

# Point of Rocks Landmark Area

## Along the Cimarron River



**Point of Rocks Morton, County Kansas**

The Point of Rocks bluff has a rimrock of soft caliche and a base of somewhat harder limestone and is an impressive landmark that can be seen from points to the south and up and down the river for quite a distance. Many Indian artifacts, including arrow points and scrapers, have been picked up around both landmarks.

Several holes of fresh water have been known to exist up and down the Cimarron in this region, the intervals depending on rainfall for a given season. Some ten miles above Point of Rocks a permanent water hole, known among local cattlemen for much of the twentieth century as "The Boggs," existed. Some six miles above "The Boggs" another, smaller permanent spring has been found several hundred yards north of the river. While these springs were known to ranchers, no mention of them appears in Santa Fe Trail accounts.

Limited amounts of water for man or beast can nearly always be obtained from the river bed by digging a foot or so and waiting for the hole to fill. The famous explorer, Jedediah Smith, had apparently learned this fact. It is believed that Smith's search for water for his caravan in 1831 resulted in his missing the Lower Springs. Evidently striking the Cimarron somewhere below that point, Smith may have dug into the sandy bed to obtain water. While so engaged, he was surprised by a party of Comanches and killed. The exact location of Smith's death remains unknown.

Just as the Middle Spring was a reliable source of water for travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, it served well the ranchers who came into the region after the Trail was history.

After the Santa Fe Trail, the most historical phase of the area began in 1877 when Texas ranch partners, known as Bates and Beals, pastured some of their cattle near Point of Rocks during the summer months. The first permanent occupation came with the arrival of John W. Beaty from the upper Arkansas Valley and his construction of a cow camp on the bench above the Cimarron and just below Point of Rocks. He

brought some six or eight men with him to start a new ranch headquarters, after which he turned south to the Texas panhandle to obtain the cows with which to stock this range. This expansion of the Beaty interests occurred in 1879 or 1880, some 14 years after he arrived in Colorado in 1866 at the age of 19.

John Beaty had taken several wagon loads of trading goods to the upper Arkansas over the Santa Fe Trail and, finding a place that suited his plans, had built a trading post at what was later known as Manzanola in Otero County, Colorado. Three of his brothers, James, Jasper, and Alvin, followed him soon there after from the family home in Carroll County, Missouri, bringing more merchandise and entering into partnership in the new community they founded. The four young men were descendants of pioneers. Their grandfather, William Beaty, a Kentucky backwoods scout and settler, had married Peggy Crockett, a sister of Davy Crockett. Their father, Harvey Beaty, had moved to Missouri in his youth and encouraged his sons to keep pace with the rapidly moving frontier.

Their interests were wide and varied, and they soon developed, in addition to a new town and a big store, a bank and an expanding cattle ranch. Most of their land during the early years was open range with title established only at a few watering points. Some of their landholdings were obtained from the Mexican grant to Ceran St. Vrain and Comelio Vigil through an assignment to F. Aguilar, an associate of William Bent.

The Beaty brothers extended their range south along the Timpas and Purgatoire, up the Smith Fork of the latter, and down Butte Creek into what is now Baca County, Colorado. It was natural for John Beaty to scout out the Cimarron, find grass and water he liked, and establish a new ranch division headquarters at Point of Rocks. Grazing was excellent throughout the locale, and the river valley provided tall grass suitable for hay cutting.

Soon after building the headquarters camp just below Point of Rocks, John Beaty filed a homestead entry on the quarter-section containing the buildings in early 1881. Others in his group soon filed homesteads on the quarter section containing Middle Spring and several other nearby quarters. This was a common practice among early cattlemen, the adult members of their family and employees of proven loyalty fanned out and homesteaded the most desirable land, with water and grass being the chief criteria in choosing a location. There was little competition for such land in those days even though the homestead entry laws had been on the books for nearly two decades.

Later additions to deeded land were acquired largely by purchase of homesteads and relinquishments as many of the early settlers found it impossible to hold onto the land for even the five years required to obtain title without getting a job or assistance from the more entrenched cattlemen. The job or assistance usually led to purchase of the homestead by the cattlemen soon after the patent was issued. Land records in most counties of this region show countless quarter sections with a mortgage dated immediately after the patent was issued with a quit-claim following mortgage registry almost in a matter of minutes.

The Beaty brothers were engaged in building other divisions of their huge and prosperous operation at the same time in Otero, Bent, Las Animas, and Prowers counties in Colorado. Their keen judgment, along with decisive and tireless efforts, made projects move forward, including trading activities, banking houses, landholdings, and cattle acquisitions. They controlled a large range, well beyond their actual ownership, in Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

Within a dozen years, the Beaty brothers had assembled more than 18,000 deeded acres around Point of

Rocks and Middle Spring. This land was well blocked out, giving them actual control over several times that amount of acreage, with much of the land still belonging to the public domain. With their holdings in Colorado and other business interests, they were reportedly among the wealthiest men of the Southwest in the early 1890s.

The Beaty brothers somehow weathered the terrible blizzard of 1886 and the droughts that followed a few years later. Their losses were considerable, of course, but they survived while many other ranchers were forced out of business. Their town of Manzanola was missed by the railroad, but they moved their interests to railroad towns. By the late 1890s, the brothers sensed another wave of homesteaders, and they were feeling the impact of barbed wire and windmills. They decided to reduce and transfer some of the holdings. Alvin and James secured thousands of acres of level prairie some 50 miles farther east where rainfall was heavier, and they prepared to break the prairie and become farmers.

In 1897 Henry S. Boice, a successful and experienced cattleman, came through Colorado looking for land and met the Beaty brothers at Manzanola. He inspected several of their ranch properties, took a fancy to the Point of Rocks division, and purchased the 18,000 deeded acres with 12,000 head of cattle in one big package deal. Boice also obtained the famous brands of the Beaty spread, the Double 0 and JO, along with the land and cattle, according to Ed Dean who lived in Morton County until his death in 1950. Alvin Beaty moved to Lakin before the ranch was sold, bought banks at Lakin and Syracuse, and assembled another ranch in Kearny and Grant counties.

The big ranch made money under the new ownership, although the country began to fill with another wave of homesteaders and problems of interfering fences, strayed and seized cattle and resultant arguments, and the general nuisance of changing times and conditions. Intent on resolving some of these problems, Boice continued to buy out homesteaders and increase his deeded holdings in both Morton and Baca counties, and he owned more than 100,000 acres toward the end of his stay in the area.

Boice was also buying ranch land in Arizona and land and city property in California, which led to almost continuous travel between his fields of activity. The Point of Rocks ranch was about 75 miles from the nearest railroad. Boice, therefore, was willing to sell the Point of Rocks property when approached by buyers of the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Santa Fe Railroad, in 1907. He sold the Morton County part of his ranch and several thousand acres in Colorado. Boice and his heirs retained holdings in Baca County, Colorado, until 1941, when they sold more than 50,000 acres at an average price of \$2.00 per acre to R. B. Holt, a Walsh, Colorado, banker. In the 1950s Holt's son, Bowers Holt, held much of that land and was one of the biggest landowners in the region.

The Santa Fe was preparing to build a branch rail line into the area, and through its land company, sold most of its purchases in the region in small tracts and created Elkhart, the temporary railhead, through town lot sales. The grassy area of the Point of Rocks ranch hung on the market for several years after the town was built. Henry S. Boice had understood that the new land seekers who came with the railroad would dislocate the cattle industry for several years, and other cattlemen were reluctant to take on the reduced ranch with much of its more level land already converted into small grain farms with an uncertain future.

The historic Middle Spring and Point of Rocks, along with 20 sections of land, were leased to Sam King and associates of Hutchinson, Kansas. They restocked the pastures and continued in business for several years. Nature struck hard at the ranch in 1914 when a flash flood developed from heavy downpours

upstream from the ranch. A 10 to 12 foot rise of water swept down the Cimarron Valley on May 1 of that year, spread out across the rich hay meadows and swept across the ranch buildings and corrals on the low bench of the north bank directly beneath the Point of Rocks.



The water hurled the ranch house from its foundation, carried it down stream, and drowned the two young children of Perry Brite, who then was operating foreman of the ranch. Ranchers and farmers searched the valley for days before finding the bodies of Madge (age 11) and Merle (age 4) and burying them nearby.

The flood also resulted in deep deposits of river sand on what had been rich meadows. Hay harvesting was over for several miles up and down the Cimarron, and the loss to ranches was immeasurable. Eventually grasses were reestablished along the valley sufficient for grazing, but they did not recover for good hay cutting.

The loss of the hay meadows hurt not only Sam King but subsequent lessors, and the ranch suffered other setbacks. Eventually Foster Elliott, a third generation cattleman, bought the ranch with a heavy mortgage on it in favor of the Interstate Land and Cattle Company of Kansas City, Missouri. Elliott bought several other properties nearby, all with heavy encumbrance. Factors leading to his early loss through foreclosure are not important to this story, but by the time cattle prices broke and drought struck in 1933, the grace period had elapsed and the Interstate Company took possession of the ranch under foreclosure. By that time, however, most of the land in Morton County had been plowed and planted to small grain crops, setting the scene for the disaster of the "Dirty Thirties."

There were no buyers for the ranch during the desperate years of the Dust Bowl, when property owners were fighting just to hold onto their own land rather than seek new investments. The grass was so poor because of the dry weather and blowing dust and sand that the Missouri bankers never even tried to lease out the Point of Rocks ranch. According to the Soil Conservation Service, Morton County suffered the most damage to its soil of any county in the Dust Bowl, with over 78% of the total acres seriously eroded by the hundreds of dust storms.

The farm program of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration declared Morton and Baca counties submarginal and sent Resettlement Administration land buyers into the area to purchase much of the available land for the average price of \$4.00 per acre. Many farmers and ranchers sold their land or their equities to the Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service, which by 1939 had acquired almost 107,000 acres. Under the purchase plan authorized by Congress (the Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act), the Soil Conservation Service set up the Land Utilization Project, which took title to the surface with all mineral rights remaining with the vendor. This became important a few years later when huge natural gas and petroleum reserves were found on the government lands. Eventually more than 400 oil/gas facilities

and approximately 300 miles of pipeline were located on the Cimarron National Grassland.

The Land Utilization Project employed Worker Progress Administration crews to build terraces, establish ponds, and plant grasses over the 108,175 acres in Morton and a small part of Stevens counties, mostly up and down the Cimarron valley and centering in the Middle Spring area. An earthen dam was constructed below the spring to create a large reservoir, since only a small pool had theretofore existed.

At the end of World War II, in 1945, the Land Utilization Project pronounced the grass pastures again ready for grazing and entered into a lease with a newlyformed Morton County Grazing Association. Only resident cattle breeders and raisers could belong to the association, and each was given a permit for summer pasture much like forest permits. The permits gave the members the right to summer range for a specified number of cattle, depending upon the rainfall in a given season.

In 1954 the Land Utilization Project's big pasture was transferred from the Soil Conservation Service to the Forest Service, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, and made part of the San Isabel Forest, with headquarters at Pueblo, Colorado. When strangers were told that the range was part of the San Isabel Forest, they searched the horizon for the trees, even though cottonwoods and willows had grown along the river channel. In 1960 the Land Utilization Project became the Cimarron National Grassland, still a part of the Forest Service. Presently the Forest Service allows the 120 members of the Morton County Grazing Association to pasture 5,000 head of cattle for six months on the Cimarron National Grassland. The Forest Service and three range riders from the Association maintain almost 500 miles of fence and 125 windmills.

Another incident connected with Point of Rocks is of historical interest. In 1941 many communities in Kansas celebrated the 400th anniversary of the coming of Coronado to the region. Like other towns, Elkhart planned a gala time with a big parade and program. Singularly enough, on a Sunday afternoon in May, some six weeks prior to the fiesta, Elkhart's bank president, George L. Hayward, and his son Jack, were walking up the dry bed of the Cimarron, hunting arrow points and scrapers. They had success in the vicinity of Middle Spring and Point of Rocks. Just below the bluff of the Point, the banker called his son's attention to an exposed limestone ledge that had recently been washed clear by flood waters. Just above the streambed, perhaps 20 inches in length, appeared a carved signature and the date of 1541. Close study by the Haywards recalled a similar signature facsimile on the frontispiece photo of Paul Jone's recently-published book about Coronado's trip, *Coronado and Quivira*.

Excited by their find, they hurried back to town to get a copy of the book, called me and several other friends, and we all drove out to the Point for an examination. Dr. F. H. Buckmaster, Elkhart's physician, made another trip to town and brought back plaster of Paris and made a quick matrix cast. The inscription was also photographed.

In the days that followed, several college archaeologists and historians visited the scene along with Paul Jones and other Coronado fans and students. Newspapers in Wichita, Denver, Kansas City, and numerous small towns printed much about the discovery. It appeared to be old, but the timeliness of the finding and the absence of any other cut or engraving made many doubt its authenticity. A short time later, for reasons unknown, the rock was either removed or destroyed.

The Haywards, whose standing in the community and veracity were unquestioned, suddenly found themselves objects of suspicion. Regarded by many as perpetrators of a hoax inspired by city pride, they swore by their Methodist Bibles that their find was pure and valid without an iota of fraud, but heads still

shook and savants still argued. And there the matter still stands.

Ruts of the Santa Fe Trail are visible across the Cimarron National Grassland. As you are driving across the Grasslands, watch for the many limestone posts out in the open. These are used to mark the route of the Santa Fe Trail across this open country. Middle Spring and the Point of Rocks look much as they did in Trail days, as you can see from the photos on the page. There is also an abundance of wildlife in the area. This is rattlesnake country so caution should be followed when around the rocks in the area. A self guided auto tour of the Grassland is available.



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