Kansas 1972 Podcast
MINI-EPISODE - Rattlebone Hollow

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:
This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

Kara Heitz:
And welcome to a special mini episode of Kansas 1972. We couldn't quite fit this story into one of the main episodes, but we felt like it was too important not to tell. So, enjoy this extra story.

***The Trouble With Trash*, Caterpillar Tractor Co., 1960s**
Rubbish. Trash. Garbage. Refuse. All our discarded junk experts call it solid waste by any name. It's a national headache.

Kara Heitz:
As we've seen in previous episodes, the 1970s saw a growing consciousness about environmental issues in the United States. Public service announcements implored people to "don't pollute," and an Italian American actor playing a Native American shed a famous (or perhaps infamous) tear at the sight of a modern industrial landscape.

Crying Indian PSA, Keep America Beautiful, Inc, 1971
Some people have a deep abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country. Some people don't. People start pollution. People can stop it.

Kara Heitz:
But one of the main challenges to effectively addressing pollution was what to do with all the waste produced by contemporary lifestyles.

***The Trouble With Trash*, Caterpillar Tractor Co., 1960s**
To put it bluntly, we're losing ground in the fight to dispose of it as fast as we produce it. Every day it costs more to collect every pound of refuse. Every day there are more pounds of it. Every day there are fewer places to put it to get rid of it. That's the trouble with trash.

Kara Heitz:
In the 1970s, many people still disposed of their trash by burning it, which produced even more environmental pollutants. And existing dump sites were often unsanitary and rapidly filling up. So, in 1972, a relatively young government agency sought a solution.

***5000 Dumps*, EPA, 1972**
The Environmental Protection Agency of the federal government has organized a campaign called Mission 5000. The purpose to improve the quality of our environment by eliminating 5000 of America's dumps in an effective two-year project. Soliciting the assistance and cooperation of thousands of local communities.

***The Kansas City Star*, Feb. 14, 1972, "Landfill Business Good"**
"*The Kansas City Star*. February 14, 1972. The model sanitary landfill in Kansas City, Kansas, opened for business today. Nick Artz, project director, reported that many trucks dumped refuse there.

The landfill is on a 46-acre site in the vicinity of 5th and Cleveland. The project is funded primarily with federal funds through the Environmental Protection Agency.

***5000 Dumps*, EPA, 1972**
Until recently, the average American has accepted the cheapest and easiest means of disposal, usually simply a dump. Today, the mood has changed. The public demands a better environment. New systems must be devised to control the quantity and characteristics of wastes and provide efficient collection.

***The Kansas City Star*, Feb. 14, 1972, "Landfill Business Good"**
The waste material is covered with a layer of dirt at the end of each day's operations. The landfill is expected to be completed in three to five years, at which time it will be converted into a city park."

Kara Heitz:
That landfill that opened in 1972 was located on the far east side of Wyandotte County, north of downtown Kansas City, Kansas, and just east of the Fairfax Industrial District.

And this landfill was supposed to exemplify a new kind of environmentally responsible trash disposal. It was planned as being so safe, in fact, that a park would be built on top of it in a few years, after the landfill was full.

Catherine Hoffman:
That park, it's now John Garland Park. It reopened a couple of years ago. People were still extremely skeptical, understandably. I went there a number of times. It looks very nice. They did it up pretty well, there’s a nice track going around it. And all the times that I went there, I didn't see another soul out there. It could have been the time of day, but I definitely think that there's still a big community hesitation to, to step foot on there.

Kara Heitz:
That’s Catherine Hoffman, a reporter for Kansas City PBS. When researching stories for this series, I came across a recent article she wrote for their digital magazine, *Flatland*. It was about a historic community in Kansas City, Kansas, I had never heard of before.

Catherine Hoffman:
At *Flatland*, our digital magazine, we have this really cool series. It's called *Curious KC*. It's where Kansas City fans submit questions and then people can vote on which question they think is the most interesting in the voting round. And then as reporters, we report on the winning question. So we got this question last fall and somebody asked if we could investigate the history of Rattlebone Hollow. And I thought it was a really interesting name. So, I picked that one up. I had no idea what it was when it was where it was. And so, I started reaching out to historians. And so I do a lot of historical stories, Kansas City and love history. So, we get a lot of history questions on Curious KC. And no one knew anything.

Kara Heitz:
That landfill that opened in 1972, which is now John Garland Park, is located in Rattlebone Hollow, a neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas, that not many people remember today.

In this episode, we’ll be telling the story of Rattlebone Hollow, from its origins in the late 1800s, through the impact of land confiscations and urban renewal in the 20th century. And we’ll also learn how that landfill fits into a larger story of environmental racism.

So, I am sure some of you listening have heard about Quindaro (Quin-DAIR-oh), a town in Wyandotte County that was established in the 1850s as a haven for people escaping slavery. But just a little east of Quindaro (Quin-DAIR-oh) is the settlement of Rattlebone Hollow, whose roots go back almost as long to the 1870s.

Catherine Hoffman:
So, a lot of people that are from the area know the story of Exoduster stories, but it was essentially a huge migration of formerly enslaved Black folks that were leaving the South after becoming emancipated and coming to Kansas for farmland. And so, it started in here, and it started in March of 1879. Steamboat showed up in Wyandotte County carrying about 200 migrant African Americans from the South, and nobody was expecting it. Nobody in the area knew that people were coming into that first boat came and they said, okay, let's find them food, shelter, whatever. And the boats kept coming

and they didn't stop coming. And then within two years, there's about 40,000 African Americans came to Wyandotte County from the South.

Kara Heitz:
So what exactly was so attractive about Kansas to formerly enslaved peoples?

Catherine Hoffman:
…part of the draw for Kansas not only farmland, but Kansas was a free state in the Civil War. And so, you know, there is this kind of promise of freedom and land. And so these folks came to Kansas, most of them with nothing but the shirts on their backs and maybe a line or two that they had read in a paper or a secondhand story from a relative or someone like that who said, you know, Kansas is the spot to be.

So they arrived and immediately started farming. And so, like I said, a lot of them had nothing but the shirts on their backs, but they really quickly started homesteading really successfully.

Kara Heitz:
One of those communities established by Exodusters in Wyandotte County was Rattlebone Hollow. While the boundaries are not precisely set, if you look at a map today, the community was generally bound by what is today Quindaro (Quin-DAIR-oh) Blvd on the south, North 7th or maybe even North 10th Street on the West, and Fairfax Trafficway on the east. And some of those original homesteads went all the way north to the bluffs that look over the Missouri River.

Of course, the name Rattlebone Hollow is pretty unusual. I asked Catherine Hoffman where it came from.

Catherine Hoffman:
There's a lot of different theories on the name Rattlebone Hollow and where it came from, the two main ones. The first one is that at the time the churches in the area couldn't afford musical instruments, and so they would make music with bones. And so, you could hear the music from the bones rattling through the hollows in the ravines of the area.

And then there's the second one, which I personally think is how they got the name, was that there was a meatpacking plant in the area in Fairfax, and they had a lot of animal parts that they would usually discard, you know, pigs feet, neck bones, things like that. And those were things that formerly enslaved folks were really used to eating on plantations. And so, the meatpacking plant in Fairfax would take a cart full of all of the discarded meat parts through the neighborhood. And then the women, when they heard the sound of the bones rattling on the cart, would come out of their houses to claim the animal parts that they wanted for their meals.

So that's the one that I think is more likely. But those are the two main ideas of how they got the name.

Kara Heitz:
Rattlebone Hollow continued to grow well into the 20th century and developed into a thriving Black community within Kansas City, Kansas.

To get a better sense of what it was like to live in this neighborhood, I also spoke with Phil Dixon. Dixon is a writer, historian, and co-founder of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. He's also on the Humanities Kansas Speaker's Bureau. Dixon grew up in Rattlebone Hollow and is still very connected to the neighborhood and its history.

Phil Dixon:
I didn't know about other communities at that time, right, and for the most part, I rarely left the community. So that community right there was my whole my whole existence. So, it had an educational system. And I and from where I stood, I could stand at the top of the hill of seventh in Georgia. I could look right across and see Dunbar Elementary. And Dunbar Elementary was named after Paul Laurence Dunbar, who the famous poet. And so, I was learning history from the minute you got to school because you had to learn who the school was named after. And the school we had all Black teachers, all Black students. I don't remember a white kid ever going to the school when I was there, and I was there probably from 1960 to maybe 70.

Kara Heitz:
Rattlebone Hollow was a self-sufficient African American community, complete with not just schools, but Black-owned businesses.

Phil Dixon:
You know, there was business owners. There were professional people. I know in my neighborhood, my grandfather had moved there in 1924, and he was kind of an entrepreneur and, you know, like his own restaurant. And then he had a bar, the North End Beer Gardens, and he also had miniature golf in the 1930s in the neighborhood.

And then there were professional athletes. They came out of the neighborhood. There were a lot of people who migrated into the area from different southern states. And so you got a sense of what was going on in other parts of the country and how those people, when they came, when their kids came and we would talk and they would tell you about things.

There was a Pullman porter up the street, you know, that was a pretty professional job. But they were schoolteachers, principals in the neighborhood, and they had a little bit of everything.

Catherine Hoffman:
There's just some cool people, some really cool people that came out of this neighborhood. Really interesting stories as these two guys, Floyd and Willie Mayweather, that became millionaires while they were in Rattlebone Hollow mostly off of

a kind of inheritance situation but still interesting. You know, there was Kansas City Monarchs players from this neighborhood, really famous boxer named Tommy Campbell, a woman named Maxine Claire. She's a really renowned author. She got a really prestigious I want to say it was a Guggenheim fellowship and she wrote a book. It's a fictional book, but it's based off of her experience growing up in Rattlebone Hollow. And that book is called *Rattlebone*. There is one of my favorites is this woman named Marva Whitney. She was a backup singer for James Brown…

Kara Heitz:
And that neighborhood that was home to Black professionals, business owners, musicians, athletes, and entrepreneurs created a very tight knit community.

Phil Dixon:
…it was just a great place. And but people supported people. And the other thing is, because some people live there so long, they not only knew you, they knew your parents or grandparents. And it made for a good place to grow up.

Kara Heitz:
If you look at a satellite map of Kansas City, Kansas, you'll notice that to the east and north of Rattlebone Hollow is very grey in color, in contrast to the green of the residential areas. This is the Fairfax Industrial District.

Established in 1922 and encompassing around 2,000 acres of land in the northeast corner of Kansas City, Kansas, the Fairfax Industrial District is believed to be the first planned district of its type in the United States. Today, the 130 businesses in the district employ over 10,000 people and produce a variety of products and services. For example, today I learned that approximately 85% of the global Cheez-Its supply is produced in the Kellogg's plant in Fairfax. Cool, right?

During World War II, the Industrial District became home to the US military's largest production facility for B-25 bombers, operated by North American Aviation. During the war years, over 59,000 individuals worked at the B-25 bomber facility, which had a tremendous impact on the Kansas City regional economy and also on the war effort.

***Manpower*, US OWI, 1943**
By the end of 1943. One out of every two active Americans will either be in war production or in the fighting forces. The rest of us will be feeding, clothing, housing, the front-line fighters and workers. Only then will we be fighting with every muscle. Only at that point can we say that all work is war work.

Kara Heitz:
The B-25 facility was also part of an important social change taking place during World War II, as the facility employed a significant number of women.

***Manpower*, US OWI, 1943**
With every man utilized. We are still short millions of hands. We must call upon women.

Kara Heitz:
After its first year of operation, in 1942, around 27% of the plants' employees were women, a number that would rise to 40% by the end of the war. While certainly a number of these jobs were secretarial and clerical, women at the Fairfax B-25 plant also assembled parts of the aircraft and engaged in other labor typically performed by men.

Employers find that women can do many jobs as well as men. Some jobs better.

The Four Vagabonds, "Rosie the Riveter" song (1943)
"All the day long,
Whether rain or shine,
She's a part of the assembly line.
She's making history,
Working for victory,
Rosie the Riveter."

Kara Heitz:
But not everyone was able to access these jobs. Initially African Americans were only given custodial positions at the B-25 facility in Fairfax.

Phil Dixon:
When they build the bomber plane, Black people had to fight. And matter of fact, you dig that information, you'll find it. They had to fight to get the city to let Black people work there. It wasn't you know, it's the war. They didn't want Black people to come in and get those jobs. Right. So they had they had to it was a struggle to get them to get the jobs. And, of course, why they're bringing people in. There were a bunch of people just sitting right up against the plant. They couldn't get the opportunity to work there.

Kara Heitz:
In addition to job discrimination, the bomber plant affected Black residents of Rattlebone Hollow in an even more significant way.

Catherine Hoffman:
So eminent domain and segregation is a really big part of the Rattlebone hollow history. So, in World War II, the U.S. government came in and seized a lot of land in Rattlebone Hollow, kind of carved out their own space because they were using the Fairfax Industrial Plant to build bombers for World War II. And so they carved out land from Rattlebone hollow. And again, this is land that Black folks own settled worked hard to maintain that was seized by the government to build housing for the workers for this… war time industrial plant.

Kara Heitz:
Eminent domain was used to confiscate land owned by African Americans in Rattlebone Hollow in order to build housing for workers at the B-25 plant. Phil Dixon describes in more detail what happened.

Phil Dixon: But the land that we had was taken by eminent domain during World War II, and that's when they built the Manorcrest homes. But up until that time, yeah, there were a lot of Black people who farmed in there. I know the Campbells also had a farm in there and it could have been others. Those are two people that I know from talking to them, that they had land that was pretty much taken. And you hear about the homes that are there and they talk about the bomber plant that was built. What they don't tell you is how they acquired the land. Who owned the land? Before that, it wasn't the city.

Catherine Hoffman:
And like you said, it was so special at that time because it was Black people owning their own land, which is you can't overstate how special and important that is. Land ownership is one of the quickest ways to build generational wealth. It's so important for Black folks to be able to own land. And that made it all the more painful every time the government seized land in Rattlebone Hollow through eminent domain, piece by piece, for various reasons.

Kara Heitz:
The Manorcrest development housed primarily white workers, in contrast to the predominantly Black surrounding neighborhoods. There was even a fence erected between Manorcrest and Rattlebone Hollow to keep the communities separate.

Phil Dixon:
Once you crossed that fence you in Manorcrest, you were no longer you were in a completely different community. And everybody knew it.

Kara Heitz:
Catherine Hoffman saw parts of that fence still standing when visiting the neighborhood with Phil Dixon.

Catherine Hoffman:
And it was incredible to see that that fence is actually still up. It's broken down in a lot of different places. But when I was driving around the neighborhood with Phil, we were both amazed to see that it was still there. And it really makes you think of all of these remnants of the past, of these really segregated and violent times that we still have around these physical reminders and how we might walk past them, drive past them every day, and have no idea what used to happen, where we are.

And that's not to say that those times are over, but it's just incredible that those physical markers are still so present in our everyday lives.

Kara Heitz:
That residential segregation has persisted into the 21st century. If you look at a contemporary demographic map of Kansas City, Kansas, you'll see this sliver of land on the north side of Rattlebone Hollow that is made up of predominantly white residents,

while surrounded by areas that are predominantly African American. That sliver of white residents Manorcrest. We'll put up a map on the website for you to check out yourself.

So by the 1970s, Rattlebone Hollow was, unfortunately, not what it once was. The specific effects of land confiscation, as well as nationwide issues such as housing and job discrimination, urban disinvestment, and other similar economic problems altered this once thriving community.

Catherine Hoffman:
I think around the seventies with the landfill and then into the eighties, I think with the later generations of Rattlebone Hollow, I think that the attitude kind of changed from let's build this up. And, you know, look, look what we made to I'm going to make it out, you know. And so, I think as generations progressed, the idea became like, you know, I'm going to make it out of here.

Kara Heitz:
And part of that story of decline and neglect is the landfill that was built in 1972 by the Wyandotte County Government and the EPA. However, the intent of the landfill was actually to improve the neighborhood. Remember this was supposed to be a new kind of "sanitary" landfill that would provide a more environmentally friendly alternative to trash burning or the old-fashioned county dump.

***The Trouble With Trash*, Caterpillar Tractor Co., 1960s**
There is a definition of sanitary landfill, as provided to us by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which really tells us just exactly what a sanitary landfill is. It defines the sanitary landfill as a method of disposing of refuse on land without creating nuisances and hazards to public health or safety. By utilizing the principles of engineering to confine the refuse to the smallest practical area, to reduce it to the smallest practical volume, and to cover it with a layer of earth at the conclusion of each day's operation.

Kara Heitz:
And once the landfill was full, the space was turned into something that was supposed to benefit the community.

***The Kansas City Times*, Sept. 20, 1974, "A Park Blooms Atop the Trash"**
"The Kansas City Times, Sept. 20, 1974. The big demonstration sanitary landfill project is Kansas City, Kansas, is just about full of trash and bids now have been taken to being converting the earth-covered tract to parkland.

Nearly three years and 500,000 tons of refuse after the Mid-America Regional Council began using the site, an earth cover of two or three feet will be placed atop the seven layers of compacted trash.

A tennis court with basketball goals, a softball field, and a parking lot then will be constructed. Later on, a playground and other facilities will be installed."

Kara Heitz:
The park was named for John Garland, an African American employee of the Wyandotte County Health Department who recommended the site in Rattlebone Hollow. And the project had the support of Black community leaders, including the local chapter of the NAACP.

But something went terribly wrong. In the ensuing years, the landfill underneath the park started leaching hazardous waste. The August 23, 1993, issue of the *Kansas City Star* featured an in-depth article about the problems at this former landfill site.

***The Kansas City Star*, August 23, 1993, "A growing topic: environmental racism"**
"In 1972, when the landfill's planners first thought of building a landfill that one day would be John Garland Memorial Park, they were thinking of a national environmental model, not a toxic waste site.

'There really were good intentions,' says Nick Artz, who directed the project.
Artz maintains that poor maintenance has created much of the problem. The landfill was light years ahead of other landfills of the 1970s; for example, it was built with a clay liner and monitoring wells to detect runoff and vents to allow methane gas to escape.
In 1988, Artz added, he learned that the monitors and vents were not being checked regularly by the health department. He wrote an angry letter to his employer …
As early as 1976, though, reports of the dump leaking chemicals were beginning to concern officials.

But the EPA has concluded they pose no immediate health threat to residents, although part of the park has been closed as a safety precaution. The EPA also has blamed the city for not maintaining the landfill properly."

Kara Heitz:
The Kansas City Star article also discussed how this local Kansas City, Kansas, situation fit into a larger national problem.

***The Kansas City Star*, August 23, 1993, "A growing topic: environmental racism"**
"The nation's toxic waste dumps, landfills, and incinerators are too often in Black neighborhoods … And the EPA's enforcement and clean-up efforts lag in Black neighborhoods.

'Even in today's society, racism influences where an individual lives, works, and plays.' says Robert Bullard, a University of California-Riverside professor who helped define Environmental Racism."

Catherine Hoffman:
It was a common thing in the neighborhood to hear like, you know, oh, don't go near there. Because the citizens knew that it was toxic before the government did and before the government did anything about it… everyone knew to avoid the area, everybody in the neighborhood due to avoid that area because they knew that something was wrong.

And it's just so heartbreaking that the government and the EPA looked at this neighborhood as nothing more than a blighted area where they could dump a landfill and no one would care. And that's the story of urban renewal and environmental racism in America.

Kara Heitz:
And it's not just the fact that things like landfills, even purportedly sanitary ones, are much more likely to be put near Black neighborhoods. It's also the fact that the local health department did not maintain the site adequately, possible because of mismanagement, lack of financial resources, the low political clout of Rattlebone Hollow residents, or probably some combination of all of the above. And all of these factors are intertwined with issues of race and discrimination in America.

There have been multiple efforts to clean up John Garland Park beginning in the 1990s and well into the 21st century. It's supposedly safe now, but as Catherine Hoffman mentioned at the beginning of this story, residents are still understandably skeptical.

Today, not much is physically left of the community of Rattlebone Hollow.

Catherine Hoffman:
Today, you can still see the skeleton of what used to be a lot of the old buildings are vacant, a lot of the old houses are vacant and torn down. A lot of the streets are blocked off and grown over. Some of the original churches do remain, which is extremely cool. And you can go see those and, you know, really feel the history that's kind of steeped in that physical space…

Kara Heitz:
But even with the deterioration of the physical space, the community still lives on in other ways.

Catherine Hoffman:
But there's still a lot of people that care about it. The amazing thing with this story, it was so, so difficult to get started. But once it published, the messages just started kind of flooding in on Facebook and email and phone calls of people saying like, Oh, my God, I grew up there. My mom grew up there. My grandma grew up there. Like, I didn't know it was still around and I didn't know that anybody cared about us. So a lot of people saying, like, I never thought anyone from the news would care about what we were doing and what we built and where we came from. And I saw a lot of messages of people saying, like, I grew up there and I didn't realize that's where we came from. I didn't realize that we were direct descendants of those first Exodusters. So, you know, it's important to note that while the physical neighborhood isn't what it used to be, there's still it still remains kind of in people's collective consciousness and memories. And they're keeping it alive in a different way.

Kara Heitz:
And one of those ways Rattlebone Hollow is being kept alive is online. Phil Dixon explains.

Phil Dixon:
I'm on a couple of sites where we're actually these are these are like on Facebook pages, and it'll be people who grew up in the area. And someone will say something like, Do you remember searching for a store or something? And then it'll create a whole string of conversations of what people remember. And when you when you start remembering reflection, reflecting on that, there is a great sense of community.

Even though most of these people don't live there anymore. But it's at the core of everybody's existence because there was so many things. It was a springboard community and some of the best and brightest. They couldn't stay in Kansas City, Kansas, because the opportunities were limited. So many, many, many of them left to go on to do great things outside of the community and in communities all over the nation.

Kara Heitz:
In Wyandotte County, there has been a lot of recent interest in African American regional history, especially with the well-deserved attention received by the Quindaro settlement. And this is part of a growing movement in Kansan to better document and celebrate African American history within our state, with sites like the Kansas African American History Trail (which by the way is sponsored by The Kansas African American Museum which was features in a previous episode. I'll put a link to it on this episode's website.)

I asked Phil Dixon how he thinks the story of Rattlebone Hollow should fit this larger history of African Americans in Wyandotte County, and in Kansas.

Phil Dixon:
Where I think some educate, first of all, some education and let people know it existed. And I think we need to talk a little bit more about what came from Rattlebone, because it was kind of like really the birth of the Black community, in Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
And part of that history of African American communities in Kansas is the continued legacy of failed urban renewal policies and environmental racism.

***The Trouble With Trash*, Caterpillar Tractor Co., 1960s**
For most communities, the choice is simple sanitary landfill or open dumps. But it's a choice that must be made now because to ignore our troubles with trash any longer is to risk losing control of our environment altogether. Indeed, there's more at stake than just keeping this America the Beautiful. It's a matter of being America, the livable and the decision, either way, is yours.

EPISODE OUTRO

Josh White, excerpt from the song “The House I Live In” (recorded 1944)
The house I live in,
The goodness everywhere,
A land of wealth and beauty
With enough for all to share.
A land that we call "Freedom",
The home of Liberty,
With its promise for tomorrow
That's America to me

Kara Heitz:
Thanks for listening to this special mini episode of *Kansas 1972*. You can listen to all the episodes as well as find out more about the sources we used for this and other episodes, on our website at humanitieskansas.org.

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:
Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:
Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK’s pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.