



Ravenstone Press

Stories of Kansas and the Great Plains



The Statue of Johnny Kaw - The Pioneer Kansas Wheat Farmer

Kansas Tall Tale Hero Towers Over the Manhattan City Park

A 30 foot tall statue of Johnny Kaw, the Pioneer Kansas Wheat farmer, stands in the Manhattan City Park. The statue was constructed in 1966, eleven years after the Manhattan Centennial celebration that inspired George Filinger to write the story of Johnny Kaw.

The 1955 centennial committee had trouble getting people and the media interested in Kansas history. Filinger, a professor of horticulture at Kansas State University, believed that a tall tale

character might spark interest. He created Johnny Kaw to be Kansas' answer to other heroes like Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill.

Johnny created the Kansas landscape, geography and pioneer trails. He dug the Kaw River Valley, planted wheat, invented sunflowers, and grew giant potatoes. Johnny even controlled the weather, lopping the funnels off tornadoes and wringing out the clouds to end droughts. His pets were the wildcat and the Jayhawk, who, though fast friends, enjoyed a good scrap now and then. The result of their fights was the Dust Bowl.

Johnny didn't take kindly to Paul Bunyan tromping down his wheat so he had quite a fight with the other big fellow and used his nose to plow the Mississippi River Bed. He even went west and helped Finn McCool dig the Grand Canyon and then piled up the rubble to form the Rocky Mountains.

Filinger had a fine tall tale imagination and his stories captured the interest of people across the state. Johnny was intended to be a Kansas figure, not simply a local Manhattan one, and he was careful to include as much of Kansas as he could.

(Photo copyright 1997 by Geraldine A. Garretson.)

Filinger's Stories and His Johnny Kaw Book

When Dr. George A. Filinger created Johnny Kaw for the Manhattan centennial, his stories were originally published in the Manhattan Mercury, the local newspaper. He self-published the stories in a booklet, *The Story of Johnny Kaw - The Pioneer Kansas Wheat Farmer*, illustrated with the same illustrations that accompanied the newspaper articles. The ink drawings were contributed by Elmer J. Tomasch of the Kansas State University Art Department.

Filinger published a revised edition in 1969, this time including photos and information about the construction of the giant statue.

Filinger sold his book personally, as well as through consignment at local stores and the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce. It sold for \$1.00. It was not reprinted after the 1969 edition.

When George Filinger died in 1978, his Johnny Kaw manuscripts, the Tomasch illustrations, and Filinger's collection of newspaper articles and Johnny Kaw paraphernalia were donated to the Riley County Historical Society.

George Filinger - Author of the Johnny Kaw Stories

George Filinger was born on a farm near Munden, Kansas, near the Nebraska border, on April 23, 1897. He was a member of the Kansas State University faculty from 1931 to 1966, serving as a professor of horticulture. He had a strong interest in tall tale characters and created Johnny

Kaw " for fun " to help publicize the Manhattan, Kansas centennial in 1955. Dr. Filinger worked to promote Johnny throughout the rest of his life, expressing the wish that the stories of Johnny's exploits not be forgotten at the end of the centennial. Filinger died in 1978.

Bringing Johnny Kaw to Life - The Artists for the Filinger Book and the Statues

Mrs. Walter O'Neill

There were three small statues of Johnny before the giant one was erected in the City Park. Mrs. Walter O'Neill of Manhattan sculpted the first one for the centennial. It was featured in the City Park during the 1955 Centennial, but it was beheaded by vandals. It was then moved to a farm, where someone backed a wagon backed over it. Photos of the sculptor, Filinger, and this statue may be seen in Filinger's book.

J. Cranston Heintzelman

The first scale model for the giant statue was sculpted by J. Cranston Heintzelman of the KSU Art Department.

Elmer J. Tomasch

The drawings and design for the statue actually constructed were made by Elmer Tomasch who drew the ink drawings for the newspaper articles and book. Tomasch was born November 16, 1914 in Cleveland, Ohio. He joined the Kansas State University Art Department in 1947. Tomasch's exhibited his work in both group and one-man shows. It is also found in private and museum collections. He had a lifelong interest in portraying the solidity and mass of the human figure. His monumental illustrations of Johnny Kaw reflect that style. Professor Tomasch died in 1977.

William Stewart

William Stewart was Elmer Tomasch's graduate assistant. He was the one who actually oversaw construction of the statue in the park. He found this difficult, as he had been promised volunteer labor and construction materials that were not forthcoming. Evidently, this was one of the reasons the statue cost more than expected. Glenn C. Klimek and his son Paul did the plaster and finishing work.

Although the statues resembled one another in stance and "farmer with wheat cradle" conception, they are distinctly different. One surviving model is at the Riley County Historical Museum in Manhattan. Another is at the Agricultural Hall of Fame at Bonner Springs, Kansas.

Constructing the Statue

George Filinger worked hard to promote the statue's construction and donated a large share of the money required. Dr. E. J. Frick and the Park Board, and the Community Johnny Kaw

Boosters (Frank Anneberg, C.C. Brewer, Bill Colvin, Dave Dallas, Bill Farrell, Lud Fiser, Jack Goldstein, Lowell Jack, O.W. Kershaw, Hurst Majors, and J. Robert Wilson) were instrumental in furthering the project. It cost approximately \$7,000 and was erected at no cost to the city, though it far exceeded construction cost estimates of \$3,000-3,500. The group hoped that the statue would establish Johnny Kaw as a local legend and prove to be a tourist attraction.

The statue is constructed of concrete over a steel beam framework. The design was intended to withstand wind and weather and be easy to maintain. Photos of the construction are included in the second edition of Filinger's book and were featured in newspaper articles at the time. Two local businessmen donated the steel and concrete; other businesses gave materials or reduced bills, and donations were solicited to pay for construction. Those interested could join a Johnny Kaw Club and receive a membership for just \$1.00.

The statue was completed and dedicated in May 1966.

Notes: In the late 1990s, [Jerri Garretson](#), who was then Head of Children's Services for Manhattan Public Library, researched the information included in this article in the George Filinger and Elmer Tomasch files at the [Riley County Historical Museum](#), 2309 Claflin, Manhattan, Kansas, tel. (785) 565-6490. She and Jeff Hixon, then the consultant for the [North Central Kansas Libraries System](#), created the original of this web page on the [Manhattan Public Library](#) website. It has since been removed.

In September 1997, Jerri Garretson, published a retold, adapted version of the Johnny Kaw story for children titled, [***Johnny Kaw - The Pioneer Spirit of Kansas***](#). Jerri collaborated with local artist and then KSU Art Department faculty member [Diane Dollar](#), who created the illustrations for the book. That book is now out of print, but the entire story and illustrations are included in a new anthology, [***Kansas Tall Tales***](#), published in 2008.

In September 2011, Ravenstone Press published a new, color edition of [***Johnny Kaw***](#), with additional photos and resource material.

For more information about Johnny Kaw, the books about him, and the creators of his stories and art, follow these links.

[***Johnny Kaw - The Pioneer Spirit of Kansas***](#) (book by Jerri Garretson)

[Johnny Kaw](#) - More about the creators and background

[Johnny Kaw and Kansas Katie Teacher and Librarian Resources](#)

[Johnny Kaw in the Wikipedia](#)

[***Kansas Tall Tales***](#) anthology

[Tall Tale Bibliography](#)

[Kansas Tall Tales Audio CD](#) (includes Johnny Kaw, Kansas Katie and Twister Twyla, read by author Jerri Garretson)

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