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The Osage of the Flint Hills

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The Osage of the Flint Hills



THREE YOUNG WARRIORS
*Mun-ne-pu's-kee, He Who Is Not Afraid; Ko-ha-tu'nk-a, Big Crow;
and Nah-co'm-ee-shee, Man of the Bed*
George Catlin
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

Near Rosalia in east-central Butler County, there is a trail that crosses from east to west. It intersects with the California Trail and the Texas Cattle Trail. It passes by the town of Towanda, which stands on the edge of what was once the buffalo range.

It is simply known as the Osage Trail. You can still see the trail today because Osage hunters travelled on it twice a year since time immemorial, creating deep ruts into the Hills and the banks of the Walnut River. This trail would take them through Butler County into Sedgwick County, where they would hunt the buffalo. The Osage and their buffalo trail are important to the founding of Towanda and Wichita.

The conflicts between the Osage and whites were minimal. They had traded for many years, but during the mid-1800s there was confusion and conflict between the tribes and the settlers who were making permanent homes on the land. Because of the Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854 and the Homestead Act of 1862, some areas within Butler County were open to white settlers, pushing many tribes to the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Still the Osage had possession of their strip of treaty lands in Butler County. This had been designated to them by the government in 1825. The surveyors established a boundary line in the southern part of Butler County. To the dismay of the Osage, the line was drawn too far south, and they protested by tearing down the markers. This disputed boundary caused problems for the Osage because nearby was



BUFFALO CHASE OVER
PRAIRIE BLUFFS
George Catlin
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

public land for the settlers. Nobody had a clear idea where the line was, and ultimately the settlers built homes on Osage lands before the land was officially surveyed in 1857. Even after the land had been surveyed, settlers continued to build on Osage lands. To protect what was theirs, the Osage chased off the settlers who tried to create towns.

After the land was surveyed, more settlers arrived, including C. L. Chandler, the first settler of Towanda, who arrived in 1858. After a quick, unsuccessful stint in a California gold rush, Chandler was following the Santa Fe Trail back to his Ohio home. Along the way, however,

he met Indian traders who wove stories about a beautiful lush land with a flowing spring just south of them. He rushed to this idyllic place, Towanda Spring, and built his cabin near the Osage Trail. Others joined him, building up a town. According to records, the post office was established in 1860 and Sarah, the wife of postmaster Dan Cupp, was the first one to record Towanda's name in a journal. She wrote that this was an Osage word for "many waters" or "rushing waters." Although this is not a word in the Osage language, it is possible that the settlers misheard their word for "rushing waters." Back East there are a couple of towns, like Tonawanda, New York, and Towanda, Pennsylvania. It could be that the settlers heard a word that reminded them of this word from back East.

In 1863, James R. Mead bought Chandler's home and turned it into a successful trading post, known as Mead's Ranch. He wanted to trade with the Osage, so he drew up a contract with Osage Indian Agent George Snow.

Superintendent of Indian Affairs Thomas Murphy agreed that Mead and the Osage could trade for one year.

The Osage piqued Mead's interest, and he wrote about the way they treated others. During the Civil War, the tribes split loyalties; the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek sided with the Confederacy, while the Wichita and others sided with the Union. Many native families who sided with the Union were killed as they fled from Confederates troops. In the summer of 1863, refugees sought aid from the Osage. Since the US Government could not help, the Osage allowed the refugees to live on their lands. The settlement of the Wichita Indians at the confluence of the Arkansas and Little Arkansas Rivers became known as "Wichita Town." Later on, Mead adopted the name "Wichita" for the new town that he and his friends established.

The trading stopped when the Osage were forced by an act of Congress to leave their ancestral homes. Their land

was sold on July 15, 1870, at which point they walked to present day Osage County in Oklahoma. Although they were paid for their lands and could buy new lands in Indian Territory, they lost about 900 family members, their usual routines, their rich hunting grounds, and their ancestral ways. This was their Trail of Tears.

When the Osage and other tribes were forced into Indian Territory, Mead decided to leave Towanda and settle in Wichita. Postmaster Cupp took over Mead's trading post.

Over time, the trading post was abandoned, but the town of Towanda continues to thrive. The trading post no longer exists, but the ruts from the heavy traffic of the Osage moving to and from their hunting grounds still remain.

Kathleen Auschwitz is the librarian for the Osage Nation Library and Resource Center within the Wah-Zha-Zhi Cultural Center and the Pawhuska Public Library in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. She holds a Master's Degree from Emporia State University.