

JOURNAL *of the* WEST[®]

VOL. 42, NO. 4
FALL 2003



Boosterism in the West

ABOUT THE WEST



For early Kansas farmers, such as this family from Kirwin, Kansas, a horse was transportation and an essential means of livelihood.

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Frontier Protective and Social Network: *The Anti-Horse Thief Association in Kansas* Cindy Higgins

AS U.S. settlers migrated westward, they left behind statutory laws and the peace officers able to enforce them. Until communities organized, settlers protected their own lives and possessions and often did so by banding together to spontaneously halt wrongdoing. Often justified by the circumstances, their vigilante justice reflected the lack of a legal system rather than the legal system's failure to convict wrongdoers. Practiced by moderate citizens orderly in their application of force, vigilantism discouraged crime. Its dark side was the "lynch mob," an excitable group intent on quick, drastic punishment. Vigilantism reached a zenith during the latter part of the 19th century in the Great Plains and Western states where isolated settlers were vulnerable prey.¹

Kansas had its share of self-deputized, secret groups

mostly united to oust horse thieves. In 1882, these like-minded groups combined forces under the umbrella of the Anti-Horse Thief Association (AHTA). So popular was this protective network that it spread quickly through Missouri following the Civil War, and then to other states (Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, Arkansas, New Mexico, Montana, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Oklahoma). However, no state joined the bandwagon more than Kansas, the power base and voice of the AHTA.

Spanning the close of the 19th century and the opening of the 20th, this organization's mission was protection — but exactly "from what?" was the changing question as the AHTA outlived its original purpose of theft protection and evolved through two distinct stages, progressive reform and zealous patriotism, before its slow demise.²

Midwest Frontier Phenomenon Arises in Response to Repeated Thefts

The frontier watchdog AHTA had its roots in the northeast region of Missouri. David McKee, advancing peace-keeping strategies he learned while mining gold in California, proposed to fellow Clark County farmers in 1854 that they work together as detectives to bring thieves — particularly horse thieves — to legal trial.³ McKee's neighbors welcomed the concept of an extra-legal society that aided law officers and did not violate one law to uphold another. They disdained hooded night-riders who at best used summary actions on suspected criminals, and at worst were outlaws themselves.⁴

Knowing they had to take action to stop the infestation of roving scoundrels in their area, the farmers joined up with McKee. Translated into practice, McKee's plan proved ineffective, yet showed promise. The Great Western Horse Insurance and Detective Company, which offered Indiana and Illinois customers insurance against theft with its own detective force, trumpeted the inadequacies of mutual protective groups in self-promotion:

Small organizations, such as Vigilance Companies and small State Companies, cannot successfully protect owners in their property, nor suppress horse stealing, as nine times out of ten they fail to return to the owner the animal stolen or capture the thief.⁵

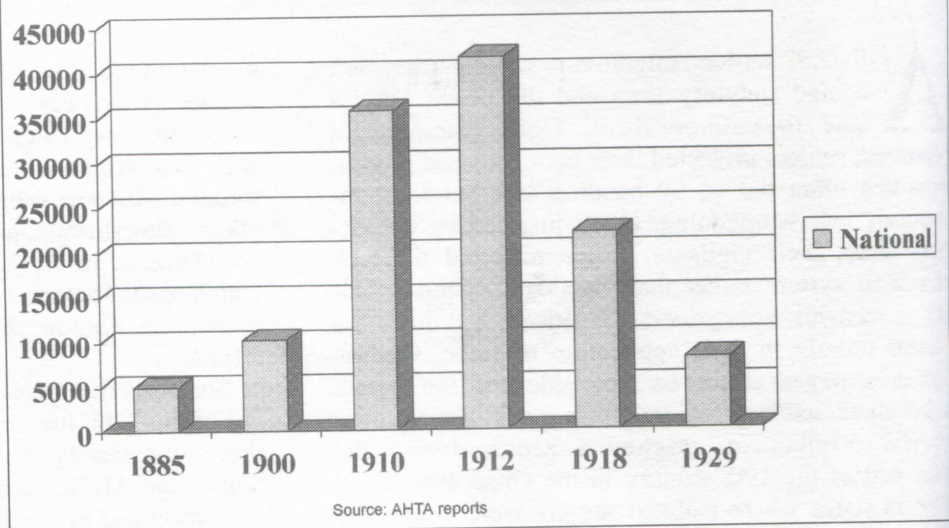
Pursuit activities officially halted when McKee entered the Home Guard at the onset of the Civil War. Upon his disability discharge and at the urging of his neighbors, he quickly resurrected and fine-tuned the former protection society structure. Guided by the motto "Protect the innocent and bring thieves and law breakers to justice," McKee and his followers established the national Grand Order of the Anti-Horse Thief Association on October 23, 1863. Eight Missouri subordinate orders joined within a few months. They reported to their state (Missouri) association, which itself looked to the Grand Order that kept the "black book" containing names and residences of suspicious characters and known criminals, expelled AHTA members, and rejected member candidates.

An example of information in these reports can be found in the *Oklahoma Black List* that held each suborder's rogue report of "suspicious" men. After noting



This "Black List" of Oklahoma ne'er-do-wells circulated among AHTA groups to identify known and possible criminals.

National Membership



Several states had Anti-Horse Thief Association lodges, but Kansas became the power base and voice of the AHTA, in part because of the boosterism of W. W. Graves in St. Paul, Kansas.



▲ Anti-Horse Thief Association festivities often included family members. In 1926, these "Antis" gathered in Wichita, Kansas.

Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence



◀ Massachusetts Street, the main street of Lawrence, Kansas, was the site of this Central Protective Association parade, October 3, 1905.

Robert Green Collection, Watkins Community Museum of History, Lawrence, KS

name, age, height, weight, complexion, eye and hair color, and residence (i.e., "R. J. Jones, age 55 or 60, height 5 ft 9 in., dark complexion, black hair, getting gray. Occupation, sitting around saloons and spinning yarns, has failed twice in business in the last two years"), the listing included offenses, such as

Horstrader and all around crook, strictly against A.H.T.A., noted for pure cussedness of all kinds, skipped his bills, general harbinger of thieves, suspected of stealing harnesses and saddles, sent up for 1 year and 1 day for stealing hog.

Or:

Clarence Hedge, about 5 ft 10 in., light complexion, horse trader and farmer, supposed to belong to a gang of horse thieves which operates from somewhere east of Guthrie west to the Glass Mountains.⁶

To access these lists, a man or woman (if she owned property) had to join the AHTA. Members were required to be 18 or older, pay the \$.50 initiation fee (\$1 in later times), contribute annual dues (\$.50 to \$3), and be ready to pursue suspected thieves. When a horse turned up missing, a posse of at least two members rode two days,

for \$1 a day, all expenses paid, while fellow lodge members tended the riders' farmsteads.

Once members caught up with the thieves, either the owner of the stolen property, the AHTA deputy sheriff, or a law official made an arrest with a state's warrant. The typical AHTA reward for a captured horse thief was \$100, half that for theft of household items. If the association did not recover the horse, it paid two-thirds of the animal's value. If the alleged theft proved to be only strayed livestock, the owner paid partial recovery costs.

Early Kansas farmers took the AHTA to heart because a horse was transportation and a means of livelihood. Survival depended on a horse, and its theft was not taken lightly. The first territorial statutes in 1855 spelled out the crime's magnitude: seven years of hard labor for stealing a horse, mare, gelding, colt, filly, mule, or ass.⁷ Harsh penalties did not thwart theft. Kansas Governor Thomas Carney issued a statement in 1863 that robberies prevailed, and that stealing of horses and other stock was common in nearly all parts of the state. Carney blamed this proliferation on the difficulty of locating the thieves, sparsely settled communities, and robber gangs.⁸

Thieves, many of them from bordering states, preyed on Kansas's isolated and boundary communities, such as Johnson County, where farmers along Indian Creek estimated that thieves stole 60 horses, besides many

head of cattle, one summer in the 1860s. Similar thefts occurred throughout the county and were attributed to an organized thieving operation extending from Kansas City to Omaha that finally broke up by 1870.⁹

James David Drees, in his *Kansas History* article on Kansas Army posts, claimed that individual thieves and organized bands also vexed Army posts (Fort Wallace, Fort Hays, Fort Larned, Fort Dodge, and Fort Harker) in the 1860s and 1870s. Thievery halted when the Army took advantage of increasing telegraph lines, roads, and railroads to more effectively track stolen property. By 1874, horse thieves who had formerly concentrated on Army posts turned their attention to farmers and ranchers in remote areas such as the upper region of southern Kansas and the present state of Oklahoma.¹⁰

Several AHTA groups sprung up to stop thieves from operating along the Arkansas River between Wichita and Winfield. Cattle-industry areas near Fort Dodge, Abilene, and the Flint Hills had more than their share of thievery, but perhaps none so much as Butler County, a hotbed of rustling and summary law enforcement. Several news accounts of the time claimed that thieves made Butler County their rendezvous point and trafficked there for years.¹¹

During the early days of Kansas statehood, a horse thief captured by vigilantes, and everybody else as well, knew the punishment would be great, possibly death. One editor wrote that 19th-century Westerners had

a degree of respect for the robbery of a stage coach or for the man who dealt cold decks in a poker game or for the drunk who shot up the saloon. But for the horse thief he had only scorn and a hemp rope.¹²

The earliest Kansas newspapers typically dismissed a hanging with a one-sentence mention. Punishment was matter of fact, a given, a sign of unruly times needing closure. Newspapers in the 1870s and 1880s deplored “necktie par-

Kansas has been difficult to overthrow. Scouts have been sent out as umbrella menders and peddlers who go into banks and while mending an umbrella make a drawing of the bank interior.

“The southern gang had about forty specifications, when some of the members were captured,” said Mr. Dolley. “It was also learned that sheriffs have been aiding and abetting these robbers. Small stores along the borders have been

supplied with merchandise taken from freight trains.

“I have found the A. H. T. A. a great power for good. The bankers are under great obligation to the organization. I made an appeal to the bankers and many of them are joining. The work has been extended from catching horse thieves to that of all kinds of criminals, and the society has done its part to relieve the outrages of these highwaymen. In behalf of the 1,100 banks in the state of Kansas I wish to thank the A. H. T. A. for the splendid interest you have taken in our work.”

Arkansas City was chosen as the meeting place for next year. There were four other cities contesting for the honor, Independence, Newton, Osawatomie and Ft. Scott. Independence was the closest competitor.

President Wall read his annual report at the meeting of the organization last night. The report showed that 89 new societies were organized within the state during last year. There were reorganized and reinstated 48 lodges during the same period. There are now 538 sub-orders in Kansas, with a membership of 22,000. The membership increase this year exceeded that of last year by 1,500.

LADIES AUXILIARY OF A. H. T. A. HERE ALSO

A ladies' auxiliary of the A. H. T. A. will soon be organized in Topeka. A preliminary meeting was held by the state officers with a number of ladies of Topeka who are eligible to membership last night in the Commercial club rooms. No definite action was taken, but the state officers explained the plan of co-operation between the auxiliary and the Anti-Horse Thief association.

Mrs. Belle Dyer, of Sedan president of the state auxiliary, outlined the purposes of the organization. She said:

“Our aim at first was social entertainment and mental improvement. It now includes aid for the sick and needy, education, assisting members in distress and the promotion of benevolence in general. If the ladies' auxiliary numbered one-tenth of the A. H. T. A. imagine what a power we would be. We hope at the end of October, 1912, to number 5,000. We purpose to live our motto: “Encourage the right, discourage the wrong.”

WALL AT THE HEAD

Parsons Man Again President
of A. H. T. A.

Contest Lively With M. H. Calbeck of Peabody.

AN AFTERNOON PARADE

Passes Down Kansas Avenue
Headed by Band.

Convention Next Year at
Arkansas City.

President—J. W. Wall, Parsons.
Vice President—H. F. Harbaugh,
Wellington.
Secretary-treasurer—G. J. McCarty,
Coffeyville.

These men were chosen this morning to head the Kansas division of the Anti-Horse in the ensuing year. The next meeting place will be Arkansas City.



John W. Wall, Re-elected President
Kansas Division of the Anti-Horse
Thief Association.

The contest for the presidency was hotly fought. M. H. Calbeck of Peabody was also in the field, and Mr. Wall eventually won out by a majority of but 51 votes.

This is Wall's third term of office.

John W. Wall, Parsons, Kansas, presided over the Kansas Division of the Anti-Horse Thief Association for several terms during the height of the organization's popularity. This engraving appeared in *The Topeka Journal*, October 20, 1911.

ties” and “jerking to Jesus,” yet, in the next sentence condoned summary justice as a necessity. After the century turn, hangings took on headline status as public

acceptance changed to repugnance once Kansas had passed through its frontier stage. Not until 1903, however, did Kansas legislators enact legislation addressing mob hangings, quasi-legal until that time, especially if certain conditions were met (e.g., five or more persons involved.)¹³

As the AHTA gained steam (and horse thievery declined), its advocates churned out public relations statements declaring the organization to be a detective, protective, and patriotic organization, not an old-time, vigilante committee intent on enforcing its own version of the law. That policy line attracted members as soon as the Kansas AHTA grand lodge organized in 1881 and incorporated similar groups that voted to abandon their individual group names, including the Wild Cat Horse Guards (Nemaha County); Tornado Vigilance Committee (Ridgeway); Eureka Detective Association (Jackson County); Protective Society of Vergas Valley; Citizen's Protective Association (Tecumseh); Virgil Anti-Horse Thief Company (Greenwood County); and Wabaunsee County Detective Police (Alma). By 1885, the number of subscribers mushroomed to 184, with a total of 4,973 members.¹⁴

One holdout was the Central Protective Association (CPA), virtually the same as the AHTA, that had formed around the same time (1871) and in the same place (Clark County, Missouri). The CPA also grew quickly (184 lodges by 1885), primarily in communities along the north-to-south border between Missouri and Kansas, particularly in the north, mostly in Missouri. After several AHTA overtures to merge, the CPA allied with the AHTA. Members filed reports with the AHTA headquarters and publications. Lodges shared the same bylaws, supplies, practices, and philosophies, and reimbursed each other for recovery costs. Some units held dual memberships to the two, often-confused, organizations.¹⁵

Heyday of Association Benefits from Addition of Social Activities and Progressivism's Reform Drive

As the 19th century closed, Kansas farmers also joined farm associations, including the Farmers' Alliance (a political voice on land, transportation, and finance issues), the Mutual Protective Association (which helped farmers facing foreclosure), and the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange). Nevertheless, AHTA membership continued to increase in Kansas. Just shy of 5,000 members in 1885, that number doubled by 1900. At a time when only a handful of horses were stolen in Kansas — membership, instead of waning, tripled to 35,738 in 1910. Over half of those members were Kansans, while the rest were divided among seven states.¹⁶

The popular draw of the AHTA, with its sense of control and security, would hold its appeal even as the frontier organized and the reason for the association's existence — horse theft — diminished. As the transition

progressed, the AHTA left behind its cloak of secrecy to become an aboveboard fraternal organization whose members usually included a town's most respected members. Congressmen, bankers, and industry notables wore their AHTA ribbons with pride.

This connection with monied classes is not surprising; property owners formed into associations for protection against those who had little or no holdings. Those failing to meet AHTA eligibility requirements were "drunkards, debt-dodgers, and loose mouthed people," said John Wall, Parsons, AHTA Kansas president. Charles Sessions, ex-secretary of Kansas noted:

Reminds me of the time the Topeka or Shawnee County A.H.T.A. was organized several years ago. There was a large and enthusiastic membership at the organization meeting. Here was Governor Stubbs, Joe Dolley [*Kansas bank commissioner*], Arthur Capper, Fred Jackson, myself, John Dawson, every state and county official, I believe, and a number of bankers. . . . I don't believe there were three out of the several score charter members who ever owned a horse.¹⁷

Social festivities, an added part of the AHTA membership package, added to the association's appeal. The Pleasant Valley AHTA held an annual fish fry where members pan-fried catfish and carp from the Blue River for a big crowd who ate at long tables on the east side of the schoolhouse meeting place.¹⁸

Picnics and fish fries proved popular, but it was the oyster suppers at the year's end that marked the AHTA lodges' main social event of the year, where members sang the organization's anthem "Home Sweet Home" at dinner closing. Preceding dinner, members flocked to local hunts for rabbits (they sometimes shot hundreds), not horse thieves. Those who shot the most cottontails had their dinner served by the "losers" in this AHTA social staple. Not only did AHTA members stalk criminals and rabbits, they hunted livestock predators, namely wolves and coyotes. Using shotguns, lodge members and others in Douglas, Leavenworth, and Johnson counties each January flushed out wolves and coyotes using a human square that advanced inward. Afterward, the hunters had a festive celebration lunch.¹⁹

Taking advantage of the membership burst, W. W. Graves, St. Paul, Kansas, began printing the *A.H.T.A. Weekly News*, the organization's official paper, in February 1902. The boastful paper furnished detailed descriptions of severe court sentences, stolen or stray property, suspected thieves, and elaboration of the AHTA purpose. With most news items detailing social gatherings or lodge reports of thief inactivity ("There has been nothing stole from us since Heck was a pup"), Graves managed to fill eight to twelve pages each issue.²⁰

AHTA's ardent cheerleader, in each edition of the *News Graves* urged readers to add new members, and

they did. Hustling potential members, a constant, insistent theme, was in Graves's financial self-interest as the *News* made itself the official source for AHTA supplies. Members could buy certificates, stationery, "resolutions of respect for deceased members," record books of all types, *Graves' Manual* (meeting procedures and association regulations), Celluloid lapel buttons, and waterproof signs saying "Keep Out, protected by A.H.T.A." For every \$3 worth of supplies, Graves threw in a free subscription to the official newspaper.

Intertwined with membership growth spurred on by Graves was the expanded AHTA mission of humanitarian reform. It echoed other Kansas do-good, go-getters caught up in the moral reforms of the Progressive era that flourished before World War I. For example, the AHTA ladies auxiliary that formed in 1909 at Sedan, Kansas, in its mission to better homes, advocated for more religious teaching; procuring homes for the unfortunate; protecting young girls from white-slave traffic; teaching boys to avoid drugs and liquor; helping foreigners become good American citizens; aiding the sick and needy; and eliminating all crime.²¹

That an auxiliary sprang from the AHTA indicates the association's channeling of energy from possession protection to safeguarding its members' values and vision of America. Wrote Philip Jordan, frontier law enforcement historian, "Anti-horse thief associations dwindled away from lack of lynch business, became purely social conclaves, or, like McKee's organization, sought, as a catharsis, to purge society of its evils."²² The AHTA did its moral boosterism with the support of Kansas politicians. Welcoming the 1911 AHTA meeting delegates, Kansas Governor Walter Stubbs said:

Keep to the purpose for which you were organized, and no doubt the organization will grow until it takes in the majority of best citizens. It will grow until the thieves, murderers, and all criminals will shy around Kansas. This organization should be so big and powerful that the criminal will be afraid to come into the state. My faith in the society is shown by the fact that I have appointed a member of the A.H.T.A., Joe Jazen, of Crawford County, on the state prison board of directors.²³

Fighting off rustlers of all varieties (AHTA members passed the "old blue hen" laws in Kansas and Missouri making chicken-stealing a penitentiary offense) shared equal billing with betterment campaigns, such as the annual "Good Government Day" (second Sunday in November) when members held public programs showing the value of good citizenship and encouraged ministers to preach a related sermon that day. At national conventions, AHTA leaders voiced opposition to divorce, hemp-pickers, parole for habitual criminals, petting parties, and movie-picture reels glamorizing crime get-aways. They pledged to protect the families of soldiers,

promote spiritual and moral instruction in schools, and advocate for attorney respect of court witnesses.

Besides promoting moral campaigns, AHTA members, in 1915, extended protection to automobiles. That same year Kansas merchants joined together to create the Anti-Burglar Association after robbers had terrorized small-town merchants for 18 months.²⁴ The AHTA could not provide the same safeguarding effectiveness of former years for theft of automobiles, however, because thieves sped away before pursuing committees could organize.

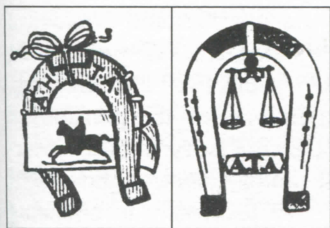
Redirection made sense, but it did not ignite the spark of fervor as had the original AHTA purpose. At that time, automobiles were luxury items, not household necessities. Nevertheless, AHTA participation hit an all-time high in 1919 with 50,000 members, again dominated by Kansas. AHTA popularity in Kansas, in part, may be attributed to W. W. Graves's public relations efforts and to the number of Kansas officers in the national organization — Kansans held the national presidency for 24 years in its first 43 years of representation.²⁵

In 1917, over 60 counties in Kansas had active A.H.T.A. suborders, with the southeast quadrant of the state containing the most members and lodges, particularly in the counties surrounding Wichita and in Cherokee, Labette, and Crawford. Some towns supported several lodges, such as Lane-3, Columbus-5, Coffeyville-6, Independence-7, McCune-8, and Galena-4, which met at local schoolhouses. The membership size of the individual lodges also indicated their popularity in the community: Coffeyville-571, Chanute-561, Parsons-428, Pittsburg-390, Peabody-318, Newton-201, Kingman-193, Arkansas City-175, and New Cambria-163. Other lodges that numbered more than 100 members included Ottawa, Independence, Paola, Cherryvale, Lacygne, Caldwell, and Oxford. The AHTA was virtually nonexistent in Kansas's western counties, with the exception of Brewster in Thomas County and Satanta (two lodges) in Haskell County. In comparison, Nebraska had only one lodge that year, Colorado six.²⁶

Competition and Redirection Cause Membership to Drop

As World War I approached, AHTA national conventions concentrated more on patriotism than crime prevention. J. T. Botkin, retiring AHTA president, urged the convention audience to be careful in their relationships with the huge influx of foreign-born citizens "who may still be loyal to the land of their birth." These nativist impulses would be further fanned by the "red scare" highlighted by the Sacco-Vanzetti trial in the 1920s.²⁷

Social eugenics drew attention in 1920. President John Laplam, who may have been echoing his own personal view, addressed convention delegates with:



As farmers' lifestyles changed in the 20th century, the Anti-Horse Thief Association (far left) dropped reference to horses in its name and logotype at its national convention in 1926 and became known as the Anti-Thief Association (left).

. . . the marriage of imbeciles, the insane, the epileptic, the habitual criminal, and their resulting offspring constitute a direct menace to our country. These classes should be sterilized, so as to prevent them from procreating their kind. This would not only save the future generations billions of money, but would save many of our wives and daughters from being assaulted and raped by these classes now abroad in our land.²⁸

As the 1920s unfolded, AHTA membership plummeted. Hugh Gresham, biographer of AHTA founder McKee, linked the association's membership drop with World War I enlistment and the economic depressions of 1921 and 1929, even though the Anti-Horse Thief Association had changed its name to the more inclusive Anti-Thief Association in 1926.

Kansas president John Kretchet, Scammon, Kansas — who in 1924 had taken on the mission of rebuilding the national organization after boosting his own suborder local membership from 37 to 365 by increasing social activities, establishing auxiliaries, and personally assisting in numerous arrests — blamed decreasing national membership on the lack of an aggressive state campaign, possible officer non-performance, and competing automobile protective associations.²⁹

Other competing protective organizations included the Kansas Farmer Protective Service (1927), the Anti-Burglars Association, and the State Bankers Association — which had urged all its members to join the A.H.T.A. in 1910 and then set up its own vigilance committees in 1925 after a rash of bank robberies. Fraternal organizations, such as the Free Masons, with 448 lodges and 83,401 state members, in 1929 also lured AHTA members. Other competing fraternal societies in 1929 were Rotary Clubs in 56 cities, Lions Clubs in 61 cities, and many smaller organizations including Kiwanis.³⁰

With an eye toward AHTA moral campaigns in preceding

years, Gresham's statement about membership loss is not surprising:

Perhaps the Klan dealt the A.H.T.A. the hardest blow it ever received from an outside opposition. Thousands of Antis became Klansmen and in many communities, Anti orders ceased to function because the members became Klansmen and when non-Klansmen were elected to offices, more left for the Klan.³¹

The connection with the Ku Klux Klan makes sense when looking at the history of Klan and other extra-legal groups that victimized minorities. Begun in 1866 at Pulaski, Tennessee, as a social group for war veterans, the Klan quickly became a secret society that terrorized Negroes and carpetbaggers for sake of oppression. Also preying on blacks in the South following the Civil War were disgruntled "Regulators" and the masked "White Caps," who organized during the late 1890s to ride in raids against the subjects of their condemnation. Elsewhere in the 1890s, "Regulators" organized against minorities in San Francisco, and the American Protective Association targeted emigrants and Catholics nationwide.³²

Each of these groups rallied against those they found threatening. In the Klan's case, when Southern whites regained control of their governments, the Klan waned because it no longer served its purpose. Then, in 1915, the Klan resurfaced with a fury and enlarged its mission to subjugate Jews, Roman Catholics, political radicals, foreigners, and organized labor. Savvy membership recruiters canvassed the country urging all to join the Protestant-only, Anglo-Saxon organization dedicated to



Taken at a 1923 demonstration in Topeka, Kansas, this photo illustrates the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas. During the 1920s, KKK "klaverns" in Kansas had four times the Anti-Horse Thief Association state membership before the state ousted the Klan in a Kansas Supreme Court decision. As part of its mission, the klaverns were to oppose mob violence and provide law enforcement officers with information that would solve crimes.

Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence

“old-fashioned morality and patriotism.” Cleverly written brochures made it seem un-American not to belong, causing many Kansans to become part of the Invisible Empire.

Interestingly, the national Ku Klux Klan targeted southeastern and south-central Kansas, long an AHTA stronghold. Reminiscent of the AHTA, the Klan promoted its tenet “to prevent the causes of mob violence and lynching,” and made it known that its members supplied law enforcement officers with crime-solving information. In Kansas, klaverns had four times the AHTA state membership in the Klan’s short-lived heyday (1922-1924) before the state ousted the Klan in its Supreme Court decision. After the 1920s, the Klan dramatically dropped in national membership to the point of extinction when members focused their energies elsewhere during the Great Depression.³³

Twilight Years Enue As the Organization Outlives Its Usefulness

AHTA membership withered throughout the 1930s. Kansan politician Alf Landon and others lauded the organization, but praises did little to revive it.³⁴ The organization’s weekly newspaper suspended publication in 1932 because of subscriber loss. In his 1936 presentation to the Kansas State Historical Society, W. R. Honnell said the protection society was dedicated more to memory than anything else:

On New Year’s Day, I received an invitation from the old Kennetuk [*now a northeast Kansas “ghost town”*] Anti-Horse Thief Association to speak at a celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Pony Express. This association has degenerated from its formal noble purpose of holding necktie parties into an old settlers’ reunion.³⁵

When 1937 rolled in, the organization counted a membership foothold in five states. Kansas spread 1,434 members among 48 lodges.³⁶ At the 1939 state meeting, leaders urged legislators to endorse capital punishment for kidnapping for ransom; compulsory liability insurance laws for drivers of all motor vehicles; and a legal requirement for people to give testimony in obtaining convictions. Talk of social welfare advocacy was absent, unlike at the meetings held during the second and third decades of the 20th century. And as each year passed, the number of suborders dwindled. In 1944, Neosho County, which at one time had 25 suborders and was the site of eight state and national conventions, consolidated its suborders into two: one at north Big Creek Township, the other by Thayer.³⁷

During the 1940s, remnants of the A.H.T.A. consisted primarily of senior citizens. When members died, the *Pittsburg Headlight* reported their positions remained vacant. A September 13, 1949, the *Kansas City Times* reported that the organization still was represented in six states with the strongest membership in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Illinois. In 1961, the *Kansas City Times* noted that a Brookfield, Missouri, president led the national organization; and the last time the AHTA was “called out” happened in the drought years when rustlers butchered cattle in pastures. The next year the same paper wrote that the organization’s role now consisted of posting rewards.³⁸

At the 1969 national meeting, 150 delegates met at Caldwell, Kansas. In a way, the words of the oldest continuous member, Gusta Wolff, Renfrow, Oklahoma, who joined in 1913, summarized the AHTA story:

Some of us boys saw a man stealing pelts nailed to [a] barn. We reported it to my dad, who had joined the organization in 1898. That night, the



In Douglas County, Kansas, members of the Central Protective Association (CPA), which later merged with the Anti-Horse Thief Association, gathered in Durr’s Grove by the Wakarusa River in Eudora, Kansas, for a summer picnic and parade, an event that still is held today. This photo shows picnic revelers around 1898. *Eudora Area Historical Society, Eudora, KS*

investigating committee slipped up and caught the man and turned him over for prosecution. That's how I happened to join. . . . We don't have many members any more, but there is more need for it now than ever before. We watch for anything un-American now because we're trying to keep our country from being stolen from within.³⁹

The AHTA today may be found in some social organizations that sprang from long-ago chapters. And, the longest-running celebration of this once thriving organization in Kansas may be the CPA picnic, which takes place the third weekend of each July in Eudora, Kansas. Held since the close of the 19th century, even though the local lodge folded in 1929, the picnic now is the setting for carnival rides, golf tournaments, church dinners, and parades, with not a single link to the event's original mission.⁴⁰

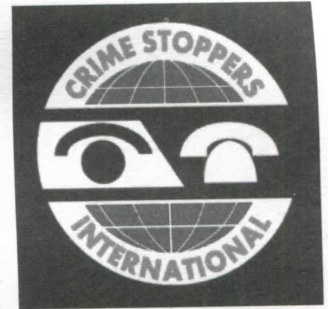
Conclusion

Vigilantism, as old as human society, often bridges the gap between lawlessness and orderly communities. According to legal historian Richard Maxwell Brown, the vigilantism of the mid- and late 19th century stemmed from the belief of popular sovereignty, which maintains that people, not society, can choose when and where not to obey the law. In his 1969 accounting of citizen involvement in law enforcement, Brown counted more than 300 vigilante movements in America. The groups, Brown contended, fall into frontier protection against outlaws or mobilization against immigrants and others perceived as threats to the status quo.⁴¹

Akin to vigilantism, the AHTA supplemented, not circumvented, the law and presented a practical solution to principle-driven settlers who used its human surveillance network as protection on the Kansas frontier. However, the organization proved useful for only a few decades. Faced with the necessity of redefinition for survival, the AHTA expanded its purpose aided by the passionate promotion of W. W. Graves. The AHTA flame then rose higher than ever, only to soon smolder as the Progressive spirit ebbed. In its attempt to cast itself also as a social fraternity and morals safeguard, the struggling organization suffered identity confusion. When it returned to its protective roots, the AHTA found competition from other organizations, which added to its redundancy.

Self-defense groups continue to form and disband to this day. If there is an heir to the A.H.T.A., perhaps it is Crime Stoppers International, a volunteer community crime-solving society, represented today in 17 Kansas communities alone and more than a thousand groups worldwide. Begun in 1976, this organization posts rewards, runs tips hotlines, and works with schools to reduce youth violence. To date, Crime Stoppers claims to have aided in more than 427,222 arrests, paid over

\$61 million in rewards, and recovered \$1.3 billion of property through its partnership with the media, law enforcement, and community. The need to protect one's own personal property is not the membership draw in this organization as it was in the AHTA, but the stand against crime and the protection of community still remain strong motivations for membership, as they had in the past.⁴²



Crimestoppers International is a modern-day form of a mutual protective society. It has 17 chapters in the state of Kansas, according to the organization's web site at <http://www.c-s-i.org/>.

NOTES

1. Wayne Gard, *Frontier Justice* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); James Hewitt, "The Fatal Fall of Barrett Scott: Vigilantes on the Niobrara," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 12 (Spring 1992), 83-98.
2. Minnie Brashear, "The Anti-Horse Thief Association of Northeast Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review*, 45 (July 1951): 347.
3. McKee, born (1823-1896) in Sangamon County, Illinois, the youngest of 11, farmed and raised stock in Clark County, Missouri, for most of his life. He was often referred to as "Major" McKee, because he served as a Major in a cavalry battalion. Source review suggests that 1854 is the probable origin date of the AHTA. Compare with Brashear, "The Anti-Horse Thief Association," 342-344; *The Encyclopedia of the United States of America Past and Present* (Gulf Breeze, FL: King and Queen Press, 1983), 84; *Parsons Eclipse*, Aug. 26, 1906; W. W. Graves, *History of Neosho County* (St. Paul, KS: Journal Press, 1951), 545; Hugh Gresham, *The Story of Major David McKee: Founder of the Anti-Horse Thief Association* (Cheney, KS: Association, 1937).
4. One organized vigilante committee in Lewis County, Missouri, besides its own hangman, also had a whip lasher. *Liberty Weekly Tribune*, July 19, 1857.
5. *General 1866 Circular of the Great Western Horse Insurance & Detective Association*, Kansas State Historical Society Center for Historical Research, #GL Port 368.82, issued to Kansans. Animals insured by Great Western were branded on their left fore-hoof. If the company retrieved the horse in 30 days, it returned the horse to the owner. After 30 days, the company sent the animal's policy amount to the owner. If the horse was found later, the owner could buy back the horse from the company.
6. *Oklahoma Black List 1901*, in Kansas State Historical Society Center for Historical Research, #K352.2An87Pam.v.2#1, published by the Anti-Horse Thief Association.
7. *General Statutes*, Kansas, 1855, Ch. 49, Sec. 31.
8. *Kansas State Journal* (Lawrence, KS), July 30, 1863.
9. E. F. Heisler and D. M. Smith, *Johnson County Atlas* (1874), 20.
10. James David Drees, "The Army and the Horse Thieves," *Kansas History*, 11 (Winter 1988), 35-53.
11. V. P. Mooney, *History of Butler County* (1916), 258, cited in Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 11 (Feb. 1933): 197.
12. *Rush County Clippings, 1879-1919*, 1 (1930), 87, Kansas State Historical Society for Historical Research, #K478.1-R99; Gard, *Frontier Justice*, 195-196; *Wichita Vidette*, Dec. 8, 1870; J. T. Botkin, "Justice Was Swift and Sure in Early Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, Vol. 16 (1923-1925): 488-493.
13. Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1933): 209.
14. *Parsons [Kansas] Eclipse*, Aug. 26, 1909; *The [Topeka] Daily Capital*, Oct. 21, 1879.
15. *Weekly Kansas Chief*, Oct. 16, 1902; *Daily Champion*, Feb. 8, 1888, in a speech by Governor John Martin decrying all forms of

Horse Theft and Hanging

Did the "Antis," as they often called themselves, ever hang horse thieves? Maybe. Genevieve Yost's 1933 account of Kansas lynchings reports documented hangings in Kansas for horse theft between 1856-1870 in these counties: Douglas-7, Franklin-4, Anderson-1, Coffee-1, Leavenworth-1, Atchison-1, Osage-1, Bourbon-3, Morris-2, Lyon-1, Riley-3, Wabaunsee-2, Doniphan-4, Miami-4, Jefferson-5, Greenwood-5, Nemaha-2, Allen-2, Wilson-1, Johnson-5, Cherokee-5, Ellsworth-2, Geary-2, Wyandotte-1, Sedgewick-2, and Butler-8. Yost's last recorded decade for horse-thief hanging was 1870 to 1880, a time when murder and rape replaced horse thievery as hanging justification. Considering that hangings were often done in secret, these numbers probably reflect only a portion of lynching deaths.¹

Vigilante groups made no secret of the fact that they were eager to permanently snuff out thieves during this raucous era. The *El Dorado Walnut Valley Times* declared that horse-thief infestation would soon end, because the "798 Vigilantes promised to kill four horse thieves a month (eight already killed), until all were gone."² Threats and the knowledge of active vigilantes helped check crime. In one tale, "Pickles" Wright, an all-purpose thief, who got his nickname after he took a two-quart jar of pickles during a theft and ate them as he rode, committed one theft too many. At trial in Fort Scott, Pickles pled guilty, knowing that would result in a penitentiary sentence. He did so, he said, to avoid the justice of the Osage Vigilance Committee (which called itself an anti-horse thief society although it was not officially part of the AHTA) from Mapleton, headed by "old Billy Baker and a rope."³

While AHTA written policy forbade executions, local reports do concede that a few captured thieves never got the chance to plead their case before official law authorities.⁴ Wrote the *Topeka Capital*:

Many a morning the rising sun would shine upon the lifeless form of a horse thief suspended from the staunch limb of a tree. No one would know how he got there, except that it was whispered in the countryside gossip that the A.H.T.A. had been out that night.⁵

Question marks also hover around Woodbine AHTA lodge members, in Reverend J. A. McClellan's account of relative Joseph McClellan:

This association had two rules of action when it went after horse thieves. First, if the association found the horses in the possession of a

man who was using them in the field, then he was questioned pretty closely as to how he secured the horses and what he intended to do about it. But if the stolen horses and the thieves were found in hiding, or overtaken on the trail, no quarter was asked and none was given.

One night in the fall of 1873 a member of the A.H.T.A. knocked on the door of Joe McClellan's home and reported a gang of thieves had stolen a neighbor's horses about three hours before. Joe, according to Mrs. J. B. Shields of Lost Springs, said, "I will be ready in twenty minutes." He ate a meager meal, took a small supply of food with him, and, after saddling his old faithful saddle-horse, Porter, and making sure of his Colt's revolvers, he was off. He was gone for about ten days. When asked if he found the horses, he said, "Yes, but we just left the men."

This raid did a good deal toward breaking up horse stealing in that section of the county. McClellan and two other men trailed the thieves down into Marion County. They discovered the camp in the bend of a creek southeast of the present town of Marion not far from the present site of Florence. The details of the fight of course were never reported, but Joe McClellan and his companions brought back the horses. All they ever said to anyone was that those fellows would probably never steal any more horses. The settlers, who understood the code of the day, were thankful to be relieved from the marauding of that bunch of thieves and never asked for details.⁶

Another inkling that the first AHTA members did not always act aboveboard links to the organization policy of secrecy-shrouded, candle-lit meetings and veiled membership. C. E. Cory, Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1899 wrote:

The society was, as near as I can make it out — I never belonged to it — a cross between a Know Nothing Lodge and New Orleans Mafia. It had no officers so far as the public learned, nor members either, for that matter.

Cory went on to tell of silhouettes dangling in the morning "apparently meditating on things he took or done."⁷

government as tyranny during his homage to the CPA; *Weekly Kansas Chief*, Oct. 16, 1902.

16. *Parsons Eclipse*, Aug. 6, 1909; *Topeka Capital*, March 19, 1911; *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 19, 1911; *Topeka Journal*, Nov. 23, 1918; *Kansas City Times*, Oct. 6, 1937.
17. [In Wall.] *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 8, 1911; [In Sessions.] *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 24, 1915.
18. *The A.H.T.A. Proceedings of the 36th Annual Session of the Kansas Division* (St. Paul, KS: Anti-Horse Thief Association, 1917), 13. B. L. Taft, Parsons, KS, state president, mentioned at the 1917 state meeting that he had recently attended several AHTA picnics. The picnic in Eudora, Kansas, remains to this day perhaps the last active vestige of the AHTA, although the local lodge folded around 1929 (*Marysville Advocate*, Feb. 16, 1978). In her regular historical column, Oretha Ruetti interviewed an AHTA member who joined in 1916 and a woman who attended the AHTA fish fries. The article mentions the organization's use of one-room schools for meeting places and the 1912 construction of an anteroom on the Pleasant Valley School to hold lodge materials.
19. Issues of *A.H.T.A. Weekly News* mentioned the rabbit dinners at various communities, such as the January 7, 1903, issue that reported one hunt in which 313 rabbits were caught. Regarding "wolf" hunts, see *Eudora News*, Jan. 17, 1935; Jan. 24, 1935; Jan. 31, 1935; Jan. 9, 1936; Jan. 30, 1936; Feb. 6, 1936; and Dec. 29, 1938. In later years, according to a personal interview with Peggy Westerhouse Claggett, June 15, 1997, Eudora, Kansas, "They used cars with radios and ran them down the miles. They liked to run over the coyotes to kill them instead of wasting bullets."
20. *A.H.T.A. Weekly News*, Jan. 14, 1904.
21. *The A.H.T.A. Proceedings of the 38th Annual Session of the Kansas Division* (St. Paul, KS: Anti-Thief Association, 1938), 29. At one AHTA annual convention, an auxiliary gave this toast glorifying AHTA men:

*You may talk about your Masons,
Elks, Odd Fellows, and such
You may call them so fraternal as to
fairly beat the Dutch.
You may praise them, if you choose to
with their mystic rites and noise,
But they cannot hold a candle
to the Anti-Horse Thief Boys.*

. . . .

*They meet and plan together,
to place the thieves in the "pen."
And they face the criminal in battle,
with the courage of honest men.
Here the compact is cemented,
midst battle smoke and noise,
So here there are none who can hold a candle
to the Anti-Horse Thief Boys.*
22. Philip D. Jordan, *Frontier Law and Order: Ten Essays* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1970), 95.
23. *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 19, 1911.
24. *Topeka Capital*, Apr. 6, 1915.
25. *The A.H.T.A. Proceedings of the 39th Annual Session of the Kansas Division* (St. Paul, KS: Anti-Horse Thief Association, 1920), 11; *Topeka Capital*, Mar. 19, 1911. Association reports from 1917-1922 also show the variety of reported stolen items besides horses and cars: bicycles, traps, pump, gas well, casing, chickens, jewelry, lap robe, guns, sheep, meat, cultivator, coffee corn, bull dog, buggies, tarps, telephone wire, carpenter tools, apples, hides, fishing tackle, feather bed, disc plow, bee hive, log chain, batteries, pigs, auto tires, clothing, grain, rose bushes, ducks, etc.
26. *The Anti-Horse Thief Association. Kansas Division: Roster and Statistics from the 37th Year* (Neosho, KS: Anti-Horse Thief Association, 1918).
27. *Topeka Capital*, Mar. 25, 1917.
28. *The A.H.T.A. Proceedings of the 39th Annual Session of the Kansas Division* (St. Paul, KS: Anti-Horse Thief Association, 1920), 12-13.

29. *Topeka Capital*, Dec. 21, 1924.
30. *Kansas Facts: A Yearbook of the State* (Topeka, KS: Chas. P. Beebe Publishers, 1929), 254, 256, 307.
31. Gresham, *The Story of Major David McKee*, 75.
32. E. W. Crozier, *The White Caps: A History of the Organization in Sevier County* (Knoxville, TN: Bean, Warters, & Gaut, 1899).
33. Patrick G. O'Brien, "I Want Everyone to Know the Shame of the State: Henry J. Allen Confronts the Ku Klux Klan, 1921-1923," *Kansas History*, 19 (Summer 1996): 98, 101; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1920*, The Urban Life in America Series (New York, Oxford University Press, 1967), 255; "1,200 [KKK] in Emporia solved 50 cases of law violation and supplied court officers with information regarding lawbreakers," *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 3, 1922; *Topeka Daily Capital*, Nov. 16, 1923; Charles Sloan, "Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK from Kansas in 1922," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 40 (1974): 393.
34. *The A.H.T.A. Proceedings of the 57th Annual Session of the Kansas Division* (Cheney, KS: Anti-Thief Association, 1937).
35. W. R. Honnell, "The Annual Meeting," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 5 (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1936): 67.
36. *Kansas City Times*, Oct. 6, 1937.
37. *Topeka Capital*, Oct. 29, 1937; W. W. Graves, *History of Neosho County*, 550.
38. *Pittsburg Headlight*, May 19, 1958; *Kansas City Times*, Sept. 22, 1961; *Kansas City Times*, Nov. 15, 1962.
39. *Wichita Eagle*, Sept. 9, 1969.
40. Cindy Higgins, *Eudora C.P.A. Picnic* (Eudora, KS: Eudora Area Historical Society, 1997). The author has searched for other celebrations relating to the Anti-Horse Thief Association and Central Protective Society, including use of the Internet and the Kansas Travel and Tourism Development Division databases, but has not found other related celebrations to date.
41. Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 102; Richard Maxwell Brown, "The American Vigilante Tradition" in H. D. Graham and T. R. Gurr, eds., *The History of Violence in America* (New York: Bantam, 1969), 154-226.
42. Crime Stoppers International, Inc., <http://www.c-s-i.org> (May 22, 2003).

SIDEBAR NOTES

1. Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1933): 211-217; *Marysville [Kansas] Advocate* columnist Oretha Ruetti wrote that Margaret Wullschleger, Pleasant Valley, Kansas, showed Ruetti a family AHTA lodge pin that featured the familiar AHTA logo-type of a horseshoe arching over a horse in rider. This Kansas version rested on the shape of the Kansas map with a lasso rope outlining the map. Ruetti suggested the rope represented a noose. *Marysville Advocate*, Feb. 16, 1978.
2. V. P. Mooney, *History of Butler County* (1916), 258, cited in Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," 197.
3. T. F. Robley, *History of Bourbon County: Kansas to the Close of 1865* (Fort Scott, KS: Monitor), 149-150.
4. *Rush County Clippings, 1879-1919*, 1 (1930), 87, Kansas State Historical Society Center for Historical Research, #K9781-R99.
5. *Topeka Capital*, Dec. 21, 1924.
6. Rev. J. A. McClellan, "Joseph McClellan," *Kansas State Historical Collection* 17 (1926-1928), 862.
7. *Mail and Breeze* (Fort Scott), July 28, 1899.

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