

# Kansas History

A Journal of the Central Plains

Volume 47, Number 2 | Summer 2024



A Collaboration of the Kansas Historical Foundation  
and the Department of History at Kansas State University



The origins of horse racing pre-date the written record. The first recorded race in the United States dates back to 1665 and took place in what is now Salisbury, New York. Originally, the horse's stamina was the most valuable factor in American races, but during the Civil War the emphasis came to be placed more on speed. Even though antigambling stances in Progressive Era politics were strong, states started regulating betting in the early twentieth century. During the Depression, racing tracks became an important source of tax revenue.

Kansas opened several tracks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since Kansas did not legalize parimutuel betting until 1986--where bets go into a pool and are against other people instead of a sportsbook--early tracks profited from entrance fees, concessions, stable fees, and ticket sales. Tracks in Kansas offered events in thoroughbred, quarter horse, and standardbred or harness racing, along with greyhound racing.

The Woodlands track in Kansas City, Kansas, started in greyhound racing and expanded to horse racing. Due to a plague of scandals and competition from Missouri's riverboat casinos, the track filed for bankruptcy and tried slot machines to boost revenue. Other tracks, such as Eureka Downs, struggled financially as people lost interest in the sport in the late twentieth century. The Horse Racing Benefit Fund attempted to subsidize smaller tracks, especially Eureka Downs, Rooks County, and Anthony Downs, from the larger tracks' profits to save the events in the 1990s. Ultimately, the effort failed, and many tracks closed by the early 2000s, including the Woodlands in 2008.

The picture above captures the gates opening during a race as part of the Eastern Cowley County Fair in Burden, Kansas. County fairs were always a common venue for races, although they have sometimes been controversial. In the November 3, 1880, edition of *The Kansas Farmer* the discussion of gambling brought up horse racing: "The question has been mooted in our county, and the managers say the question is simply—we must tolerate horse-racing or have no fair." Three quarters of a century later, on August 22, 1955, *The Iola Register* ran a lament on harness racing leaving the area and attempted to soothe disappointment by assuring horse racing would continue, just with "an all-running horse program." Despite some moral reservations, then, Kansans saw the sport as important for much of the state's history.

*Editorial Assistant  
September Gering*

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Back cover: *Grandfather to the Kaw people, I'zhúje'waxóbe. Courtesy of the Sacred Red Rock Project.*

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*Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* is published quarterly through a partnership between the Kansas Historical Foundation and the Department of History at Kansas State University. The Kansas Historical Foundation serves as a fundraising, fund management, membership, and retail organization to support and promote the Kansas Historical Society, a state agency that safeguards and shares the state's history through the collection, preservation, and interpretation of its past. The Society's collections and programs are diverse and are made available through its library and museum in Topeka, historic sites and classrooms across

the state, and publications and web-based resources accessible everywhere. The Department of History at Kansas State University is especially well-suited to the study of Kansas, agricultural, and environmental history. As a Land Grant school whose culture and economy have historically been shaped by the economy in the state, the history of Kansas holds a venerable place in the academic offerings of the University. Environmental history, with a particular focus on agricultural, water, and grassland issues in Kansas, has become increasingly more important to university research and curricula worldwide.

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The journal publishes scholarly articles, edited documents, and other materials that contribute to an understanding of the history and cultural heritage of Kansas and the Central Plains. Political, social, intellectual, cultural, economic, and institutional histories are welcome, as are biographical and historiographical interpretations and studies of archaeology, the built environment, and material culture. Articles emphasizing visual documentation, exceptional reminiscences, and autobiographical writings are also considered for publication. Genealogical studies are generally not accepted.

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The Edgar Langsdorf Award for Excellence in Writing, which includes a plaque and an honorarium of two hundred dollars, is awarded each year for the best article published in *Kansas History*.

The editors welcome letters responding to any of the articles published in the journal. With the correspondent's permission, those that contribute substantively to the scholarly dialogue by offering new insights or historical information may be published. All comments or editorial queries should be addressed to the editors, *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, Department of History, 201C Calvin Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506-1002; 785-532-0375; email: [khjournal@ksu.edu](mailto:khjournal@ksu.edu).

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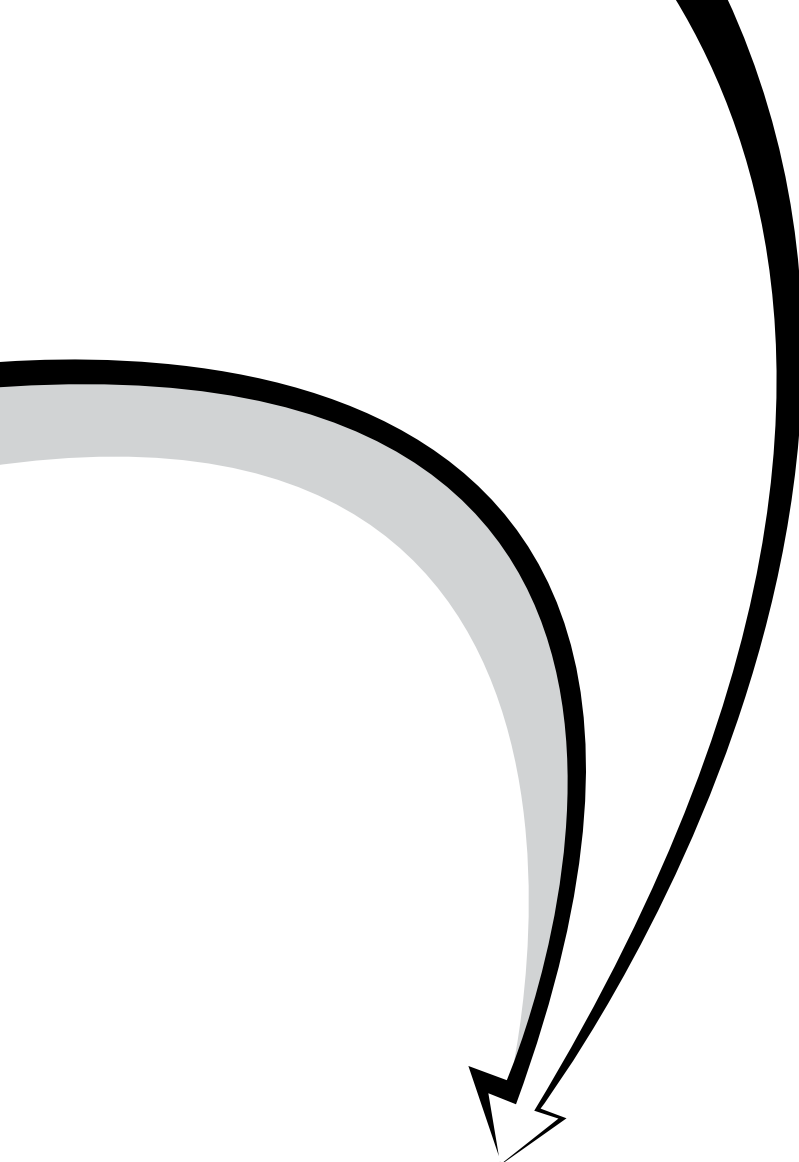
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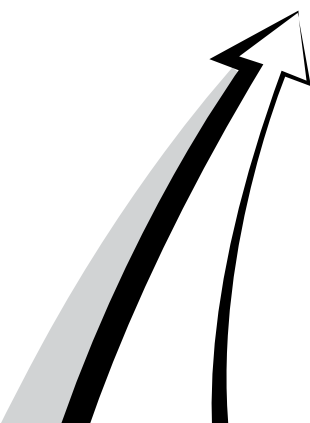


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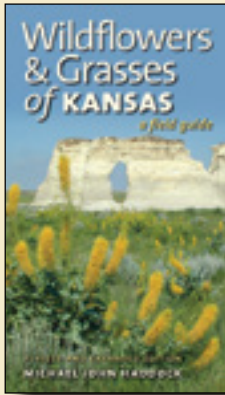
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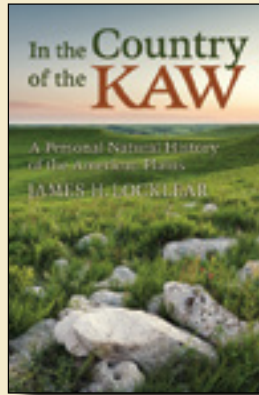
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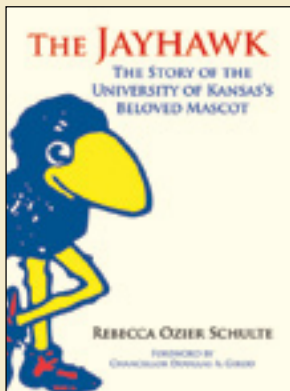
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