

“Early Arbors Were Labors of Frustration”
By John Mark Lambertson
Originally published in The Ottawa Herald March 26, 1988

While several individuals have contributed to the beauty and productivity of Franklin County by their tree-planting efforts, one person in particular stands out.

As a scientist, lecturer and promoter, he can be considered the first professional horticulturist in the county. Because of his early advocacy of fruit production, he also could be called the “Johnny Appleseed of Franklin County.”

Samuel T. Kelsey was a native of New York State and came to Ottawa in 1865 to manage and improve the Ottawa University grounds. He had his work cut out for him as the school had 15,000 acres of land at that time. Kelsey planted forest, hedge, fruit and ornamental trees over much of the land south of Seventh Street and east of Main.

Due to financial setbacks, OU relied on the “college farm” to supply some of its income and tens of thousands of trees were propagated and sold to that end. When the college later sold off its horticultural interests, the purchaser developed what today is Willis Nursery.

While at Ottawa, Kelsey lectured, demonstrated and vigorously promoted the idea of using hedge trees to provide “cheap, durable, and beautiful fences,” noting that they also attracted valuable birds. He was one of the earliest and strongest champions of hedge fences in Kansas and eventually saw thousands of miles of such arbors crisscross the state.

In 1867, Kelsey also helped found the Kansas State Horticultural Society. In fact, he named the society, wrote its constitution, and served as its first recording secretary. In later years, he recalled that the society provided a forum of like-minded individuals with whom he could discuss “the grave questions of pear blight, apple scab, grape rot, rabbits, bugs, and borers.”

Kelsey also gave many speeches and wrote papers on topics such as “Congress Should Appropriate for Forest-tree Planting” and “Against Wine-making.”

After four years at Ottawa, Kelsey went into partnership with J.H. Whetstone to design and establish a model agricultural community in the western part of Franklin County. Purchasing 12,000 acres of virgin prairie, the two men enclosed it with 20 miles of wire fence and divided the land into 160-acre farms by planting 100 miles of hedge.

They started over one million fruit, forest and ornamental trees, and capped off their efforts by laying out a town, which they named after the goddess of fruit—Pomona.

(The creek northeast of Pomona is still called Kelsey Creek.)

Bad luck immediately beset Kelsey and Whetstone, however. A financial depression or “panic” swept the nation in the mid-1870s and a grasshopper plague struck in 1875.

Compounding the situation were the local ranchers, who were used to grazing their cattle on the open prairie and did not take kindly to farmers who fenced and planted. Kelsey found his wire fences cut and his beloved saplings trampled.

Kelsey left Franklin for Reno County, where for a time he served as “forester” for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. His task was to experiment with various crops and trees and to recommend healthy specimens to the settlers the railroad brought to Kansas.

Once again there were difficulties. Stockmen had considerable clout on the western plains of Kansas and the controlling interests of the railroad were not united behind Kelsey’s vision of a Kansas of orchards and forests. Quick financial returns were demanded and trees took several years to pay off.

Unsatisfied with the Ottawa venture and broke after the Pomona one, Kelsey now became deeply discouraged. "I had learned by lesson in the dear school of experience," he said.

"I knew the time would surely come when there would be a necessity and a demand for the work that I had tried to do, but...it had proven, for me and my time, a visionary undertaking."

Tired and disappointed, Kelsey left Kansas and returned to the East, where, after numerous other adventures, he died in 1919.

Before his death, Franklin County's horticultural pioneer wrote that his life story could be called, "The Misadventures of a Too-sooner." But the ideas of the "too-sooner" took root along with his cherished trees, and in the bountiful harvest of once-barren Kansas his spirit lives on.