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2009 – Discovering this Place (Marty White,
Editor)

Pike in the Kansas Flint Hills, 1806

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Recommended Citation

Oliva, Leo E. (2009). "Pike in the Kansas Flint Hills, 1806," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2009/flinthills/4>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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LIEUTENANT ZEBULON MONTGOMERY PIKE

Pike in the Kansas Flint Hills, 1806

Zebulon Montgomery Pike was the first U.S. Army explorer to cross the present state of Kansas during his 1806-1807 expedition to the American Southwest. Although his primary missions, established for him by General James Wilkinson, were accomplished in other present states (return of Osage Indians to their homes in western Missouri, visit with Pawnee Indians

in southern Nebraska, find the source of the Arkansas River in Colorado, and seek the source of the elusive Red River which is in Texas), Pike provided the first published reports on Kansas, the Flint Hills, and the Great Plains. His views affected the public image of the region (a desert unfit for Anglo-American agriculture and best left to the American Indians) and spurred the initiation of overland travel and commerce across Kansas (eventually opening trade between

the Missouri Valley and northern Mexico and leading to the Santa Fe Trail).

Pike's command, including Lieutenant James Wilkinson, 19 enlisted men, interpreter Baronet Vasquez, and a civilian physician, Dr. John H. Robinson, accompanied by several Osages and a couple of Pawnees, entered present southeast Kansas on September 3, 1806, not far from Fort Scott. They crossed the Flint Hills, which Pike named, and many rivers

en route to the Pawnee village on the Republican River in present Nebraska.

Pike sought friendship and trade with the Pawnees, who were being courted by both the Spanish and Anglo-Americans but made no firm commitments to either. Pike faced a tense situation when he requested the Pawnees to lower the Spanish flag recently presented them by Spanish troops and raise the flag of the United States, but this was done. Pike wisely told the Pawnees to keep the Spanish flag so they could hoist it if Spanish troops returned.

Pike marched south to the Arkansas River, where Lieutenant Wilkinson and five soldiers left his command and attempted to navigate the Arkansas downstream in handmade canoes, without success. Later, after becoming lost in the Rocky Mountains during the winter months, Pike and the remainder of his troops were captured by Spanish troops and taken to Santa Fe and Chihuahua before being escorted back to the United States across Texas. Pike learned much about northern Mexico, including

population, Indian tribes, economic resources, military strength, and weakness of the Spanish government.

What Pike recorded about Kansas, comparing it to a desert, affected U.S. policy for years to come. The area became a dumping ground for eastern Indian tribes, and Kansas (and Nebraska) did not become a territory open to settlement until 1854. On the other hand, the information he gathered about crossing the Great Plains and about the region of northern New Spain (Mexico) on his expedition was published in 1810, and it stimulated attempts to open trade between the U.S. and northern Mexico and led to the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, the major portion of which crossed Kansas in 1821. Pike set in motion a series of events that eventually led to the United States acquiring more than half of Mexico, including all or a portion of ten present U.S. states (including Kansas).

On September 12, 1806, Pike's party camped along the Cottonwood River (which he called the Grand River) near the location of the 2009 Symphony

in the Flint Hills. His diary entries for that time period follow (with Pike's unique spellings). "Cabrie" was pronghorn antelope. He was the first person to publish the term "flint hills." He recorded:

10th September, Wednesday. – Marched early. Struck and passed the divide between the Grand river and the Verdegris river. Stopped to breakfast on a small stream of the latter; after which we marched and encamped on the fourth small stream. Killed one elk, one deer. Distance 21 miles.

11th September, Thursday. – Passed four branches and over high hilly prairies. Encamped at night on a large branch of Grand river. Killed one cabrie, one deer. Distance 17 miles.

12th September, Friday. – Commenced our march at seven o'clock. Passed very ruff flint hills. My feat blistered and very sore. I stood on a hill, and in one view below me saw buffalo, elk, deer, cabrie, and panthers. Encamped on the main branch of Grand river, which had very steep banks and was deep. Dr. Robinson,

Bradley, and Baroney arrived after dusk, having killed three buffalo, which, with one I killed, and two by the Indians, made six; the Indians alledging it was the Kans' hunting-ground, therefore they would destroy all the game they possibly could. Distance 18 miles.

13th September, Saturday. – Late in marching, it having every appearance of rain. Halted to dine on a branch of Grand river. Marched again at half past two o'clock, and halted at five, intending to dispatch Dr. Robinson and one of our Pawnees to the village to-morrow. Killed six buffalo, one elk, and three deer. Distance 9 miles.

Leo E. Oliva holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Denver and is the author of a dozen books, most about frontier military history. He writes a weekly newspaper column on "Our Kansas Heritage." He is editor and publisher of the Santa Fe Trail Association quarterly, Wagon Tracks, now in its 23rd year. He served on the Zebulon Pike Bicentennial Commission. During the Pike Bicentennial he presented more than a dozen public programs and published six articles about Pike's Southwest Expedition.