

Guide to
the Microfilm Edition
of the
**FBI File on the
OSAGE INDIAN MURDERS**

Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

Osage Indians, a remarkable people, wisely used the economic base of various localities during several generations following their nineteenth-century removal from the rich alluvial lands of the Mississippi-Arkansas confluence. By the early twentieth century, situated in the cross-timber zone of northeastern Oklahoma, Osage people developed the cattle-grazing and oil-drilling potential of their latest in a series of estates. As did the oil, headright royalties flowed while Osage Indians tried, in a variety of ways, to adapt to the demands of the new order. In time, these Native American people became victims of plots to divert the wealth of their nation.

Exact counts are difficult to derive, but during the early 1920s it was estimated that somewhere between a dozen to two dozen Osage Indians were murdered or simply "disappeared." As wards of the federal government, their special status brought investigators from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It soon became apparent that Osage fears, widely shared among friendly whites, virtually dried up knowledgeable sources. Moreover, Oklahoma county and state officials initially were reluctant to cooperate with federal investigators. In what became one of its most celebrated cases, the FBI—then simply the Bureau of Investigation—avidly pursued the Osage murderers, eventually securing life-term convictions in state and federal courts.

The FBI's Osage Indian Murders files contain stores of data about life and attitudes of Osage Indians and their neighbors during the 1920s. The impact of oil wealth on northeastern Oklahoma is clearly documented. Of equal interest is the operation of state and federal law enforcement agencies in an era when, many assume, gangsters and bootleggers in major cities were society's sole villains. It is also evident from the Osage Indian Murders files that the FBI at all levels—especially including the young director, J. Edgar Hoover—acutely sensed heinous injustice and were determined to persevere in what became a most difficult task of investigation and prosecution. Sandbagged in a host of brazen but

ingenious ways, the FBI nonetheless persisted, fought, and defeated charges of improper procedure and broke the congenial bonds of frontier silence to win convictions.

Scholars of the Osage people, modern Oklahoma, or early twentieth-century politics and law enforcement will find compelling source material in the FBI's Osage Indian Murders files. An even wider audience will find in these explicit and well-ordered documents a first-rate murder mystery, solved through unusual combinations of stealth, wisdom, and dedication—in short, one of the most exciting yet demanding murder investigations ever operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation!

Roughly, the Osage Indian Murders files are half investigatory, half prosecutory. For the most part, documents bearing on investigation activities precede those related to various aspects of prosecution. At the front of these files is a short compendium of newspaper clippings about the murders and the FBI's role in these cases. Most clippings are from Oklahoma newspapers; some are from Washington, DC, newspapers. The final section of the files contains correspondence and other material dealing with radio, film, and other popular communications forms as they worked with the FBI to acquaint the public with this unusual story. Field reports; internal correspondence and memoranda; correspondence with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Justice Department officers, and Oklahoma state officials; witness profiles and associated prosecution documents; and other matter related to investigation and prosecution form the bulk of the FBI's Osage Indian Murders files.

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