Terror and Tragedy in the Osage Valley

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For First Nation people, the twentieth century saw times of great improvements and times of discernible hopelessness. In the 1920s, the Osage Indians of northeastern Oklahoma enjoyed abundant prosperity when they discovered oil on their properties, which may have been the only triumph this tribe faced in these wretched times. Although the Indians flourished with excessive fortune from the new discovery, this triumph quickly turned to tragedy as the tribe was targeted by murderous locals who wished to take possession of their abundance of wealth. This complicated homicide case led to the development of the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a powerful federal department. These devious assassinations of the people within the Osage tribe caused the government to permanently change their means of conducting investigations.

The Osage Indians experienced multiple tragedies with lands they settled. In the past, they claimed sums of land, only to be forcefully removed by the government and then later by new settlers. Following the Civil War, the tribe had permanently settled on a 50-by-125 mile plot in southeastern Kansas, satisfied with this acquisition along with the government's promise that they could permanently remain on this land. However, while peacefully existing in this region, eager white settlers began to overtake this territory, forcing the tribe off of their own land once again. With fury and desperation, the tribe found itself in need of a new location to settle. Eventually, the tribe identified a location in Oklahoma that white settlers had no desire to inhabit, as they viewed the territory as “broken, rocky, sterile, and utterly unfit for cultivation.” The Osage perceived it as a perfect location because the white settlers would not want to join them. Osage Chief Wah-Ti-An-Kah announced at a council meeting, “My people will be happy

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2 *Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon*, pp. 40
in this land…. White man will not come to this land. There are many hills here...white man does
not like country where there are hills, and he will not come.”

However, a few months following their settlement on their reservation, the Osage gained
friends outside of their tribe. William K. Hale, a white settler of the Osage hills, retained an
exceptional reputation as a successful cattleman, generous donor towards charities and
foundations, and a true friend to the Osage Indians. Hale’s friendship with the Osage Indians
became so close that he was given the title of “King of the Osage Hills.” He protected the tribe
and looked out for them and their well being. Hale claims, “I have never had better friends in my
life than the Osages...I will always be the Osages true friend.”

Once the tribe settled into their new land, they spotted a “rainbow sheen” amidst the top
of creek water, which soon led to the discovery of a plethora of oil beneath their land. With the
oil freely flowing, the tribe seized the discovery as an opportunity for business. By the late 19th
century, there were 8,579 oil wells, each one pumping out liquid gold and filling the Osage
Valley with riches. An Indian from this time, Thomas McKean Finney, referred to as
‘Wahshowahgaley’ among the tribe, claims that “this uninhabited land....has become an
industrial center...adding yearly untold wealth to the Osage Nation.... from the constant flow of
gas and oil...reaching into the heart of this wonderland.”

The oil business grew tremendously, and the tribe began to possess great amounts of
wealth. Each one of the 2,229 tribe members listed on the scroll would collect a quarterly amount

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3 Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp. 40
4 Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp. 29
5 Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp. 29
6 Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp 52
8 Finney, Thomas McKean. Pioneer days with the Osage Indians, west of '96. 1925. HathiTrust,
babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b59454;view=1up;seq=1.
of the profit gained from oil tapping. In the beginning, the check was only for a few dollars, but eventually, the check grew exponentially to hundreds and then thousands of dollars.\(^9\)

The Osage Indians became the richest people per capita in the world\(^10\). The National Museum of the American Indian states that within a few years, “the Osage Indians went from poverty to prosperity.”\(^11\) Tribe members eventually accumulated millions of dollars from these monthly oil checks. In 1923 alone, the tribe took in more than $30 million, equivalent to $400 million today. With the excess of wealth, the Indians bought cars, clothing, large terra cotta mansions, and many other items. The Indians simply kept inheriting wages day after day.\(^12\) With the new discovery of oil, white settlers began looking for tactics to gain a closer relation to the tribe, for they were envious of the prosperous Indians. The envious Americans outside of the tribe began to wonder, “where will it end? Every time a new well is drilled the Indians are that much richer.”\(^13\). Although the joyous Osage were considered the wealthiest people on the earth, they soon realized they would not be able to buy their protection from what they were about to encounter.\(^14\)

Mollie Brown was a wealthy Osage Indian woman who married Ernest Burkhart, a white man. She and her family were registered members of the Osage Tribe and inherited a large sum of money due to oil profits. Mollie grew up in a family with four daughters: herself, Rita, Minnie, and Anna. On May 21, 1921, hunters found the body of a dead woman in a ravine, with

\(^9\) Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp. 6
\(^10\) Grann “The forgotten murders of the Osage people for the oil beneath their land.” PBS NewsHour
\(^12\) Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon, pp. 6-7
a bullet hole piercing the skull. After discovering the deceased body, the tribe council contacted many Osage Indians to see if anyone could identify this lifeless person. Eventually, Mollie and Rita, along with their spouses, made their way down to the creek. They examined the clothes that the corpse wore, and solemnly confirmed that this was Anna Brown. The only information the town gathered was that she had spent the evening of May 21 with Bryon Burkhart, William Hale’s nephew. However, Bryon Burkhart was denied of any wrongdoing after questioning, and her assassination remained a mystery.

On the evening of March 9th, 1923, another tragic event occurred. Rita and her husband, Bill Smith, and their maid, Nettie Brookshire, were victims of a widespread inferno that ended in pure tragedy. During the night, a loud, rumbling commotion woke citizens in every direction. Startled awake from their slumbers, the people realized that someone had planted a bomb under the house and detonated it. On the scene, a volunteer fireman pronounced Rita and Nettie dead, and discovered that Bill had initially survived the violent explosions. However, four days after the powerful denotation, Bill died of fatal injuries, taking all of his knowledge of the tragedy to the grave with him.

The blood-shed continued across the Osage tribe as the mysterious hands of death were placed upon George Bigheart. Just a few days before his passing, Bigheart had signed all of his life savings, his ‘headright’, to his closest friend, William K. Hale. By doing so, Hale would acquire all of Bigheart’s wealth and savings once he was deceased. On the same day that Bigheart assigned his headright to Hale, Bigheart became severely intoxicated. Hale and his


16 *Grann, Killers of the Flower Moon*, pp. 88-89
nephew Ernest Burkhart led Bigheart to the hospital to receive help with his drinking addiction. Bigheart began to recover from the excessive amount of alcohol, but soon died on June 29, 1923. However, before Bigheart took his last breaths, he spoke with his lawyer, Charles Vaughn about his suspicions regarding the mysterious murders within the Osage community. According to a local newspaper of this time, it claims that “this statement cost him (Charles Vaughn) his life”\textsuperscript{17}. After learning Bigheart’s suspicions, Vaughn was stripped naked and thrown out of the window of a moving train. People later found his lifeless body near the tracks.\textsuperscript{18}

Within the Osage community, fear and panic pervaded. The bloodshed continued throughout many of the wealthiest families in Osage County. Dismally, the tribe experienced yet another saddening death, as Lizzie Kile, the mother of Mollie, Anna, Rita, and Minnie, began to experience a horrible illness and passed away shortly after. Officials did not conduct an autopsy, but claimed that poison whiskey may have caused her death.\textsuperscript{19}

Hale became outwardly frustrated, considering there was no explanation for his acquaintance Lizzie’s death. One by one, he had watched his companions meet death, without any explanation. He was determined to ascertain who was violently annihilating the tribe, as he couldn’t bear to watch his companions continuously pass. The Osage Valley had turned from a peaceful reservation to a targeted murder location. After taking the deaths into account, Hale was eager to uncover the mystery lying behind all these homicides.\textsuperscript{20}

While death continuously touched many Osage families, the tribe hired private investigators as an attempt to end these unexplainable deaths. However, after the death toll


\textsuperscript{18} "The Osage Murders." \textit{The Literary Digest}, pp. 11-12

\textsuperscript{19} Hogan, \textit{The Osage Indian Murders}, pp. 71

\textsuperscript{20} Grann, \textit{Killers of the Flower Moon}, pp. 36
exceeded two dozen, the Osage Tribal Council concluded that the national government needed to aid them in these investigations, since the local police and private investigators were both unable and unwilling to solve the cases.\textsuperscript{21} They merely pushed the case aside and thought nothing of it. With renewed hopefulness among the tribe, the Bureau of Investigation (BOI) was contacted.\textsuperscript{22}

Initially, the BOI did not prove to be as helpful as the tribe had hoped they would be. The assistant director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, had anticipated that resolving this difficult homicide case would boost the BOI’s reputation. However, the BOI made multiple poor choices that did not appear to be logical or professional to the general public, including releasing prisoners and losing track of possible suspects. Hoover was beyond frustrated with the way their investigation was proceeding; the BOI’s first homicide case was not running as smoothly as they had planned. Hoover stated, “I cannot too strongly emphasize my desire that this situation be cleared up at the earliest possible moment.”\textsuperscript{23} Hoover feared that the delay in solving this case would damage the BOI’s future of becoming the amazing bureau he had always dreamed of.\textsuperscript{24} Eventually, four undercover investigative agents working for the BOI, acting as an oilman, cattleman, Indian medicine man, and insurance salesman, traveled around Oklahoma and slowly began to collect information from informants about this cryptic case.\textsuperscript{25} After traveling around the state and investigating for days on end, the agents shared their newly collected information with the Bureau of Investigation. After conducting these intricate investigations and


\textsuperscript{22} Grann, "The forgotten murders of the Osage people for the oil beneath their land." \textit{PBS News Hour}

\textsuperscript{23} Howell, "The Reign of Terror." \textit{newsok}

\textsuperscript{24} Howell, "The Reign of Terror." \textit{newsok}

gaining respect from America for their superb tactics, the BOI was changed in 1935 to be known as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Hale intended to become the richest white man in the United States by exploiting the Osage Indians' wealth. He and his cohorts sought to establish connections with the tribe via friendship, partnership, and even marriage. However, they feigned their loyalty to the tribe. Once they had assessed who in the tribe obtained the largest amounts of money, they created intricate murder plans to systematically eradicate them. Beginning with the wealthiest members of the tribe, they carried out their plans, keeping in mind who would inherit the money once the tribe member passed away. They put their fraudulent plan to work, and over time, Hale and his partners clandestinely killed numerous Osage Indians. The exact number of murders remains unknown, but some believe the number is among the hundreds. It started with the deaths of Anna Brown and her cousin Henry Roan, who had both died from single gunshot wounds. Shortly after, Lizzie Kile mysteriously passed, followed by Rita, her spouse, and their house maid. A pattern to the deaths became conspicuous. The wealth of Lizzie passed to Anna, then to Henry, then to Rita. When they were all murdered, the wealth in the Brown family belonged to George Bigheart, and he inherited more than ten peoples' life savings. When Bigheart passed, Mollie and her husband Ernest Burkhart stood next in line to acquire the money. However, a few days prior to Bigheart's passing, he signed his headright to his dearest friend, William Hale. By doing so, Hale received generations of profit through a systematic murder line, and became one of the richest white men in America. His appalling three-year crime left him with what he had always desired: the absurd wealth of numerous members of the Osage Indian tribe.²⁶

As the United States attempts to move past the brutal times the Osage Indians faced, we cannot forget the lasting impact this era had on American history. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was born out of these homicide cases and still stands today as the most prestigious federal investigation service. Although the FBI’s investigation saw times of desperation, the Bureau eventually solved one of the country’s hardest crime cases. These homicide cases positively propelled the FBI forward with their investigative tactics and helped the Bureau gain the trust needed to tackle stronger cases.

However, advancing the FBI was not the only impact of this time. Remaining feelings of distrust, fear, and hatred towards new settlers still resonate with the Osage tribe. During the time of oil discovery, racist citizens believed that the tribe did not deserve their new-found prosperity. They acted on their envious emotions by terrorizing the innocent tribe, creating a hostility the Osage simply could not look past. The remaining Indians of the Osage tribe still struggle to welcome newcomers due to the destruction they faced in the past. They are skeptical to befriend those who took advantage of them and nearly destroyed their tribe. The tribe wonders how this devious episode in America’s history will be remembered. Will this era be remembered in full truth, or will the whites who married into the tribe share a biased one-sided story? Mark Freeman, Jr., an Osage Tribal Councilman and Osage Nation Congressman, expressed these worries stating, “History’s going to remove all of the fullbloods.”

The twentieth century brought forth conditions in the Osage County more horrifying than one could imagine. The Osage reservation in north-central Oklahoma became one of the most

28 Jason. "Terror's Legacy." This Land,
dangerous places in the world after the Osage tribe evolved to be the richest people in the world during the early 1920s. The murders became a terrifying yet normalized occurrence.\textsuperscript{29} According to the author Dennis MacAuliffe, no matter how timid the tribe grew, they could not escape “the appalling destruction of the American Indians in the death camps that were their reservations.”\textsuperscript{30} Each member feared they would be targeted next, but there was no saying who the murderous locals would go after. These complex murders have left the legacy of creating the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and has eternally altered the way the FBI conducts challenging cases. For centuries to come, as the murders of the innocent Osage begin to slip the minds of Americans, we must never forget the heartbreak and hardships that this tribe faced. Not only must we remember this era for the unscrupulous murders which ran rampant throughout the Osage county and traumatized the Osage people, but we must honor this case for creating the nations best investigative system: the Federal Bureau of Investigation.


Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Within this Article, it shares the murder victims’ stories, insight on the murders, and how the National and State Governments responded to these tragic incidents. While reading, the document explains why these particular victims were subjected to murder, and it explains why wealthy families were targeted. This article contains valuable information that I used as a basis for understanding these horrific murders of the Osage Indians.


This article was full of information regarding the Indians discovering oil, obtaining wealth, and how it affected the community. This 13 page article provided me with detailed context on the discovery of oil and how the Osage Indians took action to obtain the new mineral.


This primary source was crucial to my research process, as it provided me with first hand information from the federal government. I used the case files to gain deeper knowledge regarding the crimes and convictions within the Osage territory, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's take on the complicated homicide cases.


This primary from the newspaper 'The Atlanta Constitution', provided me with great insight on the conviction on William K. Hale. Along with describing the systematical murder plot, it clearly explains Hale's devious plan to gain the tribes wealth. I used this source to understand the conviction, as well as the plot, and I gained knowledge regarding William Hale's intricate scheme.
Secondary Sources


This website contains information regarding the lasting legacy of the Osage Indian murders. I used this source to collect material on the outcome of the crimes, as well as how America will remember them. Along with gaining knowledge on the remembrance of these tragic murder cases, this source also provided me with an excellent quote.


Thomas Finney McKean's book provided me with an excellent quote from an Osage Indian of the time of the oil rush on the reservation in the 1920's. The quote describes the impact that oil had on the community, and how much the community changed due to the discovery.


This website touched on various topics involving the murders of the Osage Indians. My understanding of many topics grew while analyzing this website. However, I benefited the most from this source due to the great amount of details it provided regarding the tribes transition and decision to move from private investigators, to getting the federal government involved.


This book was a key component to my research, and it helped lead my overall investigation. Every page was full of information on every topic relating to the murders. Although there was a large amount of information within the book, I benefited the most from text regarding the context of the Osage Indians, as well as the investigations of the cases, both private and federal.


This detailed book provided me with great insight on the murders of the Osage Indians, as well as the plot to catching the murderers. Not only were there details regarding some of the
most complicated and misunderstood parts of the case, but it was a very helpful resource when it came to understanding the Federal Investigations, led and conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.


This website gives a basis for most topics relating to the murder case. However, I benefited the most from the information on the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This portion of the website provided me with many quality primary sources, and gave in depth stories and examples from the Bureau at the time.


This Radio Program speaks out about the Osage crimes, and the effect it had on the tribe. I used this source to understand the immediate impact the murders had on the tribe, and the reaction the Indians had after discovering their wealth had been swindled.


This book goes into great detail regarding life on the reservation, which they vividly describe as "murder camps". Within the book, it thoroughly describes the struggles the Indians faced; including fear, murder, and racial discrimination. This book provided me with many quotes, as well as insight on the extreme racial discrimination these American Indians faced.


This website clearly proves the tragedies and hardships that Indians faced in their everyday lives. They were constantly targeted and taken advantage of for their wealth, and they
faced extreme racial discrimination. I used this source to gain information regarding the life of an Osage, and the many battles they struggled in life, that will follow them forever.


This website was especially helpful in my research, due to the in-depth description it provided of William Hale's murder plot. It lists the tactics the powerful men used towards the Indians, as well as the outcome and ramifications the men had to pay for their devious actions.


This journal article gives insight to the struggle the Osage Indians faced during the terrifying time of these systematical murders. It provides details on the confusion that was pervasive to all because no one knew how to solve these murder cases. Also, it shares it great detail the abundance of money that was given to the tribe, and their struggles to maintain their wealth without causing problems with the new white settlers. This resource was very helpful with the murder case of Lizzy Q and her family, as well as helping me understand the precautions the Indians had to take to protect their wealth.