

Scourge of the Osage from the Hand that Held the Quill: The Economic Survival of the Osage Indians Concerning Their Transformation from Warlords to Landlords in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, the Osage nation found itself embroiled in heavy trading and combat with Europe and neighboring tribes. While intricate negotiations usually smoothed over problematic agreements made between these parties and the Osages, they were of no avail against American expansionism. By the 1800s, the Osages descended from a significant Midwestern-Amerindian power into a struggle for survival as a nation, foreign in their homeland. The Nineteenth-Century economic survival of the Osage people is examined during three key periods: the Thomas Jefferson presidency; the 1830s-1840s removal of eastern Indians to Osage territory; and the Osage's implementation of the grass-leasing business to support themselves once federal aid failed to reach them. With each experience, the Osage nation recognized that the means to survival was to model certain functions of their economic and political systems after those of America's capitalistic society. This research offers contemporary Osages a look into their past and the trials they overcame. The tribe's tale sharply counters the common stereotype that Indians were unable to endure American expansionism financially. A comprehensive study into the Osage's nineteenth-century economic saga has never been constructed, though this era was the most pivotal to their survival. At the beginning of Osage-American contact, it took only one generation before the tribe went from the richest, most powerful Amerindian nation in the Plains to having an 1830's diet consisting of only bitter acorns. It was the Osage's ascent to greatness once more that astonished not only their neighbors, but those of the modern day as well. After all, by the year 1900, the U.S. government deemed them the single richest society in the entire country.

1. Introduction

Since the intrusion of Europeans upon Amerindian soil over 500 years ago, tribal communities are linked with harrowing tales of eternal pillage and defilement by the Whiteman. Such depressing stereotypes are not completely true for every native interaction with their intruders. The history of the Osage people, for example, is an extraordinary saga of their dissent into near annihilation by the mid 1800s, then triumphantly becoming some of the richest human beings on earth, by using the Whiteman's system of capitalism to their own advantage. The story of the Osage's economic climb is, of course, well-known among tribal communities, but until present day, has not been examined, researched, or even chronicled in extant in order to educate modern Americans. Thus, the author embarked on an intellectual journey through the written and oral records left of the Osage ordeal. In total, the writer's study began over five years ago when she encountered an Osage Indian as he recollected a portion of his family history to her. This research project is the first of its kind to investigate, in detail, the enormous impact American interaction had upon this tribal group in the nineteenth century and the Osages' astonishing facility to overcome these new obstacles, however trodden their spirits would become.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Research for this project involved a massive investigation of an array of primary and secondary documents located throughout the United States. Materials such as microfilm and microfiche reels; original newspaper accounts from both Indian, white-settler, and urban writers; several personal interviews of Osage families experiencing the tribulations, as well as historical experts on the geographic location, historical events, and legal issues of the expanding American West; congressional documents, letters, and records were used from large sessions, committee meetings, reports of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs, relevant agents, other federal

officials—such as the Secretary of War, Indian spokesmen, and settlers affected by federal-Amerindian conversations ; original photographs of those involved; presidential papers, notes, and private entries; then existing federal laws and their creation/evolution during this ear in response to the growing Indian grass-leasing business; and personal diaries of those affected by Osage events. Evidence was meticulously inspected before understand the staggering mark Americans had left on this native community. With each new generation of Osages came more white intrusions and communal problems—ranging from a loss of land and a lack of food with the Jefferson administration; to overcrowding, disease, and war during eastern Indian removal to Osage land; to living in complete poverty following enforced inherently unfair land treaties once these Indians were indoctrinated with notion that American capitalism would be able to ‘civilize’ their savage souls. In the end the Osages kept their cultural and social beliefs while profiting from the rocky, inerrable lands on which they lived. Fortunately, these prairies were extremely profitable for the tribe once leasing arrangements were made with Midwestern cattle ranches for grazing rights. As for the modern significance of this research, parts of the project have already been published in scholarly journals, presented in several interstate and international conferences; requested for use by the United States Attorney’s Office and the Kansas Mid-America Indian Center to increase education and awareness of the Osages and other Nineteenth-Century Amerindian triumphs; and has won first place in the international conference held by the American Academy for the Advancement of Sciences. Beyond these accolades, this research, most importantly, offers contemporary Osage Indians a look into their past and the shocking trials they so valiantly overcame. Such a comprehensive study into the Osage’s Nineteenth-Century economic saga has never been constructed, though this era was, clearly, the most pivotal to the survival and future of their people. After all, at the beginning of Osage-American contact, it took only one generation before the tribe went from the richest, most powerful Amerindian nation in the Plains to having an 1830s diet consisting of only bitter acorns. As is chronicled in this piece, it was the Osage’s ascent to greatness once more that astonished not only their neighbors but those of the modern-day as well.

3. Conclusions

The economic survival of the Osage Indians during the nineteenth century is a fascinating account of how one Amerindian group, severely displaced by European contact, retained the inner and communal strength to overcome their intruders, remarkably by beating them at their own game of capitalism. The Osages survived removal from their homeland, famine, plagues, warfare, and even dependency on the flawed promises of the U.S. government, ultimately becoming some of the wealthiest people in the world.

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