

Settling the "Great American Desert"

Zebulon Pike's Legacy

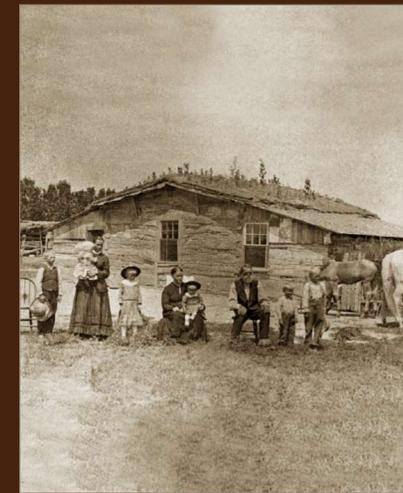
Near midnight, on October 13, 1806, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike and his exploring party, headed to the Rockies, reached the Arkansas River just south of here. The explorers camped by the river for two weeks to rest their animals and lay in a supply of meat.

Pike's published expedition reports strongly influenced public opinion about this region. He described the Great Plains as "incapable of cultivation," best left "to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country." Later explorers echoed his claims, and the Plains became known in the mid-1800s as the "Great American Desert."

Though Pike's descriptions discouraged settlement here for more than fifty years, his explorations spurred on the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. The Trail brought thousands of settlers through this area during the mid-1800s. By 1870, settlers had discovered that crops could, indeed, prosper here. In 1872, rail service reached this county, and settlers flooded in to begin a new life.



Harvesting Corn
Kansas State Historical Society



Meyer Log Home/Barton Cty. Historical Museum

Early Barton County Settlers

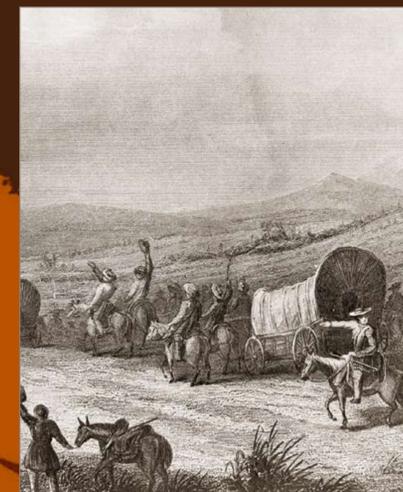
"We raised onions, tomatoes, and potatoes that year [1867] near the ranch on spaded ground, they being the first vegetables ever raised in Barton County by white men. We had rains enough to keep them in good growing condition, and they matured of good size and shape." —Homer H. Kidder of Great Bend, from *Biographical History of Barton County, Kansas, 1912*.



Prairie in Bloom/Kansas State Historical Society

Desert Rose

... "The spring [of 1872] opened very fine, and the prairie schooners carrying settlers came in very fast... Considerable land was broken and planted to corn, etc., and the desert, which has since developed into a full blown rose, began to bud." —Ed W. Dewey, from *Biographical History of Barton County, Kansas, 1912*.



Santa Fe Trail/Kansas State Historical Society

Motion and Change

Like sailing ships on the ocean, fleets of canvas-topped wagons carried settlers over the plains to Barton County. A lighter version of the massive Conestoga wagons that hauled freight on the Santa Fe Trail, the Prairie Schooner was the wagon of choice for many of the region's settlers.



Funded in part by the Federal Highway Administration through the Kansas Scenic Byways Program.