

THE CHASE COUNTY PARK OF 1935

by
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On the surface, the folklore of any community would seem to have a very haphazard development. Stories are told and re-told in coffee shops, at reunions, and in everyday conversations that have little or nothing to do with actual events. Undoubtedly, most become embellished in the retelling. Listeners usually accept the general content of most tales, although they may be highly skeptical about the specifics. With time stories change because those doing the telling or those doing the listening alter them--sometimes they do so in subtle ways, sometimes dramatically.

Folklore does more than make local history colorful. Because historical documents are sketchy and incomplete, folklore may fill in gaps. At other times, folklore serves to correct inconsistencies. Folklore also can justify or explain actions taken by individuals or the community at some point in the past. Moreover, folklore can unravel an illogical pattern of events, and make it understandable, which is something the human mind seems to need.

In the 1930s, during the Dust Bowl era, Chase Countians decided to develop a county park and lake. On September 14, 1934, County Commissioners submitted to voters a bond issue of \$15,000 for the purpose of building a county park and recreation grounds. The Board of Commissioners--Levi Jones, G. H. Grimwood, and W. P. Rettiger--unanimously supported the proposal. After public approval of the bond issue in the November general election, the board appointed a committee of County Engineer McKenzie and Commissioner W. P.

Rettiger to seek further funding from the state. Other than legal notices announcing the November bond election, no account of the proposal ever appeared in the local newspaper.¹ On February 13, 1935, the *Chase County Leader* announced for the first time the proposed county park project.² At this point, only two sites were under serious consideration--one near "Jacks Springs" south of Matfield Green, and the other, the eventual lake site just west of Cottonwood Falls that was known locally as the "Howard Estate."³ In February of 1935, Commissioner Victor Kirk and the County Engineer met with Giles Atherton, a representative of the Forestry, Fish, and Game Commission, to view the Howard site and to decide how to implement the plan. The building of the County Park must have seemed a godsend to Chase Countians locked in a Great Depression. It was estimated that fifteen to twenty local men would be needed for construction of the barracks that would house the Civilian Conservation Corps workers, and approximately the same number would be needed to provide certain special skills, such as blacksmithing and carpentry. Moreover, approximately five thousand dollars a month would be needed to purchase goods and supplies for the CCC workers for at least two years.

In June of 1935, the Board of Commissioners purchased the Howard Estate, a ranch that contained just under five hundred acres. It cost twenty-five dollars an acre--or a total of \$12,194.25. In the same month, B. N. Mullendore, Attorney for the State Fish and Game Department, announced that

the county park project would start around October 1st of that year. There was also a public announcement by Commissioners W. P. Rettiger, C. H. Grimwood, and Victor Kirk that all requirements had been met.

As local enthusiasm peaked, the *Chase County Leader* issued a brief story that the CCC unit that would soon move to Chase County was a "colored unit" of 199 workers that had been constructing Lake Wilbite near Emporia. No other notice appeared for almost a month, and there are no recorded minutes in the Commissioners' Journal from September 6, 1935 to October 7, 1935. Then, without warning, on October 23, 1935, the *Chase County Leader* announced "the County Park Project would be delayed." Next, C. C. Martin, Acting Supervisor of the ECW Administration, announced in a letter to the *Leader* that he had received orders from Washington not to initiate any new public projects.⁴ He also said that the CCC unit slated for the Chase County project would be diverted to the Reading project, which was already under construction.

In the late 1930s, Chase Countians desperately needed money, and local merchants and farmers had to wonder why the project eluded them. In reviewing the documents, no reasonable answers are given. Enter folklore to fill the void. According to most Chase Countians—both young and old—the project was cancelled because of a local fear of blacks. Some blame Chase County politicians who are said to have prevented the colored CCC unit from moving to the county when they created "sundown laws,"⁵ which did not allow blacks to be within the city limits after sundown. Consequently, black CCC workers were excluded from the area by law. This version is not universally accepted, however, because the county

had a number of black families in residence, and no one had ever heard of any restrictions on their behavior. My search of old city and county ordinances revealed many interesting and amusing ordinances, but none were specifically directed at blacks.

The most repeated story goes basically like this, "When the Cottonwood people found out a bunch of niggers were coming into the county, they raised hell until the project was killed."⁶ This version seems to be almost universally accepted in Chase County. Most people interviewed mentioned that politicians and local businessmen were most vocal in their opposition, but "everyone" was in agreement that blacks should be kept out. Why they should be excluded was obvious to most people who said that blacks "would be running free all night to steal anything they could."⁷ Many of the town fathers were also said to have been concerned about the effect that black workers would have on the morals of their daughters.⁸ In any case, folklore maintains that public pressure became so intense that the project had to be cancelled.

A final version had a portion of the CCC unit arrive in Strong City, but on the first night there was such a confrontation between blacks and local townspeople that "the next day the CCC boys were shipped out."⁹ This version is not widely held, but instead is popular only among Strong City residents, who have the unit retreating to nearby Marion County to build what is now called the Marion City Lake. The *Leader*, however, makes it clear the unit went to Reading.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the prospect of nearly two hundred blacks moving into a white community upset some members of the community, and we can assume that a few citizens alerted local leaders to potential problems. But it is unlikely

protests ever got beyond local coffee shops or, at most, the Board of Commissioners' office. Moreover, given the economic climate, it would be unreasonable to assume that the fears and concerns of a few local citizens would override a project that would pump thousands of dollars into the community. And unless one is willing to believe in a conspiracy in which *everyone* cooperated to destroy evidence of local racism, there is no evidence that local folklore is accurate in its specifics or even its general content.

According to Karl Masoner, who was County Attorney in 1953, no documents contained even a hint that local officials wished to cancel the project. There was a concern, he said, from the Civilian Conservation Corps, that the project was too "machine-intensive," and that the government favored projects with a lot of hand labor. This suggests that the Chase

County project may never have been a high priority in the eyes of the national government. In all probability, the Chase County Park project was cancelled not because of racism, but because of political pressure on the Roosevelt administration to halt its "free spending ways." Ironically, some of this pressure was applied by Kansas' own Alf Landon--Roosevelt's opponent in the 1936 election. The timing of the cancellation, coming within weeks of the announcement of a colored CCC unit coming to Chase County, probably set in motion the peculiar form that local folklore took. After all, who could attribute Chase County's potential economic losses to one of Kansas' most distinguished politicians. Some group had to be blamed for the project's loss, and folklore found a convenient American scapegoat--blacks, or to be specific, black CCC workers.

END NOTES

¹*Commissioners' Journal*, 13 November 1934:334.

²"Making Survey of Lake Sites." *Chase County Leader*, 13 February 1935:1.

³*Commissioners' Journal*, 22 January 1935: 344, and 19 February 1935:346.

⁴"Delay on County Park and Lake." *Chase County Leader*, 23 October 1935:1.

⁵Interview of anonymous source by author.

⁶Interview of anonymous source by author.

⁷Interview of anonymous source by author.

⁸Interview of anonymous source by author.

⁹Interview of anonymous source by author.

¹⁰"Work Starts on County Park." *Chase County Leader*, 4 September 1935:1.