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An Osage Perspective On The Santa Fe Trail

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Untitled

Lydia Cheshewalla and Jessica Price

AN OSAGE PERSPECTIVE ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL

The Osage people have been connected to the Flint Hills for centuries. Our ancestors were a powerful force and frustrated Spanish, French and American attempts at conquest by controlling trade routes through the Southern Plains.

Hence, the United States government needed to sign a treaty at Council Grove with the Osage in 1825 to secure safe passage for white travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. In other words, the U.S. government needed that assurance.

At the same time, the establishment of routes such as the Santa Fe Trail and the influx of white settlers represented a decline of Osage power in the region. Even though this created challenges for the Osage people through land dispossessions, disease and a socio-cultural breakdown in the Osage way of life, we are still here. We, the authors, are both citizens of the Osage Nation, as well as working professionals who have committed years of service in the Osage community in the fields of education, agriculture, natural resources, land management and more. As members of the community, we both have a vested interest in making the perspectives of Indigenous peoples more visible in the annals of settler colonial nostalgia. This perspective begins by looking at the past in order to understand the present and reimagine our future. For the Osage people, the history of the Flint Hills is part of that ongoing story, as we all continue to move forward with entangled histories.

From one perspective, the Santa Fe Trail represents the romanticized grit and determination of white settlers. From

another perspective, the trail is part of a larger story that tells of Euro-American settlers' attempts to conquer and eradicate Indigenous peoples standing in the way of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, an ambitious movement that white descendants still benefit from daily. But as Osage citizens in the present, our perspectives on these histories represent endurance, resistance, adaptation and ongoing survival as Indigenous peoples. We are a continuation, yet another generation in our ancestral lines. We are not extinct; we are present, with over 20,000 Osage citizens living in Oklahoma and Kansas and across the United States.

For the Osage, our existence endures because of our ancestors, who committed to our future even when settlers were working to eradicate us. For example, our ancestors relied on seasonal migrations across the prairies of Kansas to hunt bison. These hunts were key to the Osage way of life in this region. However, as Euro-American settlers encroached on Osage lands, whites were encouraged to kill bison as a way to eradicate Indigenous peoples of the plains. By the late 1800s, the Osage had to abandon those hunts.

This led to a socio-cultural breakdown that forced our Osage leaders to abandon the old ways and explore how to maintain and move core values forward into future generations. With the help of the Poncas and Kaws, Osage leaders started a new

ceremony, the *ncos̄k̄h*, and those core values and important socio-cultural ways were embedded into that ceremony, a gathering still held every June. This important dance is a place of learning, where younger generations listen to elders, and where core Osage concepts related to order and mutual respect are learned through experience and observation. It is one of the primary places where Osage people move forward, where we continue our communal relationships and learn Osage ways of living and being part of a community.

While the late 1800s represented a difficult time for the Osage people, our leaders were strategic in their decision making, working to ensure our future. During that time, our ancestors reorganized under new forms of government, one being the Osage Nation Constitution of 1881. Later, as Oklahoma worked to become a state in 1906, the Osage were pressured to reorganize and abandon the communal (or Osage national) land ownership established under the 1881 constitution – land they purchased and owned. So in 1906, these Osage lands, still valued by incoming settlers, were forcibly divided into allotments with individual owners, putting an emphasis on individual land ownership instead of Osage national land ownership. However, during the allotment process, Osage leaders leveraged negotiating

power to gain a more favorable process and maintained a form of communal ownership for the sub-surface land, what is now known as the Osage Minerals Estate.

This new government took on a corporate style structure tied to this minerals estate, meaning each Osage in 1906 inherited a share, and they could pass that down through their family lines. This also meant that those shares, as they became fractioned, represented partial votes instead of one full vote per Osage citizen. Furthermore, with the oil boom in the 1920s, the Osage had access to a new form of wealth, which then drew more envy from whites. This resulted in a wave of corruption and murder where whites exploited the system imposed upon the Osage to gain access to that oil and mineral wealth, using murder and corruption to meet their goals. This is often referred to as the Osage Reign of Terror, and it served as yet another challenge for our people with ongoing encroachment of whites wanting more of what the Osage have. Yet, once again, the Osage people endured and still maintain the Osage Minerals Estate today.

After 100 years of pushing back against the 1906 system which was imposed on the Osage people, the Osage Nation engaged in a government reform process in 2004-2006 which allowed our people to exercise our sovereign rights and once again reorganize in order to keep moving towards a new future (see Jean Dennison,

“Colonial Entanglement: Constituting a Twenty-First Century Osage Nation”). This time, Osage leaders moved our system to a three-branch structure in which each Osage descending from the 1906 rolls is a member of the Osage Nation and can now vote if of age. As our leaders emphasized in the preamble of the new constitution, there is still a commitment to “preserve and perpetuate a full and abundant Osage way of life that benefits all Osages, living and as yet unborn.” Once again, our leaders continue to press forward to make way for an Osage future.

Immediately following the establishment of the new government, the Osage Nation started the process of developing a 25-year strategic plan, which established goals and priorities based on the will of the Osage people. This plan has since been updated by Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear's administration. One priority was to purchase land and expand the reservation land base in an effort to regain lands that have been lost. Working towards these goals, the most significant Osage land reclamation is the purchase from media mogul Ted Turner of 43,000 acres, in the southern portion of the Flint Hills within the Osage Reservation boundaries in Oklahoma. Chief Standing Bear emphasized that this purchase was another significant step that allowed us to “get back what has been lost.” On this land, the Osage Nation is building a herd of bison,

a significant step as we consider the role of the bison in the historic Osage way of life. Furthermore, the Osage Nation has recently developed a meat-processing facility and a vegetable/fruit farm for the benefit of Osage citizens.

However, the Osage strategic plan isn't just about land reacquisition; it also puts an emphasis on culture and language education, as well as economic development and health (among other priorities). Specifically, the Osage Nation is dedicating significant resources towards culture and language education, trying to re-awaken the words spoken across the plains before settlers brought their wagons on the trails from the East, trails which brought Euro-American government(s), which then forced our ancestors into schools mandating English only. To heal some of the damage done in these histories, Osage leaders have created a language department, early childhood learning centers, an elementary school, a cultural center and more. Furthermore, with resources acquired through tribal enterprise and entrepreneurship, and with the wisdom of elders from families who have held on to those old ways, Osage leaders have created a brand-new Osage orthography to represent the unique sounds of ᄆᄆᄆᄆ ᄆᄆ. This orthography, a form of language sovereignty that reduces Osage reliance on English text and phonetics,

has also been made to work with Unicode so that it works across multiple technological platforms. This has also allowed the Osage Language Department to develop apps for Android and iOS platforms, as well as create fonts that work with Microsoft Office and Google apps and across social media. Artists also use this orthography on murals, stop motion educational videos, blanket designs and more.

Beyond Osage language revitalization efforts, leaders have also renovated the historic Osage Nation museum, built a new tribal headquarters equipped with modern technologies, and erected new statues and monuments to commemorate our leaders of the past, along with our veterans. Our leaders have done these things so our story continues so that they may be there for our children and grandchildren.

Ultimately, as we reflect back to what the Santa Fe Trail means to the Osage people, it represents something different from what most descendants of Euro-Americans on the Southern Plains might consider: encroachment, disease, land dispossession, conquest and more. But here we are, still moving forward, entangled with settler-colonialism in the present, in shared spaces such as the Flint Hills. But the 1800s and the trails of white settlers coming from the East are but one part of the Osage story, one of



Border Crossing II
Norman Akers

the past. Although these encroachments still continue in various ways, the Osage Nation is still looking to a new horizon outlined in the strategic plan and beyond. On that new horizon, we are proud to be Osage citizens under the 2006 constitution and proud to be working to help our Osage people move our story forward as best we can.

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