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Reign of Terror: The Forgotten Story of the Osage Tribe Murders

By: [Dave Roos](#) | Aug 18, 2022



Members of the Osage Nation with their white allies (standing from left) Pa-So-Top-A, unidentified holding infant, Mary Lookout (Mrs. Jean Standing Bear), Jean Standing Bear, unidentified, Mrs. Julia Lookout, unidentified. (Front row from left) Col. Zack Miller (101 Ranch), Gordon Lillie "Pawnee Bill," Frank Phillips holding Standing Bear's infant, Osage Chief Fred Lookout and Francis Revard. PHOTO BY FRANK GRIGGS/OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At the turn of the 20th century, the 2,229 members of the [Osage Nation](#) were some of the [wealthiest people in America](#). Despite being [forcibly removed](#) from their tribal homeland decades earlier, the Osage managed to strike it rich in the rocky hills of Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) when oil was discovered on their land.

The story of the Osage people should have been one of triumph over tremendous adversity, but instead the period from 1920 to 1930 became known as the "Reign of Terror." During this decade, the Osage were targeted for their money. Corrupt local officials teamed with grifters and scam artists to defraud the Osage of millions of dollars.

Far worse, dozens — or perhaps hundreds — of Osage were killed, and their murders covered up so that white "guardians" could inherit their valuable oil rights.

A century ago, the FBI conducted its first-ever murder investigation into the "[Osage Indian Murders](#)." In the end, several men were convicted of murdering an entire Osage family for their oil money. That story was movingly told in David Grann's book, "[Killers of the Flower Moon](#)," which is now being [made into a movie](#) by Martin Scorsese starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro. It is expected to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023.

But to this day, the Osage are still seeking justice for their other ancestors who disappeared or died under mysterious circumstances during this dark period.

How Did the Osage Tribe Become So Rich?

Like virtually all Native American tribes, the Osage were driven from their ancestral lands (which included large swaths of Oklahoma) in the 1800s. They were forced to relocate, first to Kansas and then, ironically, back to Oklahoma, known then as Indian Territory.

The forced removals were devastating and many Osage died, but unlike most other Native tribes, the Osage actually [bought their land](#) in the Indian Territory with money from the sale of their reservation in Kansas. And when cattlemen from Texas needed grazing land to fatten their herds on the way to Kansas City, they leased grasslands from the Osage. Those land leases provided excellent revenue for the Osage even before oil was discovered in 1897.

The Osage were also the only tribe in Indian Territory that wasn't required to comply with the 1887 [Dawes Act](#) that divided reservation land into "allotments," most of which were

sold off to white settlers. Allotment was eventually forced upon the Osages by the [1906 Osage Allotment Act](#) when Oklahoma became a state, but by that time they had money and bargaining power.

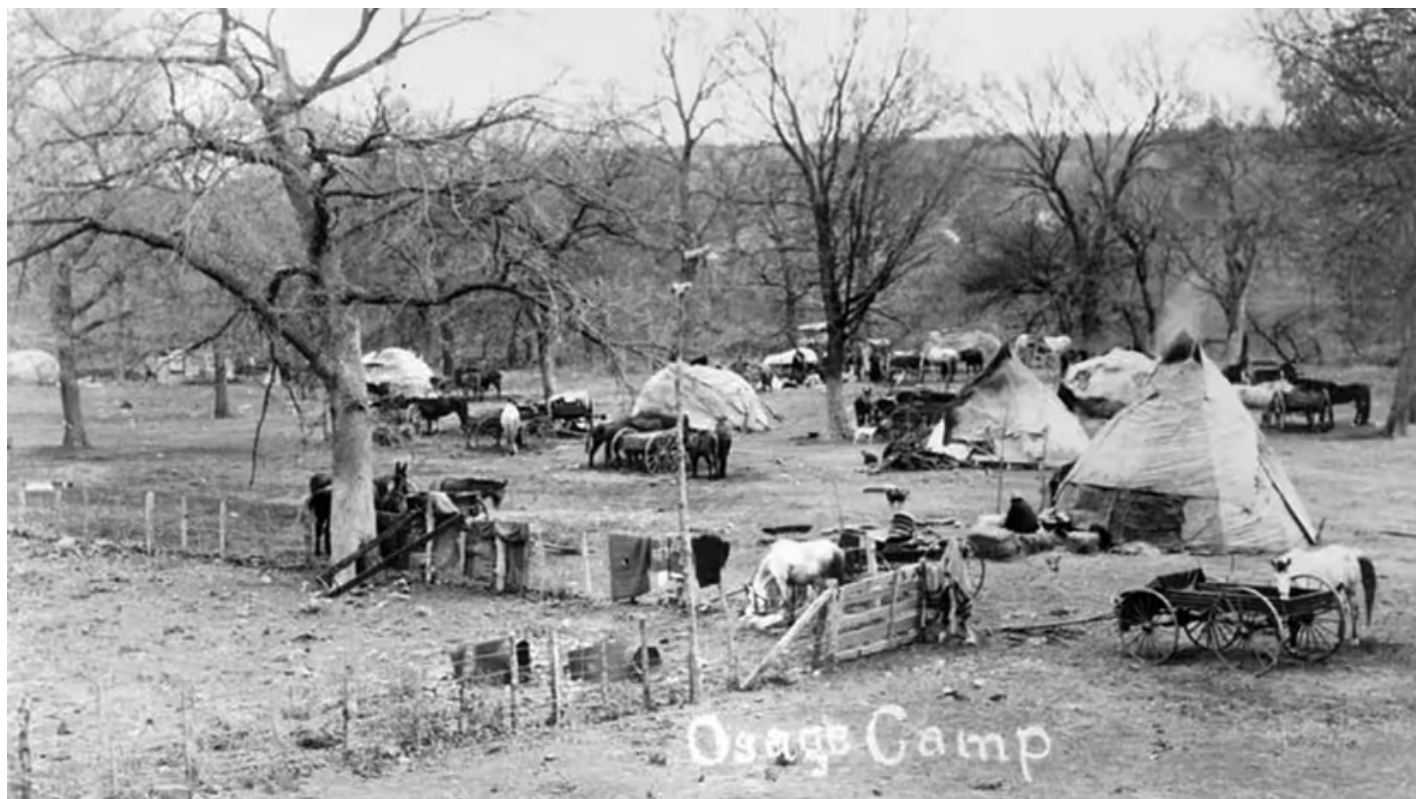
"As much as they could, our leaders were trying to fight for the rights of our people, because we had seen what had happened to the other tribes in Oklahoma who were completely decimated," says Tara Damron (Osage), program director of the [White Hair Memorial](#) learning center.

The Osage tribal leaders negotiated allotments of 640 acres (259 hectares) for each of the 2,229 registered Osages, without any "surplus" land sold to white settlers. And critically, the Osages retained mineral rights for all oil, coal and other resources beneath their land, the profits from which would be shared collectively among tribal members. Each share is called a "headright" and could only be inherited, not sold.

"I don't think they realized just how much oil was here and how much wealth they were sitting on," says Damron.

The Osages auctioned off oil-drilling rights to the highest bidder and collected a percentage of all oil revenue. The tribe was soon earning [\\$10 million to \\$30 million](#) a year, quickly making millionaires of each individual owner of an Osage headright.

A common sentiment repeated [in 1920s newspapers](#) was that the Osages were "the richest group of people per capita on earth."



Osage villages, like this one in Oklahoma circa 1906, consisted of longhouses covered with mats or skins arranged irregularly around an open space used for dances and council meetings. Teepees were used during hunting season.

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Thieves and Killers Target the Osage

Before the discovery of oil, no respectable white person wanted to live in Indian Territory, says Damron, but when millions of dollars of "black gold" started spurting from the ground, "all of a sudden it was OK for white people to live here. There was opportunity and money to be made."

For these outsiders, who swarmed into Oklahoma boom towns like Fairfax and Pawhuska, they could either make money drilling for oil or by squeezing cash directly from the Osage themselves — by any means necessary.

White merchants charged a separate, higher "Osage price" to tribal members (\$3,000 for a coffin, [for example](#)). Doctors and pharmacists got their Osage patients hooked on expensive medications. Lawyers descended on Oklahoma in droves, charging exorbitant fees to "assist" the Osage in their business dealings.

Things went from bad to worse in 1921, when Congress [passed a law](#) requiring all Osage to pass a "competency" test to see if they were able to manage their own finances. Under this insulting law, Damron says, virtually all full-blooded Osages were automatically deemed "incompetent" and assigned a "guardian" to handle their money.

Guardianships over Osage tribespeople were assigned by corrupt local judges who gifted the positions to relatives, cronies and political supporters. The guardians often swindled their Osage "wards" out of their headrights, or spent the oil money themselves while giving the ward a pittance as an "allowance." There were even cases where an Osage ward had to borrow money from their guardian and fell hopelessly into debt.

Marriage was another way that white outsiders could make a claim at an Osage headright. Especially if the Osage spouse unexpectedly died, which started to happen with shocking regularity.

"You have these intelligent, healthy people who all of a sudden die from poisoning, or from these really vague diseases like consumption," says Damron.

Jim Roan Gray, a former Osage chief, [said in a PBS documentary](#) that a full-blooded Osage with money was basically "walking around with a target" on their back. "The sense of fear... must have been horrible."



Anna Brown (left) and almost her entire family were killed for their Osage headrights. William Hale (right), the so-called "King of the Osage Hills" was behind the murders.

FBI

The FBI Snares the 'King of the Osage Hills'

Local police and judges were no help to the Osage, so tribal leaders took their pleas to Washington, D.C., where they were able to convince the FBI, led by a 29-year-old J. Edgar Hoover, to take on its first murder investigation.

The victims were several members of an extended Osage family. [Anna Brown](#), a young and vivacious woman, was the first to be killed, her body found by hunters with a gunshot to the back of her head. Brown's death had been ruled "accidental" by local authorities. Not long after, Brown's mother, Lizzie, died from suspected poisoning. Then her cousin, Henry Roan, was also shot and killed.

That left just two of Brown's surviving sisters with all of the family's valuable headrights. Then, March 10, 1923, an explosion ripped apart the home of Brown's sister, Rita, killing her and her family. The last sister, Mollie, was now the sole survivor. What Mollie didn't know was that her white husband, Ernest Burkhart, was [slowly poisoning her](#).

Burkhart was the submissive nephew of an influential and charismatic cattleman named William K. Hale. Through undercover agents, the FBI learned that Hale, known as the "King of Osage Hills," had **ordered the killings of Anna Brown** and her family so that his nephew would inherit all of their headrights, worth half a million dollars a year.

When Burkhart and other accomplices confessed, Hale was convicted of ordering the murder of Henry Roan and sentenced to life in prison. Sadly, because of his powerful connections, Hale was paroled in 1947 and Burkhart, despite pleading guilty, was **fully pardoned** by Oklahoma governor Henry Bellmon in 1965.



The late Maj. Gen. Clarence L. Tinker (for which Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma is named) was a member of the Osage Indian tribe and the U.S. military's highest ranking officer of Native American ancestry. Here his descendants are dressed in native attire during the annual Inlonshka ceremony in which the tribe honors and preserves its values and heritage.

DESIREE N. PALACIOS/U.S. AIR FORCE

The Osage Nation Today

The FBI "got their man" in the murders of Anna Brown and her family, but Damron reminds us that "that was just one family and one conviction. All of us Osage have family

stories about relatives dying or disappearing under mysterious circumstances."

Estimates of the total number of Osage killed in the 1920s ranges from **24 individuals to several hundred**. The truth, Damron says, is that "there's never been any closure. There's never been any justice."

Furthermore, the descendants of the corrupt guardians and **scam artists** who stole Osage headrights back in the 1920s are still collecting royalties on Osage oil and gas revenue. By Osage accounting, **26 percent** of headrights owners are non-Osage. A 1978 law finally made it illegal for non-Osage people to inherit headrights, but some of those headrights were gifted to churches, universities and other institutions that have no "descendants," per se.

"They have made millions off of our headrights and continue to make millions to this day," says Damron, who is **named in a lawsuit** seeking damages from the U.S. government for mishandling Osage royalties.

Damron says that the Osage Nation is strong, and because of its mineral wealth and leadership, the Osages have been able to help other Native tribes and sustain their own future. Osage membership is **close to 24,000 people** living in Oklahoma and all over the world.

"There are a lot of successful Osages," says Damron. "We overcame the terror of the 1920s, but we're still fighting to get back what's rightfully ours."



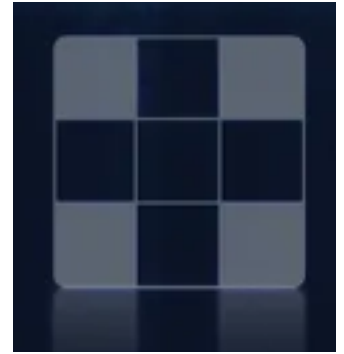
"Killers of the Flower Moon" is an upcoming film directed by Martin Scorsese starring Lily Gladstone (left) and Leonardo DiCaprio. The movie is based on the best-selling "Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI" by David Grann.

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Now That's a Start

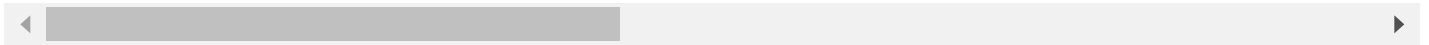
In 2011, the U.S. government agreed to a **\$380 million settlement** with the Osage Tribe for mismanagement of funds. Also in 2021, the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) **donated 20 acres of ancestral land** back to Osage Nation. The estate of Nelvada Dean donated the land to NARF, who determined it consisted of Osage Nation ancestral land.

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