

James R. Mead & Early Days in Kansas
Notes for a talk to be given at
Washburn University, Wednesday, May 6th, 2015

The Mead family, having come over from England sometime between 1630 & 1640, settled in New England. The particular branch of it to which JRM belonged mostly settled in Greenwich, Conn. & New Haven, Vermont. And it was in that latter town on the 3rd of May, 1836 that JRM was born, although at least one account records the town of his birth as Weybridge, Vermont, his mother's hometown.

JRM's mother was Mary E. James. His father was Enoch Mead of Greenwich, Conn. Enoch had matriculated at Yale College as it then was, in 1826 & had graduated in the class of 1830.

Considering life in North America in the mid-19th century, the family was generally well educated. In the 18th & 19th centuries it was expected by the family that male Meads would either be military men, preferably of high rank (JRM's great-grandfather was a General) or they would enter the ministry and preach the gospel. Enoch Mead, as is clear from his diaries & letters, wanted to be a sea captain, but sea captains were not on the approved list of Mead family occupations, so he became a preacher.

I have always felt that a good deal can be learned about an individual or a family by having a look at the books they have acquired. It may be that some future historian will find much of interest about the Mead family by having a good look at the

books they acquired, read, & kept. Although JRM had little personal interest in religion, he kept his father's books out of respect. From these we see that Enoch Mead, although a Presbyterian minister, studied at various times both Buddhism and Islam, & family members, including JRM, were reading ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus & Pliny. JRM was also quite advanced in mathematics – something that proved useful later when he was surveying claims and settlements on the great plains. He surveyed, for example, large parts of Salina and, later, Wichita. Meanwhile his sister Lizzie was devoting her spare time, as she did throughout her life, to the study of modern languages.

In 1839 when JRM was three years old & his sister Lizzie was just one, the family moved to Iowa, settling near Rockingham on the banks of the Mississippi not far from present-day Davenport. Here JRM grew to manhood, working on his father's farm, going to school, and hunting in the woods along the river. From 1849 to 1851 he attended Iowa College in Davenport.

1859 saw the start of the Colorado Gold Rush. Young James Mead, already disgusted with the daily toil demanded by farming, decided to go west, the Rocky Mountains being his intended destination, as is shown from the journal he kept at the time. In view of the fact that we are meeting here today on May 6th it is interesting to note that JRM set out from home on May 6th, 1859 – shortly after his 23rd birthday. With horse & rifle he reached the Missouri River at Weston 25 days later, crossed on the ferry to Kansas Territory on May 31st, & made camp near Fort Leavenworth.

In view of JRM's life-long interest in archaeology & ethnography it is, to me as an anthropologist, interesting to note that he entered Kansas Territory at the same time – almost to the day - and in the same place as Lewis Henry Morgan who was to become famous in the history of anthropology for his work on Native American kinship systems. I find it intriguing that my grandfather & Morgan may have passed each other in the streets of Leavenworth 156 years ago.

In his letters home JRM gives first impressions & thumbnail descriptions of places: he writes “Leavenworth City is a very stirring place. Is growing very fast. Will make a large place some day not far distant”. Of Lawrence he writes that it “is a tremendous place for a young one...It has a fine location...lots of pretty girls & fast women, and is overrun with rats.”

He guessed, wrongly as it turned out, that Topeka would become the territorial capital. He went on to say that “around [Topeka] are some fine chances to invest. I know one farm of 160 acres, 9 miles from Topeka, half timber, 75 acres fenced, 30 or 40 broke, two houses on it, a fine creek running through the timber with lots of fish in it, and plenty of rock and coal in the banks, all for \$600. Good prairie can be got alongside for \$3 an acre.” As for Lecompton, which did become the Territorial Capital, he wrote that it ‘...is a small place, with a poor location – never can be much.”

He was entranced with the landscape – so different from the Mississippi Valley – and the wild life around him. His letters

are full of the beauties of the Great Plains and the colourfully dressed Indians he met. He describes the trees along the rivers as being full of Carolina Parakeets – the only parrot native to N. America. They were apparently as common as sparrows from Texas & Florida to New York and the western prairies. The last recorded sighting of a Carolina Parakeet was in Florida in the 1920s.

Following the Santa Fe Trail he met many notable men, among them Colonel William Bent of Bent's Fort. Later he met Kit Carson & came to know other famous plainsmen. His description of the traffic on the Santa Fe Trail provides memorable images of "...uncouth caravans: men, teams, & wagons covered with dust. The immense wagons which were used ...could carry in bulk as much as a railway car and these wagons were loaded to the top of the bows with wool. Underneath each wagon a net was swung, made of hides or sacks sewed together, filled with buffalo-chips for fuel, or sometimes a log of driftwood was swinging underneath, with cooking utensils and rawhide and rawhide ropes hung along the sides; each wagon was drawn by four to eight spans of mules or oxen."

South of the big bend of the Smoky Hill River he left the Santa Fe Trail and headed north, as he had been told there were herds of buffalo there. Writing 40 years later he described what happened next:

"Towards noon as I approached the divide between the Arkansas and the Smoky Hill Rivers, I observed in the distance what appeared to be a belt of timber extending along

the horizon in each direction as far as I could see. Approaching nearer I saw that it was a vast herd of buffalo grazing – to my imagination the most entrancing sight the universe afforded – and such a sight as the eye of man can never again behold.

“It was that glorious, exhilarating season of the year, known as Indian Summer – as beautiful in the land of the Indian and buffalo as among the hills of New England. There were buffalo on all sides and mingled with them were groups of antelope grazing or playing over the hills. It was the most beautiful scene I ever beheld: an abundance of game on every side, quietly feeding or reposing in the sunshine, and at home as the Great Creator placed them before the advent of that merciless exterminator, so-called civilized man.”

Throughout Mead’s writings there are recurring & conflicting themes: on the one hand he is a hunter at heart, admitting to having shot some 2,000 buffalo in a fifteen year period. On the other hand he loves nature & wildlife. In years to come there was another conflict: that between the town builder and developer, & his profound dislike of the changes brought about by settlers who carved up the plains into fenced farms & built towns. It is ironic that the man who played a major role in establishing Wichita, who built the first bank there, the man who brought the railroad down from Newton to Wichita, the man who encouraged the building of churches & the establishment of schools by freely giving land for these purposes, the man who was among those directly responsible for diverting the Texas cattle trail so that it passed through Wichita, the man who provided supplies to Jesse Chisholm &

so backed & encouraged traffic on the Chisholm Trail – this man, James R. Mead, lived to see everything disappear that he had loved about the Great Plains as they were in the days of his youth. And in the latter part of his life he was all too aware of the part he had played in bringing about those changes. It was probably little comfort to him to realize that the changes would have come anyway. No one could have stopped them.

But now in the summer of 1859 all that lay in an uncertain future. He recalls his delight at life round a campfire on the plains:

“Along the timbered streams were plenty of wild turkeys, but I hardly noticed them. There was too much game and when I had an abundance of choice buffalo meat I had no desire for any other. I never tired of it, though it was my principal food from January to Christmas. It took the place of all other food – a perfect ration. My meals usually consisted of buffalo meat in unlimited quantity, bread in the form of ‘flap jacks’ fried in buffalo fat, and plenty of coffee, with sugar to sweeten it, drunk out of a new tin cup.”

In reply to one of James’ letters home his father raised questions about the slaughter of the buffalo. In his answer James wrote back (Sept. 23rd, 1860) to say “There is no danger of them all being killed for sometime to come, not a bit. They are like the locusts of Egypt.” And yet only 12 years later there was scarcely a buffalo to be found anywhere in Kansas. I believe it is estimated that in 1860 there may have

been as many as 30 million bison in North America. Forty years later, in 1900, there were less than 2,000.

Mead's first 'ranch' – he remarks that any prairie habitation was called a ranch in those days – was on the Saline River NW of Salina. This began as a base camp for hunting, but Mead soon found that Indians frequently turned up with buffalo hides, wolf skins, beaver skins, and other products of the plains, hoping to trade them for tobacco, knives, sugar, salt, blankets, pots & pans, and other goods. As a result Mead soon found that he was short of supplies. He decided that here was a business opportunity. Leavenworth was the nearest supply point – 250 miles away – and was itself supplied by river traffic on the Missouri. With wagon & team he started for Leavenworth & called in at the wholesale grocery establishment of Morehead & Ryan.

He writes: "I told them I wanted to buy some groceries but just then I did not have any ready money with me. They asked where I had bought goods before and what I wanted to do with them. I replied that I had bought no goods in Kansas, but I wanted to take them out on the plains and trade with the Indians. After asking me a few more questions they told me to drive up my wagons and load what I wanted. I said that I had but one wagon, and did not want a very large amount of goods in that. The team came and I loaded four hundred dollars worth of goods consisting of coffee, sugar, flour, and tobacco – all staple articles with the Indians – and started back. In payment for my goods I gave a note without security, due in thirty days. I thought it was the cheekiest piece of

business I had ever done in my life, being an inexperienced boy and a total stranger.”

After hunting for three weeks he loaded up a wagon with hides & tallow, reached Leavenworth on the last day of grace of the note he had given, found that his hides sold for eight hundred dollars, paid off his debt, loaded up with all the goods he could haul back & left Leavenworth. It was with some satisfaction that he later wrote: “From then on my credit was unquestioned.”

In 1861 Mead married Agnes Barcome of Bangor, N.Y. After two years at his Saline River Ranch they moved to Salina where they experienced the Confederate raid on that town, in the course of which Mead lost his best rifle and some horses.

In 1863, having heard favourable accounts of ‘Whitewater Country’, the Meads moved to Towanda, establishing what would be Mead’s main trading post, close by the big spring, which as Mead remarked, was ‘the most interesting thing about Towanda’. If you haven’t been down to Towanda lately I can confirm that the big spring is still pouring forth great volumes of water.

In that same year the Meads celebrated the birth of their son, James L. Mead, always known to family and friends as ‘Bunnie’. Not long after getting settled in Towanda Mead rode west from Towanda with a Mr. Buckner, an African-American gentleman who had a farm and family near Towanda, to have a look at the Valley of the Arkansas, about which he had heard a great deal from his Towanda friend Dan

Cupp, and others. They followed the Osage Trail from the Whitewater to the Arkansas, “until we reached the bluffs overlooking the Arkansas River”. Mead describes the view:

“Here a vision of beauty and interest greeted our eyes, such perhaps as no other spot on the plains could furnish. A level valley spread out before us as far as the eye could reach. The fresh green grass, cropped close by the buffalo and bordered by belts of timber, resembled a well-kept park. Through this valley wound the great and little Arkansas Rivers, their banks fringed with stately trees. Scattered about over this landscape were groups of buffalo, fat and sleek, their bodies covered with a new coat of fur, black as jet. Some were grazing and others were lying down in the warm sun, or standing motionless as if asleep. This was their country and their home, and in all the broad valley there was no human being to disturb them. So long as earth endures man will labor with hand and brain, but with all his labor, wealth, and art, he can never restore the beauty and life of that valley as I saw it on that bright June day of 1863.”

In the following year Mead built a trading post between the Little & Big Arkansas Rivers, thus setting in motion the destruction of all that he saw in his first view of the valley. He employed Jack Lawton to manage this store, as the Mead family continued to reside in Towanda. In that same year Mead was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives from Butler County. In 1865 he established a trading post on the Ninnescah River near where Clearwater was later built & represented the Wichita Indians at the Treaty of the Little Arkansas. In 1866 he built a trading post at Round Pond

Creek on the Chisholm Trail in Indian Territory. In that same year Jack Lawton was killed in the trading post on the Arkansas by what Mead described as a 'renegade white man'. During these years, and indeed up until 1870, the Meads continued to reside in Towanda. It was there in 1864 that his daughter Elizabeth was born and, in 1866, a second daughter, Mary.

In 1868, together with Governor Samuel Crawford and others, Mead incorporated a town at the junction of the Big & Little Arkansas Rivers which he named Wichita. He staked out a 160 acre claim which on today's map of the city extended from Douglas to Central and Broadway to Washington. About that same time he was elected Republican Senator for the Fifteenth District of Kansas. In 1869 he was appointed Chairman of the Ways & Means Committee of the Kansas State Senate. Up to this point good luck had accompanied him all the way, but 1869 saw the death of his wife Agnes in Towanda following the birth of their son William who died shortly afterwards. Agnes was 28 years old.

In 1870 Mead sold his ranch at Towanda but kept the trading post and post office there, employing Timothy Peet to run it. Mead then moved to his Wichita claim.

Among his close friends and long-time business associates were Towakoni Jim, a Wichita Chief, and Jesse Chisholm. Among his other friends were Satanta, War Chief of the Kiowas, who used to play with young Bunnie Mead at the trading post in Towanda, the Arapahoe Chief Heap of Bears,

Chief Ten Bears of the Comanche, & the Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle.

In recalling his early days on the plains it is clear that one of the things Mead missed most were the times when a man's word & handshake could be relied upon just as one could rely on the sun coming up tomorrow. This was also true of his dealings with the Indians.

“We frequently trusted some of the wild Indians that we became acquainted with for considerable amounts. They would tell us that the next spring, or the next fall, as the case might be, they would be at a certain place on some river, perhaps a hundred miles from where we were at the time, and that when we met them on our next trading expedition they would pay us, which they invariably did.

“As an illustration of the honor among Indians, just at the close of the war a party of seven Indians and one white man came across the plains from the southern part of the Indian Territory to my ranch on the Whitewater. Their ponies were loaded with furs and skins to trade. During the war they had no source of supplies and were therefore destitute of everything but bread and meat, which their country provided in abundance. I bought all they had with them, paying them in goods, which seemed so satisfactory to them that they proposed I should return with them, taking a stock of goods into their country.

“I had never seen anything of them before and knew nothing of their country. During the war they had been

fighting our people of the North and were considered our enemies. I therefore declined to make the trip with them. They then asked me to credit them with goods to the extent of three hundred dollars apiece¹, stating they would return in the fall (this was in the spring of the year) and pay me, which I did. I saw or heard nothing of them during the summer, but one evening along about the first of November, they rode up to my ranch with their ponies loaded to pay their debts. One of their number had died in the meanwhile and his friends had sent up three hundred dollars worth of stuff in payment. Those Indians had no object in making that long trip of two hundred and fifty miles, except to make good their pledge to me that they would come back and pay for the goods.”

Mead learned by hard experience that many white men, particularly after the Civil War, were less trustworthy. When the war ended he noted that a westward drift of whites began to invade the Great Plains and among them were some of the most lawless individuals he had ever encountered. He wrote that “we had to take our things inside at night and lock up – something we never needed to do when there were only Indians about”. He also records the violent deaths of a number of men – none of them, he remarked, were any special loss to the country.

He went on to write “It was a fact that in the early days on the plains there was the strictest honesty between men. There was no law to enforce the collection of debts, and yet I have trusted men, some of whom were supposed to be outlaws and

¹ Credit extended to 7 Indians @ \$300 each = \$2,100. How much in today's money?

thieves engaged in running off government mules from trains and stealing Indian ponies. I have trusted that class of men time and again to the amount of hundreds of dollars, with no possible security or recourse excepting their honor, and never lost a dollar by one of them.

“In those years there were no courts, no officers, no law but the law of the plains: ‘Do as you would be done by.’ Yet life and property were safe and a man could ride all over the country, camping alone at night without the slightest apprehension of danger.”

A friend of long-standing was William Mathewson. One of my mother’s memories of her childhood in Wichita was riding in an open carriage through the streets in a parade. In the carriage with her was her father, & William Mathewson, & the showman William Cody. There had apparently been, at least in the mind of Buffalo Bill Mathewson, a long-standing annoyance against Cody for appropriating the ‘Buffalo Bill’ label which Mr. Mathewson was proud of and considered to be his own. It seems that Mead had arranged for these two ‘Bills’ to meet after many years of separation with a view to repairing the breach. They met on this occasion but there is little evidence that Mathewson felt better afterward.

It has always been a matter of regret to me and quite possibly some Kansas historians, that when Mr. Mead dictated his memoir, which was first published in 1986, he says surprisingly little about early Wichita and his part in its development. It is clear that as time passed he looked back

with increasing longing to those early years on the plains when he was a young man & life was an adventure.

In 1896 Mead married Fern Hoover, my grandmother. As a young girl she had lived with her parents & her sisters in a dugout near Beeler Kansas. At some point Fern's father moved the family to Wichita where he got a job as a policeman. When Mead called at the Hoover home one evening to discuss some police matter with Mr. Hoover he met Fern.

Fernie, as she was known to the family, lived with us on the farm north of Wichita throughout the first 20 years of my life. She survived Mead by 45 years. As a result you might think I have a personal fund of unpublished stories about her pioneer husband. In truth, she rarely spoke of him.

Mead travelled widely in North America. As a youth in the days before the Civil War he had paid a number of visits to family back East, had spent time in New York where he heard Henry Ward Beecher preach, and saw Tom Thumb. After the Civil War he went to Washington to see President Grant to discuss payment of monies owed him by the Government. From California he & Fern travelled by boat to Alaska. And he indulged a dream of his youth by going into the mining business in Tin Cup, Colorado, and later in Rimini, Montana – ventures which cost a great deal of money, time, and effort, but paid little in dividends.

Writing to his mother from Montana at some point in the 1880s – he put April 26th at the top of the letter, but did not

give the year – he says, “From father’s card I learn you have been sick. I feel quite uneasy on your account as I know you are not very strong. I hope you have recovered by this time...I enclose a small present to be used for your benefit in getting good help in the house. With much love, your son James.”

A few years ago my mother handed me this letter. Looking in the envelope I found not only the letter, but also the ten dollar bill which Mead had sent.

Always interested in archaeology & ethnology, Mead may have been the first to have carried out an archaeological investigation of a site in Kansas. He wrote numerous articles on a wide variety of subjects: natural history, ethnography, archaeology, and history. He wrote some twenty articles for various newspapers, fifteen for the Kansas Academy of Sciences, and at least eight for the Kansas State Historical Society. In 1882 he was elected vice-president of the Kansas Academy of Sciences. In that same year he was re-elected President of the Old Settlers Association. In 1907 he was elected President of the Kansas State Historical Society.

Having experienced the wide open spaces of the Great Plains in the springtime of his life, he was always conscious of what had been lost, writing:

“I long for the good old times of entire personal freedom which I once enjoyed on the plains; where there were no laws or customs or hindrances to the enjoyment of our own sweet will; where the earth and all it produced were as free as the air or sunshine; where life was not a daily struggle for existence

as it now is with so many thousands of people; where the tax-gatherer came not and mortgages were unknown; where the nearest route between two points was our road, unobstructed by wire fences or cultivated fields.”

On one occasion when writing for publication, he concluded a short article with these words:

“Briefly I have written something of the freedom, beauty and chivalry of the country as it was, and the fascination of those times and scenes lingers in my mind like the memory of pleasant dreams; but gone are the Indians, the bison, and the beaver, and in their haunts along the little river are the gardens, fields, orchards, homes, cities, and villages of thousands of prosperous people.”

In the first decade of the 20th century, however, when he was simply telling his story to a stenographer, he was not so upbeat in his concluding remarks:

“The beauties and blessings of civilization are very largely a myth. In a majority of instances it is but a daily round of ceaseless toil. The freedom and beauty and the chivalry of the plains are a thing of the past; nothing now remains but dull, plodding labor, and many thousands of settlers are now squatted down on a little circumscribed piece of prairie land, trying to eke out an existence by constant toil and privation where once roamed the Indian, free and unfettered, a stranger to fear or care, with thousands of fat cattle on every hand to supply his wants, living a life of ease, happiness and pleasure unknown to his white successor.”

By 1910 Henry Ford's Model Ts were appearing on the roads of America. The Wright brothers had successfully flown their heavier-than-air machine at Kitty Hawk. The age of the internal combustion engine had arrived. It may be that James R. Mead took a look around & decided it was time to take his leave.

Dr. Schuyler Jones, CBE
Professor Emeritus
Linacre College
Oxford University