised that intermarriages were commonplace to the degree that the Kansa's physical features were "more and more approaching those of the Osages."26 Finally, and no less significant, were the mixblood marriages. As a variable in Kansa demography they are a factor to be reckoned with no later than the 1820's,27 and during subsequent decades were so consequential that by 1890 the "Half Breed Band" comprised fully forty per cent of the tribe's official BIA total.28

It follows that the 1,600 average reported for the first half of the nineteenth century was illusory. By no means did it present a realistic picture of Kansa population, which had the potential for being dynamic. What, then, had kept the population from increasing? Who was responsible?

Conflict with the Otoes and Republican Pawnees resulted in no more than three score Kansa casualties,29 while the floods of 1827 and 1844 certainly killed fewer than that.30 Far more disastrous
were the consequences of epidemic disease. During the fall of 1827 about 180 Kansa died of smallpox. At least two-thirds of the tribe were afflicted, and of those who survived many were too weak to make the semiannual buffalo hunt that fall, and thus experienced destitute conditions the following winter. Six years later cholera struck with force, and although the mortality rate was not recorded, it could not have been insignificant because of a report that there were "but two at the agency who were not down with the fever." In the summer of 1839 a raging "fever"—either cholera or smallpox, but more likely the latter—took an additional one hundred lives in a very short time. "But few families escaped the disease," reported a Methodist missionary, "and the number of deaths was great in proportion to the number of sick. The awful cries of the Indians around the dead sounded in our ears nearly every day."

Perhaps these tragedies were the cardinal feature of the Kansa population decline pattern prior to 1850. But there is evidence that chronic destitution and outright starvation also took their toll. In January 1831, for example, Secretary of War John Eaton was told that because of their "remarkable improvidence" the Kansa needed "immediate help." Four years later, upon learning that the tribe's entire food supply was less than twenty bushels of corn, Agent Richard W. Cummins flatly asserted that the Kansa were starving. The "autumnal diseases" he reported a short time later were surely in part the result of malnutrition, while widespread whiskey consumption made possible by lawless dramshop operators along the western Missouri border could only have aggravated the situation. Meanwhile, mounting pressure in Washington for another major land cession, the disastrous flood of 1844, and a stubborn Kansa commitment to the semisedentary life acted as powerful obstacles to any progress in agriculture. On the plains the ever-present Pawnees and the more regular appearance of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes made hunting increasingly more hazardous for the less powerful Kansa Indians. By the fall of 1844 their food supply was virtually exhausted, yet Indian Superintendent Thomas Harvey's incredible request was for "more Chris-
tian teaching in organized institutions,"\(^{38}\) not corn. Harvey later admitted an "outright donation" was desirable, but since the tribe remained "terribly destitute" three months later, it is doubtful that any significant assistance was extended.\(^{39}\)

The new treaty concluded in 1846 authorized a massive land cession in return for a more concentrated reservation in the upper Neosho valley.\(^{40}\) Here, where they were to make the final transition to settled, agricultural life, the quality of their life was supposed to improve. To the white man the treaty was most attractive, but for the Kansa it was quite unrealistic. In addition to the absurd assumption that a few agents, missionaries, and teachers could bring about a cultural revolution in a few short years, it failed to provide safeguards against the insatiable land hunger of the white land jobbers, whose assault on the remaining Kansa domain was greatly encouraged by the creation of Kansas Territory in 1854. Then, while Territorial officials worked in concert with Washington bureaucrats and a host of national and local speculators, the tribe was confronted by what proved to be the worst epidemic they had experienced since the middle years of the eighteenth century.

In early May 1855 Neosho Agent Andrew J. Dorn wrote Indian Commissioner George W. Manypenny that a major smallpox epidemic had erupted in Kansas Territory. One hundred little Osages were dead, more were sick and dying, and on his own authority he (Dorn) had arranged for the vaccination of about two hundred who to that point had escaped the dreaded disease. That Dorn's concern was genuine seems obvious. "All Indians should be vaccinated," he warned, "for the lives of many of our fellow-beings are in imminent danger."\(^{41}\) But the Kansa were ignored, even though their close proximity to the Santa Fe Trail made them particularly vulnerable to contagious disease. Not surprisingly, then, their ranks were reduced with a vengeance in the middle of June 1855, and before the summer was over, more than four hundred had died. Even more incredible than Superintendent Harvey's earlier preference of Christian teaching over food for a starving people was Kansa Agent John Montgomery's report to Washington that smallpox "has continued fatally with a greater
number of them, it seems, to the great satisfaction and admiration of all those who have any acquaintance with [them].”

Subsequent population counts reflect the tragedy of 1855 and its long-range implications. In October 1859 Agent Milton C. Dickey placed the total at 1,037, or “200 less than last year.” Gleefully, a local newspaper, which repeatedly extolled Christian virtues and the cause of the white farmers, predicted that “at this rate five years will solve the Kaw [Kansa] question.” These turned out to be prophetic words. Two years later the total was down to 802, including 424 males, 379 females, and 63 mixbloods, while a slight increase to 825 by 1868 was accomplished not by a halt in the downward trend, but “by those who had joined them by marriages, such as the Potawatomies and others.” Not one Kansa male was over fifty-five years old by 1872, and one year later, after they had been removed to Indian Territory, their estimated population was down to about 700. Not even a change in environment could affect the long-range trend, as can be seen in an 1877 count of 425, an 1890 count of 227 (including 92 mixbloods), and a 1905 figure of 209 (including 92 mixbloods). Finally, a contemporary report of seventeen living Kansa full bloods confirms the absurdity of applying Professor Dobyns’ twenty to one nadir population ratio to the Kansa Indians; it also suggests that the extinction of the tribe defined in aboriginal terms is virtually imminent.

Dobyns, like other anthropologists, regards epidemic disease as the paramount cause of Indian depopulation after European contact. As we have seen, smallpox very likely accounted for more Kansa deaths in historic times than any other condition. However, if we exclude the period prior to widespread contact with the white invader, i.e., the period prior to about 1800, we find that this was not the case. In fact the three major smallpox epidemics in the nineteenth century were responsible for considerably less than fifty per cent of the population decline—perhaps no more than about seven hundred deaths. Was this because of fortuitous circumstances, or was it because of the invader’s decision to try to control (and even eradicate) this terrible scourge?
To an assembly of Indian leaders in Washington in 1802 President Jefferson described the vaccination technique for smallpox as "that precious donation which the great spirit had lately made to the white man," and he promised "that it would finally extirpate that disease from the face of the earth." However, the public vaccination bill passed in 1813, which provided free vaccine through the postal service, applied to citizens, not Indians, and it was not until two decades later that Congress appropriated $12,000 to begin the fight against smallpox in Indian country. Significantly, actual vaccination expenditures that first year "for smallpox and certain other things" amounted to only $1,786, as opposed to $5,721 for "missionary improvement" and $9,424 for the "civilization of the Indians." One year later, in 1833, actual expenditures were down to $721. Under such conservative administration of the Indian vaccine law it is not surprising that a small tribe such as the Kansa was ignored. Yet the need certainly was there. Isaac McCoy, who probably knew more about conditions in Kansa country in the 1830's than any other person, asked Secretary of War Lewis Cass, on March 23, 1832, if "measures could not speedily be adopted to arrest this destroying plague by vaccination." Because four thousand Pawnee, Omaha, Otoe, Ponca (and Kansa) were already dead from the dreaded plague, "no higher reward [could be enjoyed] than the satisfaction derived from the circumstance of having rescued thousands of men, and women, and children, from this awful calamity." But it was not until 1833 that the government made any effort whatsoever to vaccinate the Kansa, and even this proved abortive. In early January 1833 Secretary Cass was informed that Frederick Chouteau, a licensed Kansa trader, had interfered with the government's medical operations. The letter came from Subagent Marston Clark, who demanded that Chouteau's license be suspended, and that he be expelled from Indian country. This Chouteau categorically challenged, with the explanation (submitted by two of his trusted employees) that he had made every effort to detain the Kansa at their villages in anticipation of their prearranged vaccination schedule. When the government physician
was "5 or 6 days late," Chouteau felt justified in distributing guns, supplies, and ammunition. Almost immediately the tribe departed on a hunting expedition, and the government doctor was forced to return to Missouri without completing his assignment. The Kansa displayed no fear of the vaccine, emphasized Chouteau, and, in fact, were most cooperative. But because of their "miserable condition" they had no alternative but to accept what he stubbornly viewed as a humane gesture to a starving people.60

Faced with conflicting accounts of the affair, Indian Superintendent William Clark in St. Louis took the easy way out by advising Commissioner Elbert Herring "to suspend the execution of his instructions [to revoke Chouteau's license] until further advised by the Department on this subject."61 There the matter rested, and it was not until 1838 that Dr. A. Chute finally submitted a register of 915 vaccinated Kansa Indians.62 Even so, because at least one hundred of the tribe were struck down by a "high fever" the following summer,63 there is reason to wonder if in fact the Kansa had been treated. In any case, the official agency records indicate that no more were vaccinated between 1838 and their removal to Indian Territory in 1873—not even during the tragic epidemic of 1855. Thus the inescapable conclusion is that many Kansa smallpox fatalities were avoidable, and that bureaucratic irresponsibility and/or outright government negligence contributed greatly to the tribe's decline.

Regretfully, the same conclusion may be inferred from an even more significant factor in the Kansa way of death. Whereas smallpox accounted for roughly seven hundred deaths in the three decades after 1825, the tribe was reduced by over one thousand in the three decades after this disease was no longer a threat. Such maladies as measles and whooping cough presented periodic threats to survival,64 but in the main it was malnutrition and exposure—conditions that slowly but certainly made the afflicted individuals succumb to the ravages of respiratory and digestive disorders, as well as outright starvation. In the literature of Indian depopulation one encounters a great deal of commentary regarding these causes of depopulation, but little tangible documentation to
argue for the real significance of the tragedy. Yet there is an abundance of at least circumstantial evidence for the “slow death,” as the following sample from the Kansa documents illustrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March, 1824</td>
<td>“starving”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April, 1828</td>
<td>“Starving condition, truely deplorable”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 1831</td>
<td>“remarkable improvidence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September, 1838</td>
<td>“none of the comforts of neighboring tribes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 1846</td>
<td>“very ill with autumnal diseases”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 1848</td>
<td>“terribly destitute”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August, 1855</td>
<td>“have lost all confidence in each other due to destitution”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October, 1861</td>
<td>“many are sick and without clothes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April, 1862</td>
<td>“completely destitute”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, 1862</td>
<td>“many deaths for want of medicine”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 1866</td>
<td>“completely destitute”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August, 1866</td>
<td>“very destitute condition”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 1868</td>
<td>“completely out of blankets and food . . . have disposed of all saleable property and have exhausted their credit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 1869</td>
<td>“We now ask, shall we starve?” (Question posed by nine chiefs and ten warriors.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March, 1872</td>
<td>“absolutely destitute; are living on a little corn and dead animals they can find lying around”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excluding the 1824 reference to starvation, every subsequent report of the tribe’s suffering came while they were under treaties with the United States—treaties which promised them at least the minimal means of survival in return for land cessions worth millions of dollars. It was assumed they would be converted to Christianity and then move smoothly along the road toward agrarian self-sufficiency. In the final analysis, however, the government’s real commitment was to the interests of white missionaries, traders, farmers, and speculators—not Indians—and the Kansa never were given a chance. Incredible as it may seem, their agent could
report as late as 1872 that "after all these [forty-eight] years the Kansas still do not have a physician."80

Chronically sick and starving, periodically afflicted by epidemic disease, and hemmed in by a combination of land-hungry white men from the east, and more powerful tribes to the north and west, the Kansa came to be recognized as a hopeless, "beggar" tribe, whose ultimate extinction was virtually unavoidable. It seems reasonable to conclude that while the white man had the means, indeed the obligation, to alter the situation, he pursued a policy of negligence and self-interest, and finally became so accustomed to the Kansa pattern of depopulation that he really did not care.

NOTES


6. Angel Rosenblat, La población indígena de América desde 1492 hasta la actualidad (Buenos Aires, 1945); A. L. Kroeber, Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America (University of California Publica-

23. See footnotes 12 and 21 supra.


27. Unrau, pp. 33-34.


29. Unrau, chs. 4 and 6, *passim*.

30. *Ibid*.


32. Marston Clark to William Clark, Sept. 1, 1833, Fort Leavenworth Agency.


34. Isaac McCoy to John Eaton, Jan. 31, 1831, McCoy Papers.


37. *Ibid*.

38. Thomas Harvey to T. Hartley Crawford, Oct. 8, 1844, St. Louis Superintendency.


40. Kappler, pp. 552-54.


42. John Montgomery to Alexander Cumming, Aug. 31, 1855, Records
of the Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received (M 234), Kansas Agency, National Archives.


44. Ibid.


46. E. S. Stover to Thomas Murphy, Jan. 25, 1868, Kansas Agency.

47. Mahlon Stubbs to Enoch Hoag, Dec. 2, 1872, Kansas Agency.


49. Uriah Spray to Cyrus Beede, Dec. 13, 1877, Osage Administrative Miscellaneous Correspondence, Box 415040, Federal Records Center, Fort Worth, Texas.

50. Kansas (Kaw) Enrollment, Dec., 1890.


52. Copy of Kansas (Kaw) Full-Blood Roll prepared in the Spring of 1973 by Mr. Jesse Mehojah, Traditional Kansa (Kaw) Chief, Enid, Oklahoma. Original Roll in possession of Mr. Jesse Mehojah and his attorney, Mr. Sam Withiam, Cushing, Oklahoma. The Full-Blood Roll, which interestingly, has not yet been certified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, includes the following persons: Tom Conn, Levi Chouteau, Francis Kekahbak, Walter Kekahbak, Clara Littlewalker, Maud McCauley, Johnie McCauley, Ray Mehojah, Charlie Mehojah, Jesse Mehojah (Traditional Chief), William Mehojah, Gene Munroe, Clyde Munroe, Ralph Pepper, Edgar Pepper, Lena Sumner, and Waye Nah-She-Wayne.

53. Dobyns, p. 441.


55. *U.S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 2, p. 806 (Feb. 27, 1813).

56. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 514 (May 5, 1832).


60. William Clark to Lewis Cass, Jan. 7, 1833; Frederick Chouteau to P. Chouteau, Feb. 5, 1833; Depositions of Pierre Ravalette and Clement
Lessert to Sam C. Owen, Jackson County, Missouri, Feb. 2, 1833, Fort Leavenworth Agency.

61. William Clark to Elbert Herring, Feb. 23, 1833, Fort Leavenworth Agency.

62. Register of Kansas Indians Vaccinated by Dr. [A] Chute, May and June, 1838, Fort Leavenworth Agency.

63. William Johnson to Corresponding Secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Dec. 30, 1840; typed copy of "Neosho Valley Villages at Council Grove," Morehouse Papers.

64. E. S. Stover to Enoch Hoag, July 1, 1824, Kansas Agency.

65. John Dougherty to William Clark, March 8, 1828, Dougherty Papers.

66. William Clark to T. L. McKenney, April 1, 1828, St. Louis Superintendency.


68. Richard Cummins to C. A. Harris, Sept. 25, 1838, Fort Leavenworth Agency.

69. Thomas Harvey to William Medill, Feb. 12, 1846, St. Louis Superintendency.

70. Thomas Harvey to William Medill, Feb. 7, 1848, Fort Leavenworth Agency.


73. Hiram Farnsworth to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 16, 1862, Kansas Agency.

74. Hiram Farnsworth to William Dole, June 18, 1862, Kansas Agency.

75. Hiram Farnsworth to Thomas Murphy, Jan. 25, 1866, Kansas Agency.

76. Hiram Farnsworth to Thomas Murphy, Aug. 28, 1866, Kansas Agency.

77. E. S. Stover to Thomas Murphy, Feb. 7, 1868, Kansas Agency.

78. Nine [Kansa] chiefs and ten warriors to E. S. Stover, Feb. 12, 1869, Kansas Agency.

79. Mahlon Stubbs to Enoch Hoag, March 18, 1872, Kansas Agency.

80. Mahlon Stubbs to Enoch Hoag, Nov. 13, 1872, Kansas Agency.