

“Kansas Post Rock” By Brad Penka

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When early pioneers first arrived on the expansive plains of Kansas, they were faced with a lack of trees for building homes and fences. Many settlers made their homes from the ground itself by cutting squares from the soil and drying them to make sod bricks. Sod homes were a temporary fix, but torrential rainfalls and prairie fires could quickly destroy the homes. They began searching for alternatives. In Central Kansas, they soon discovered a layer of rock located only a few feet below the soil surface that could be used to make permanent, weather resistant, beautiful buildings.

This rock layer is known as fencepost limestone and is the perfect thickness – about 8 to 12 inches – for building stones. When it is first exposed to air, it is soft and chalky, making it easier to drill and dress, however, once exposed to air, it becomes hard making it an excellent building material. Outcroppings of the layer are found in an 18-county region in central Kansas running diagonally from northern Ford County about 200 miles northeast to Washington County at the Nebraska border.

Another problem that the homesteader on the treeless prairie faced was a need to protect crops from cattle and the native Bison that roamed the open range. During the late 1800s, range laws allowed cattle owners to let their animals roam free requiring farmers to protect their own crops. With few trees to make fence posts, the ever-ingenious pioneer found yet another use for the local limestone layer . . . fence posts. The lack of wood for fence posts, the stones could be cut and stood on end to support barbed wire making an inexpensive and weather resistant fence. These fence posts were known as Post Rock, thus the region in Kansas where they were readily used is named Post Rock Country or the Post Rock Region. (1:50)

Typically stone posts were quarried so that each post would be split 6 feet long and 8 – 10 inches wide. Each post weighed about 300 pounds and a team of horses could only haul a few posts at a time. Most farmers chose to quarry and haul their own posts, however, many could afford the 25 cents charged per post with delivery included. Post rocks were quarried the same as building blocks, but the increased size and weight made moving them more difficult. The typical method for hauling the posts was to quarry and dress the posts, drive a wagon directly over each post, and attach the post in a sling on the underside of the wagon. The farmer would then drive along the fence line and drop the post at a post hole, usually set about 10 steps apart. When the wagon pulled away, one end of the post would slide into the hole as the post was lifted upright. Typically, 25 posts could be set in a day. Although quarrying and setting stone posts was difficult and time consuming, their longevity was much greater than wood posts. At one time, it was estimated there were over 40,000 miles of stone posts. Today, many of those have been removed and replaced with steel, but those that remain still stand strong as a testament to the ingenuity of the pioneers of Post Rock Country.

This transcript of “Kansas Post Rock” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.