

Osage Murders

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



Headstones mark Osage graves on the Osage reservation in Oklahoma.

IN THEIR WORDS

“They called it the Reign of Terror because you didn’t know where it was going to strike next. You didn’t know whose house was going to be blown up next. You didn’t know who was going to be killed next. You didn’t know who was going to be shot next.”

- Marvin Stepson
(Osage)



The Osage Reservation in 1889 when oil was first discovered.

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

The “Osage Murders” tells the story of what happened to the Osage people during the oil boom on their reservation. The boom took place in the first part of the twentieth century, leaving scars still affecting families today. The Osage became known as the wealthiest people in the world receiving royalty payments of staggering amounts. The problem was everyone except the Osage believed they did not deserve the money. Racist attitudes supported by government policies at all levels made it possible to use any means to separate the Osage from their money. Blind eyes turned away from unethical practices by lawyers, merchants and bankers. Guardians were appointed because of the racist belief that Indians could not be trusted to spend their money wisely. Many of these guardians took advantage of their position. Marrying an Osage with the intent to murder for the inheritance was an all too common practice. Each Osage family has a story of tragedy and victimization, yet as a people the Osage proudly survive.



The Osage gather to honor Frank Phillips founder of Phillips 66.

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PRODUCER STATEMENT



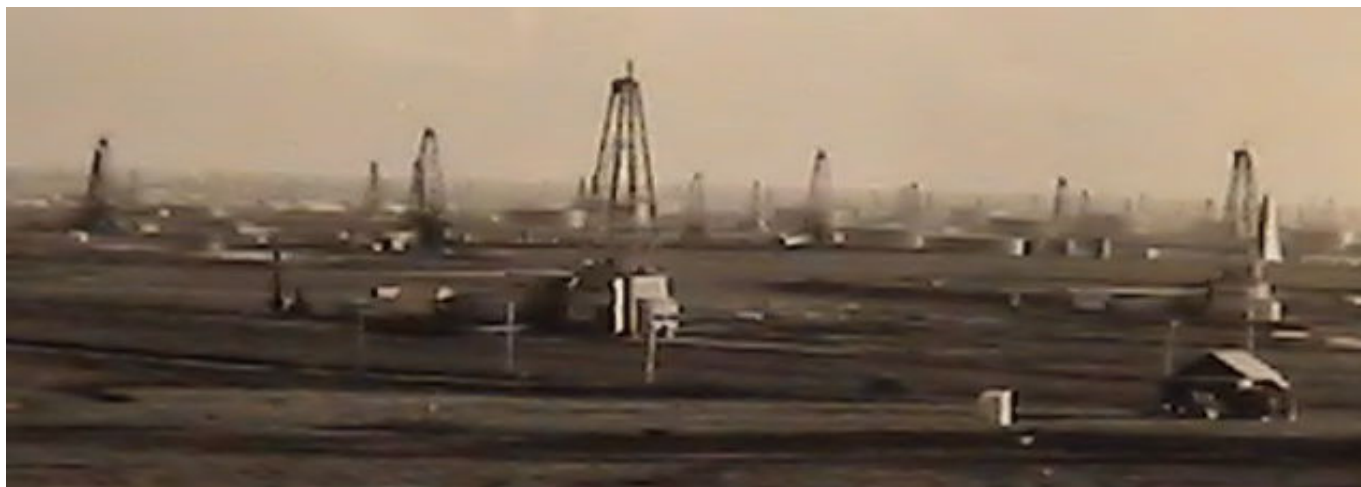
The Big Productions team
Lily Shangreaux (Oglala/Lakota) & Dan Bigbee Jr. (Comanche)

Even though this story happened a hundred years ago we still live in a world driven by the same racist attitudes that led to murder on the Osage reservation. Recent headlines are filled with examples of racially motivated behaviors reinforced by government policy. We believe that our country cannot hope to rectify the injustices of today until we come to terms with the injustices of the past. Especially when the memory of these injustices fosters distrust. Our hope in producing “Osage Murders” is to expose the history that has been swept under the rug and start a dialog that heals.

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BY THE NUMBERS



A working oil field on the Osage reservation during the "Reign of Terror".

1. In 1894, oil was discovered on the Osage Reservation.
2. An 1893 fire destroyed Osage tribal and family documents. This would open the door to fraudulent enrollments on the initial Osage Rolls. The Osage asked the rolls be purged of an estimated 600 fraudulent enrollees before headrights were established in 1906. No action was taken.
3. With the 1906 Osage allotment act the Tribal rolls were closed with 2,229 enrollees. This created 2,229 headrights. Each headright would get an equal share of the mineral royalty payments.
4. Non-Osage begin to find any means necessary to separate the Osage from their money.
5. Royalty payments grow as the demand for oil increases in the 1910s. The real boom comes in the 20s with the Osage earning \$30 million in 1923 alone. Each headright was worth \$11,000–12,000 per year during 1922–1925. The average American income in 1924 was \$2,196.
6. During the same period, 1921-1925, an estimated 60 Osage were killed. Most murders were not investigated. This period came to be known as the Reign of Terror. Headrights were inherited by an unknown number of non-Osage.
7. 1923: More than 100 headright checks were mailed to Osages living outside of Oklahoma. Most had migrated to Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and California. Some had simply moved away from the reservation to other areas of Oklahoma. Still others left the country for places like Mexico, China, Japan, and France.
8. In 1925 as a response to the Osage Reign of Terror murders, the federal government passed legislation, prohibiting headrights passing down to anyone causing the death of an Osage. The law also limited headright inheritance to Osages who were at least half-blood. Those inheriting who were less than half-blood were forced to sell their headright back to the tribe.
9. By 1935, less than one-third of the original allotted acres was owned by Osages.

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EXPLORING THE FACTS

1. At timecode [01:01:04;19 to 01:01:13;21] the narrator tells us: “The land was owned collectively by the Osage, an idea foreign to whites whose attitude was those savage Indians should divide the land”. For the Osage land is seen as an asset for the good of all Osage. Non-Osage see land best used for the benefit of the individual. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of collective ownership versus individual ownership of property.
2. At timecode [01:01:40;01 to 01:01:48;24] the narrator tells us: “The Osage Allotment Act of 1906 forced the tribe to divide their land with each Osage citizen receiving an equal share”. Remember the Osage owned their land by virtue of “fee simple”. If you owned 100 acres of land how would you react to the federal government forcing you to divide your property into quarter acre plots to be sold at auction?
3. At timecode [01:02:37;23 to 01:02:38;28] the narrator tells us: “Not surprisingly, the Osages enjoyed their money”. To many observers at the time the Osage were wasting their money. In consideration of cultural differences was it fair to make such judgments?
4. At timecode [01:10:16;09 to 01:10:23;00] the narrator tells us: “Local law enforcement was of no use to the Osage. The sheriff allegedly ran a brothel out of his jail”. Over 60 murders remain unsolved from the 1920s due to corruption and inaction by local authorities. Considering that the statute of limitations never runs out in a murder case, should the deaths of so many Osage be investigated now?



Oil pumps still operate on the Osage reservation.

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IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. The Osage people derive great pleasure from feeding large gatherings. As part of the viewing and discussion plan on serving a meal.
2. Re-create the “guardian” experience.

Select an audience member to serve as a guardian. The remaining audience members are told they have \$100,000 this month to spend. Taking turns, each person must convince the guardian to approve their expenditures.

3. The events that took place on the Osage reservation are a blatant example of what can happen when racism goes unchecked. Today’s outcries for justice offer hope that Osage as well as all indigenous people will never experience another reign of terror. You can do your part by taking a stand against injustice. Speak up if you see or hear people being targeted for the color of their skin. Call your friends on racist attitudes, or using pejorative words for people of color. Stand with people of color who are standing up for themselves.
4. Racial injustice has been ignored in our education for many years. Take time to research events in your community that have been swept under the rug. Help heal the wounds by acknowledging the existence of an uncomfortable past.



The Osage gather for a feast and election circa 1925.

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RESOURCES

There are several books written on the Osage Reign of Terror.

A Pipe for February by Charles Redcorn

Bloodland: A Family Story of Oil, Greed and Murder on the Osage Reservation by Dennis McAuliffe

The Osage Indian Murders : A True Crime Story by Lawrence J. Hogan

Visit the following to learn more about the Osage people:

The official website of the Osage Nation: <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/>

The Osage National Museum: <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/museum>

The Traveling Trunk has resources designed for elementary through middle school students, as well as interested high school students and adults. The main goal of the trunk is to foster an understanding of Osage culture and heritage throughout ancestral Osage territory in Missouri.

<https://osageculturetravelingtrunk.weebly.com/>



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For more information, please visit www.visionmakermedia.org.

Educational resources for this film are available at <https://visionmakermedia.org/osage-murders/>

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