



# CHEYENNE BOTTOMS

## A Look Back

by Karl Grover

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*The area called Cheyenne Bottoms, near Great Bend, has attracted, confounded, amazed, and frustrated people for as long as it's existed. Today, half of the original basin is managed as a public wildlife area, attracting tens of thousands of hunters and birdwatchers annually.*



The history of an area in central Kansas known as Cheyenne Bottoms is rich and varied. The most accepted theory for the formation of this 40,000-acre lowland is a subsurface structural movement. Evidence suggests this movement occurred between late Cretaceous and late Pliocene times. While native Indians no doubt used the Bottoms as hunting grounds, no written accounts of this exist.

The first written accounts by Europeans occurred in 1806. President Thomas Jefferson sent Zebulon Pike to explore the southern half of the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase. Pike passed through what would become central Kansas in October. He made mention of Cheyenne Bottoms in his journal entries of October 14 and 15. His entry on the 14th reads: "It having drizzled rain all night, and the

atmosphere being entirely obscured, we did not march until a quarter past nine o'clock, and commenced crossing the dividing ridge between the Kans (Smoky Hill) and Arkansas rivers. Arrived on a branch of the latter at one o'clock; continued down it in search of water, until after dusk, when we found a pond on the prairie, which induced us to halt." Historians speculate that the branch of the Arkansas River they followed was Cow Creek and that they stopped for the night in the vicinity of Redwing.

Continuing on the 15th Pike wrote: "In the morning road (sic) in search of the south trace, and crossed the low prairie, which was nearly all covered with ponds, but could not discover it." From the Bottoms, his crew went to the Arkansas River, striking it near what is now Great Bend.

Commerce with Mexico on what would become the Santa Fe Trail began in 1821. In 1825, George C. Sibley was sent to survey this important road. His survey party followed the Arkansas River, and on August 23, Sibley left the crew and scouted north of the river. He wrote in his diary that day: "I rode a mile or two farther towards the north and then turned more westward and fell into a beautiful and very extensive rich valley or meadow, having two small streams running through it and numerous herds of buffalo grazing in every direction . . . I presume the valley may contain 10,000 acres. It is all beautifully level and thickly set with buffalo grass and looks like an immense field of blue grass."

The year 1839 was part of an apparently very wet period for the Bottoms. Dr. Frederick A. Wislizenus was returning from a trip through the Rocky Mountains when he came across the Bottoms. After crossing Walnut Creek, Fredrick became separated from his colleagues. In an effort to reunite, he headed east hoping to cross the Santa Fe Trail and find his friends. On the foggy morning of September 29 he "found" the Bottoms. "After I had gone some miles farther, I saw a great swamp lying before me. Toward north and south I could see no end to it, but it seemed to extend only a few miles toward the east. The water was not very deep and the ground pretty firm. So I resolved to try at every risk to get

through in an eastern direction. I rode my horse forward at the slowest pace, but it often slid down on grass and reeds. My pack animal I led after me with a rope. All sorts of water birds swarmed around from all sides. Never have I seen together such quantities of swans, cranes, pelicans, geese and ducks, as were here. The swamp was fairly covered with them, and they seemed to feel themselves so safe that I could have killed hundreds of them with the shot barrel of my double-barreled weapon. Just at that time however, I was less interested in hunting than in getting out of that confounded swamp, for my horse was visibly becoming exhausted, and I was making barely a mile an hour. With



This aerial photo shows a portion of the nearly 20,000-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area. The basin actually includes more than 40,000 acres and prior to settlement, it would have been a spectacular wetland during wet weather cycles.

trouble and difficulty, I finally reached what I had thought from a distance to be trees; but it turned out to be only tall reeds, and the second half of the swamp still lay before me. My horse now would not budge for either whip or spur; so I dismounted and dragged it after me by the bridle. The water sometimes reached to my chest . . . the sun was sinking when I finally reached the other side of the swamp.”

A drought was in place in 1860. That is the year a portion of the First Cavalry with Lt. James Ewell Brown Stuart (J.E.B. Stuart of Civil War fame) passed by the Bottoms. On May 21, he recorded in his diary: “Passed several small creeks where water was expected, now all dry. Passed in afternoon to our

left immense lake thought at first to be the Arkansas – but found to be lake of good water – in center of very large basin of parched soil passed through myriads of buffalo.”

Apparently the drought continued into 1862. While taking supplies and horses from Fort Riley to Fort Union, New Mexico Territory in September of that year, Percival Lowe crossed the Bottoms. He “arrived on the high ground overlooking Cheyenne Bottom and was surprised at its extent – an expanse of about 10 miles of bottom with a mere trail but little traveled and apparently wet. I could not plunge into that without examining it. I had an inkling that there was such a bottom, and had ridden some miles ahead of



Market hunters flocked to the Bottoms in the late 1800s, when canvasback ducks brought as much as \$8 per dozen.

the horse strings, and now wrote a few lines to the man in charge of the first string telling him and all to halt here until my return, put it on a stick and stuck it in the ground. I kept an assistant wagon master with me, and we rode across the bottom to a good camp on the west side and back in about three hours. I determined to take the horse strings across, but if I got the loaded wagons into that bottom and it should rain, which was threatening, I might wallow in the mud indefinitely, and so I instructed the trains to corral. If it rained, I would have to go south to the old Santa Fe Trail. The horse-string wagons were so light that I could risk them. The horse strings crossed all right, and were in a good camp on the

west side before dark. I was off in the morning early and reached the trains by starting time and led them over the bottom.”

By 1872, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad had reached Barton County. With the railroad came more and more settlers to the Great Plains. Settlement brought those who thought they had ways of “improving” the Bottoms. In the mid-1890s, Lutellus Baldwin gazed across Cheyenne Bottoms and conceived a plan for irrigation, beautification, and amusement. He planned to accomplish this by converting the basin into an inland sea. The water for the project would be obtained from the Arkansas River, 15 miles to the southwest. Baldwin, however, lacked

the money for such an undertaking. A few years later, H.W. Koen and his brother F.B. Koen became interested in the idea. They had extensive experience in constructing irrigation projects in Colorado, and in fact, owned ditches there. The two began planning the project, with H.W. Koen providing the funds and his brother supervising the construction. They began the project in 1897 and formed the Lake Koen Navigation, Reservoir, and Irrigating Company. The ditch began on the Arkansas River, about six miles southwest of Great Bend. It went north about 6 miles and then northeast for about 6 miles. Ditch-ploughs were used for the digging. These machines required 12 horses, eight in front

and four at the rear, as well as three men. By 1901 the ditch was complete and all water control structures were finished. Water flowed into the Bottoms for about 100 days. Financial troubles were catching up with the Koens, though. Many lawsuits were filed by landowners who felt they were not fairly compensated for their condemned land, and a court order halted work on the project. The last straw for the project came in 1904, when a flood on the Arkansas River resulted in the inundation of farm land with water from the Koen ditch. In addition, the structures associated with the ditch in the river were destroyed. The damage law suits and the infrastructure repair costs were too much for the project to continue.

Around the turn of the century, wildlife provided added reason to come to the Bottoms. The American Coursing Club held their annual jack rabbit chase on the western edge of the basin. This annual event continued for five years. Between 1880 and the early 1900s, market duck hunting was common at Cheyenne Bottoms. In 1880, canvasbacks sold for \$8 a dozen, redheads sold for \$6 a dozen, mallards \$3, and other mixed species went for \$1.50 per dozen. With concern rising over declining duck numbers, the Kansas Legislature passed laws to regulate the practice of commercial hunting. In 1897, an act was passed to establish hunting seasons and to prohibit the sale



While market hunting was outlawed in 1897, there was a strong waterfowl hunting tradition at the Bottoms maintained by sportsmen's associations through the early 1900s.

and shipment of birds. A 1905 amendment provided sweeping powers to game wardens, allowing them to inspect places where birds were being sold, and it also established bag limits. These legislative actions ended market hunting at the Bottoms. In 1905, a number of Barton County citizens organized the Barton County Sportsmen's Association. Their objective was to maintain hunting privileges in different parts of the county. By 1912, they controlled six sections of land in Cheyenne Bottoms.

In 1917, the first oil well was drilled in the southeastern corner of what is now Pool 1A. It was completed in 1923. The Sooy No. 1 well produced oil, but was never sensational.

For the most part, things were quiet at Cheyenne Bottoms from 1900 into the late 1920s. The basin went through its normal wet/dry cycle. Area farmers attempted to

raise crops and pasture the grass or put up hay. In dry years they were successful, and in wet years, they lost the crops of hay. Wildlife use of the area continued to provide excellent waterfowl hunting opportunities. In 1927, a two-day, 14-inch rain northwest of the Bottoms filled the basin to its highest level remembered. This started action by two opposing groups of people with respect to Cheyenne Bottoms. One group began looking for ways to drain the basin into Cow Creek (which was opposed by the residents of Hutchinson,) or else to dig a ditch to the Arkansas River. The suggested Ark River ditch was opposed by the farmers whose ground it would cross. The other group saw an opportunity to get Cheyenne Bottoms included in the federal wildlife refuge system. The vast amount of waterfowl using the area during the falls of 1927 and

1928 were described as astonishing. In late 1927, the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission (KFFG) requested that the federal Bureau of Biological Survey inspect the Bottoms. It was hoped that a favorable recommendation from the Survey to Congress would provide funding for the development of the basin into a federal refuge. In addition, the Commission requested help from the Izaak Walton League (IWL). Representatives from both the Survey and the IWL provided positive reports on the project's merits. A bill was introduced in the House of Representatives for the establishment of a federal refuge with an appropriation of \$350,000 to buy land and begin work. A companion bill was also introduced in the Senate. In 1930, Congress passed the bill for \$250,000, but only \$50,000 was made available. Most of that money was spent on engineering and title searches. At this point

the project died, and nothing more was done until 1937.

There is often a turning point in the life of anything. For wildlife enthusiasts of the United States, this point occurred on September 2, 1937, when the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act was passed by Congress and signed into law. This act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, placed a federal excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service collects the monies generated by this tax. The cost of projects undertaken by state wildlife agencies for wildlife habitat restoration are reimbursed by the federal government up to 75 percent of the total cost of the project. Each state has a maximum amount of money it can receive, based upon the state's area and the number of hunting licenses sold. This piece of legislation did, and still does, provide the majority of money used by state wildlife agencies

for wildlife conservation. One of the first projects undertaken by KFFG with their new funding source was the acquisition and development of Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area.

The first land acquired for the Bottoms was purchased in 1942. During the war years, the area was leased to the U.S. Army Air Corp for a bombing range. Crews being trained for the B-29 heavy bomber flew out of the Great Bend Army Air Field. To this day, .50 caliber spent casings and projectiles can be found during dry periods. In addition, the training area for the .50 caliber machine guns used on bombers is still present. By 1949, the Air Corp was gone and the bulk of the 19,857 acres of the current wildlife area were purchased. Construction on the project started in 1949 with the digging of the 3.5-mile inlet canal from Wet Walnut Creek to the basin. The Wet Walnut dam was completed in 1952. Work on the 23 miles of dikes within the



Throughout history, Cheyenne Bottoms has endured attempts to either drain the wetland or create a huge lake. Ultimately, waterfowl hunting and hunters saved it. The Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission began purchasing land in 1942 to create a public hunting area. By 1949, more than 19,000 acres had been purchased and on October 13, 1957, the area was officially dedicated.

Bottoms was initiated in 1950. This included the construction of 11 water control structures and was finished in 1953. In 1955, the final phase of the project was begun. This included the construction of the Arkansas River and Wet Walnut Creek diversion dams and accompanying inlet canals. The work was completed in 1957, with the dedication held October 13, 1957. The total cost for the project was about \$2.8 million. The first waterfowl season for the “new” Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area was in 1953.

Since completion of the original construction, much has changed in the arid west. Demands for water have increased to the point where many rivers and streams no longer flow with historical regularity. In order to cope with these changes, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks embarked

on a 10-year, \$17 million renovation project of Cheyenne Bottoms in 1990. This renovation incorporates elements to conserve water, improve efficiency in water management, and re-furbish many of the original water control structures. KDWP has also added several new pieces of equipment over the past 20 years. These allow staff at the Bottoms to better deal with the management challenges that accompany any project of this size. Plans are underway to construct a modern visitor education center on the property. This will help educate the public on marsh management in general, Cheyenne Bottoms in particular, and the role hunting has played in wildlife conservation in Kansas and the United States.

Hunters have not been the only beneficiaries of Cheyenne Bottoms. Birdwatching, fishing, trapping, wetland research and

simple enjoyment of the natural world all can be found within the basin. The semi-annual Wings and Wetlands Bird Festival, numerous schools that tour the basin, and the other 50,000 annual visitors to Cheyenne Bottoms attest to the marsh’s value to the people of central Kansas. Cheyenne Bottoms has been recognized as a Wetland of International Importance, a Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve and an Important Bird Area, attesting to the marsh’s value to migratory birds.

Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area is a living biological system. Like all living things, it changes. With continued commitment by KDWP, and support from the people of Kansas, we will be able to manage these changes and keep the Bottoms one of the primary wetlands for wildlife and people alike in the Central Flyway. ♡



Mike Blair photo