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WPA Dioramas, Newton, Kansas

The dioramas presented on this page were produced by the "Museum Project" of the Kansas Work Projects Administration (WPA; called Works Progress Administration before 1939) in about 1939-1941.

The dioramas are currently located in [Santa Fe Middle School](#) in Newton, Kansas. Presumably they have been in Newton since about 1940, but they were rediscovered in storage when the school district moved out of Washington Elementary School in 1986. (See [Newton Kansan](#), Nov. 7, 2003, "Teachers using dioramas that are part of history") [Phil Epp](#), art teacher at Santa Fe at that time, used the dioramas in art classes for some years. They were put in storage again during Santa Fe renovations about 2000. In 2003 the dioramas were put on display in a newly constructed, lighted wooden case.

WPA dioramas seem to be very rare. [Dolls or figurines](#) made by the same organization seem to be better known. (See also [this link](#).) I have not found similar research about dioramas in Kansas or other states.

The Museum Project itself seems to be quite poorly documented. There are 3 catalogs of items available from the Kansas Museum Project, for 1939, 1940, and 1941. (The catalogs are at the Kansas State Historical Society.) The dioramas are mentioned in each of the three years.

It would be interesting to know more about the artists who actually made the dioramas, about the decision-making process for selecting the subject matter of the dioramas, and about the research process for planning them. These all await further research.

Five of the WPA dioramas exist in the Newton collection. (The following descriptions are taken from the 1941 catalog, *Visual Aids Catalogue and Year Book 1941*, which lists a William Whitney as the Museum Project state supervisor. His is the only personal name I have found in connection with the Museum Project.)



Kansas [sic] Harvest: In a typical semi-nomadic tribal scene the Kansas Indians are heaping their harvest of vegetables before their chief, who sits cross-legged outside his earth lodge.



Pawnee Pottery Making: In the foreground three skilled Indian craft workers are shaping earthen pots and bowls. On a bluff in the distance other women are working on a half-completed hut, showing the construction details of a Pawnee home.



Indian Travois: An Indian family on the march suggests the nomadic or semi-permanent life of the first people who lived in the region now Kansas. Backs are bent from the cold wind of a snowy winter day and from the burden each carries on his back. Dogs with travois poles fastened at their sides pull a considerable share of the family's possessions.



Coronado's March: Coronado wearing his famous golden armor and on his white horse rides at the head of his party of explorers, the first white men to enter Kansas. Gomez, an officer, and Father Padilla, first missionary to the Indians in Kansas, are seen in the foreground with Coronado.



Four Houses Trading Post: This scene depicts a beaver trapper and his Indian wife approaching Four Houses Trading Post, established about 1820 at the present site of Bonner Springs, Kansas. Pack horses carry bundles of raw pelts which will find their way to the fashion centers of the world.

The last 3 listed above are a complete set of the 3 dioramas produced in the "Kansas History" series. Four more dioramas from the "Kansas Indian Tribes" series are not in the Newton collection: Cheyenne Buffalo Hunt, Osage Elk Hunt, Comanches on the March. There was also a "Prehistoric Animals" series of six dioramas showing dinosaurs. None of these are in the Newton collection.