Osage woman and child. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, Denver, Colorado.
John D. Hunter was an American boy adopted and reared by an Osage family in the late 1700s. After rejoining American society in adulthood, he wrote extensively on Native life, with particular emphasis on “materia medica,” or Native health and healing. He described the Osages as “subject to but few diseases, and those [were] generally simple and easily cured” with a “rich variety” of remedies utilized by individuals and respected doctors. The illnesses of “civilized” society, as he called them, such as smallpox, afflicted the Osages only in rare instances. Half a century later, when the French traveler Victor Tixier spent the summer of 1840 among the Osages, he observed that they experienced “endless intermittent fevers . . . [and] inflammations of the various respiratory organs” as well as smallpox, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis, all of which drastically reduced their population.1

The differences in Osage health witnessed by these two men were a direct result of U.S. colonialism. The common assumption is that the western hemisphere’s Indigenous peoples were “virgin” populations that—after the arrival of Europeans—faced immediate, inevitable, and massive population decline owing to Old World diseases against which the Natives were immunologically defenseless.2 This study adds to a growing body of research that demonstrates how the disruptions caused by colonization determined the timing and impact of disease, especially in terms of facilitating epidemic death rates.3 The Osages had been in contact with French traders since at least the 1680s, but they were not plagued by epidemics until the 1820s, indicating that the mere presence of Old World diseases and their European carriers did not result in Osage depopulation. Instead it was the Indian removal policy and settler expansion that disrupted life, enabling epidemic diseases to decimate the Osage people.

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By the time the United States took official possession of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the Osages had been the dominant power—even over Europeans—in the Arkansas River Valley for at least fifty years. Over the course of the next century, American expansion undermined the Osage economy, subsistence, and health. The Osages competed with increasing Native and American populations for access to land, game, and gatherable foods. Not only did the stress and difficulty in finding food allow diseases to ravage the Osages, but all of these factors also reduced fertility, making it difficult for their population to rebound even in healthy years. In Kansas, Osage women who had successfully farmed for thousands of years struggled to reap bountiful harvests in a climate characterized by extreme weather. In the face of these unprecedented threats, the Osages increasingly utilized mobility to preserve lives and culture. Despite these efforts, the scope and scale of American colonialism eventually concentrated the Osages on a small reservation with a drastically reduced population that had to learn how to survive in an American-dominated society.

The Osage contact with French colonists began in the 1680s, but the establishment of French trading posts near Osage villages in the 1720s allowed them to become middlemen—controlling access to valuable goods—in the exchange between the French and distant Indigenous communities. The Osages became “major commercial hunters” while also maintaining significant agricultural production. When French traders attempted to initiate trade relations with western and southern Natives, Osage warriors resisted—violently when necessary—any threats (Native and European) to their trade dominance.

To increase access to game and enhance trade, the Osages separated into three tribal divisions in the eighteenth century. The Great Osage remained in the precolonial village area where the Little Osage, Marmaton, and Marais des Cygnes Rivers merge to form the Osage River. The Little Osage moved north to the Missouri River sometime between 1714 and 1719 to take advantage of rich hunting grounds and trade traffic on this river, where they remained until rejoining the Great Osage around 1794. In the 1760s, the Arkansas Osage moved south to the Three Forks region, where the Verdigris and Neosho Rivers join the Arkansas River. Taking advantage of their large population of at least 10,000 and their strategic location between the Mississippi River and the plains, the Osages established regional hegemony as the primary economic and military power in western Louisiana.

The Osage annual cycle began in April, when women planted their crops in the fertile floodplains along the rivers near their villages in present-day western Missouri. In late May or early June, the entire village traveled to the plains, where men hunted and women cured meat and tanned hides. By late July, they returned to their villages so women could harvest crops and store the surplus for winter. In late September or early October, the villagers again traveled to the plains, where they hunted until cold weather set in and they followed game animals to sheltered parts of the prairies or forests. When they had obtained enough meat to last through May, they returned to their home villages to begin the cycle again.

John D. Hunter, the American adoptee discussed earlier, documented his knowledge of Osage health around the turn of the nineteenth century. For the most part, Osage women bore three or four children; on rare occasions, the number was as high as five to seven. Osage women nursed their children for two to three years and sometimes longer, during which time they refrained from sexual intercourse. By comparison, early nineteenth-century American women had an average of seven to eight children in their lifetime, meaning the Osage population grew at half the rate of the U.S. population. Hunter observed that during his childhood, the Osage population was fairly evenly divided between males and females, but by the time he had reached adulthood, there were twice as many women as men. This discrepancy was due in large part to men’s participation in dangerous hunting and war expeditions as well as their “frequent exposure to all varieties of temperature and weather; fatigues from long marches; and long abstinence from food, followed by an inordinate indulgence of the appetite; [which] give rise to many diseases, from which death oftentimes ensues.” Women, he noted, rarely died from anything other than old age.

In general, Hunter described the Osages as a healthy people. They bathed daily in warm weather and frequently in cold weather, often followed by applications of bear oil to ward off insects, especially mosquitoes. Tooth decay and other dental maladies were “exceedingly rare.” Men and women often lived to age ninety or beyond, and in their earlier years they retained “their mental and corporeal powers in greater vigour and perfection” than their elderly white counterparts. As discussed earlier, diseases were uncommon amongst the Osages at that time, and those that did afflict them were easily treated.

By the early nineteenth century, the United States had gained possession of the Louisiana Purchase (including the Osage homeland), which was intended to be the new residence of Eastern Native groups pressured, and eventually forced, to move in order to open their land for American development. Hence, other Native nations increasingly encroached on Osage territory. From the north, Osage villages repeatedly faced attacks and competition from the Potawatomis, Iowas, Sacs, Mesquakies, and Kickapoos searching for game and attempting to escape the expanding American population. From the south, the same transpired with the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Shawnees, and Delawares. Cherokee hunting


8. Deafness and blindness were also unusual among the Osages, though Hunter noted “some few” who had lost their eyesight due to smallpox. Remedies for illness included medicinal barks, roots, and herbs as well as animal products, such as bear fat or oil, and frequent bleeding for headaches and congestion. Hunter, Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes Located West of the Mississippi, 205–206, 343, 346, 350–352, 370–371; Francis La Flesche, A Dictionary of the Osage Language, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 109 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932), 159.
As a result, Osage life was under siege. The U.S. removal policy increased the Native population in the trans-Missouri west, which created significant competition for the Osages in the hide trade while also depleting populations of game animals in the region. Native rivals stole Osage horses, attacked hunting parties, and destroyed villages. The Cherokees raided Osage food-storage caches and burned agricultural fields. The prevalence of violence forced some Osage men to remain behind in the summer hunting camps to protect the typical victims of Cherokee attacks: the women, elderly, and children. Violence ruined summer hunts that provided the meat supply to sustain a village through the winter and the hides necessary for trade. Osage warriors struggled to retaliate against the Cherokees, who lived close to Fort Smith and federal troops. The Osages needed to preserve good relations with Americans, the only source for goods and guns. They hoped peace would encourage the United States to stop Cherokee attacks, but federal officials continually demanded Osage land cessions instead.\(^\text{10}\)

By the 1820s, expanding Native and American settlement compromised Osage regional hegemony. Missouri, which earned statehood in 1821, boasted a

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rapidly increasing population that quickly approached the Great and Little Osage villages. Fort Gibson, which opened in 1824 within a few miles of Arkansas Osage villages, served as a clear expression of mounting U.S. military authority in the area. Americans justified the acquisition of Native land by claiming that the “savage” Native lifestyle was unsustainable in the modern world and that it was the duty of “civilized” people—supposedly Americans—to remake Natives into Christian yeoman farmers and save them from what Americans believed was inevitable extinction. In the case of the Osages, this meant men should stop hunting and start farming, eliminating women as the primary cultivators, all of which conflicted with their spiritual understanding of the world. Protestant missionization provided the first sustained “civilizing” effort among the Osages from 1821 until 1835. Though the missionaries made very little headway in gaining Christian converts, their presence further demonstrated U.S. power in the region. Thus, when federal officials demanded land cessions to remove the Osages to Kansas (then part of Indian Territory) in 1825, all Osage leaders, north and south, consented. Loss of people, food, and trade goods undercut Osage efforts to overtly resist colonization.

These challenges endangered health. The Osages had been in contact with Europeans since the late seventeenth century, but it was not until the 1820s that U.S. colonialism significantly undermined Osage survival by increasing both the Native and American populations in the region, leading to land loss and competition for resources while government agents and missionaries attempted to alter every aspect of Osage society. This produced stress, and stress increased susceptibility to disease. Inconsistent access to food (due, for example, to war or drought) contributed to malnutrition at various points, making the Osages vulnerable to infection. At the same time, epidemics inhibited hunting and farming, contributing to further malnutrition and vulnerability to disease. This combination of factors produced overall immunological weakness, allowing multiple illnesses to strike a community in quick succession, increasing mortality. Though surviving some viral diseases such as smallpox would facilitate lifelong immunity, many other illnesses (such as influenza and many bacterial and viral diseases) could repeatedly devastate a community.

Stress, malnutrition, and disease also reduced fertility. Studies have shown that in the nine months following an influenza or measles epidemic, 80 to 94 percent of normal births did not occur. Smallpox disproportionately killed pregnant women or caused miscarriage while also causing many instances of male sterility. In a smallpox-plagued community, “less than a third of the expected offspring of the affected but surviving generation will materialize.” Mental and physical stress also decreased fertility. A healthy diet and body fat are required for successful pregnancy and lactation, meaning malnutrition limited fertility as well. Consequently, population decline continued for years after disease outbreaks.

The Osages were ravaged by disease beginning in the 1820s. In 1822–1823, missionaries noted various “fevers” that seemed to primarily kill the elderly and women. As a result, missionaries noted repeated incidences of child abandonment and infanticide, including “in one instance, a child of two weeks old was buried alive with its mother.” Missionary families adopted several children they found abandoned and “cast into the open prairie to perish.” In Osage cosmology, “until the ceremonial naming the child has no place in the [nation’s] organization, and it is not even regarded as a person.” If a parent abandoned a child prior to naming, it is likely the Osages did not view this as murder. It appears that mothers and families in Osage society could abandon children if they would not be able


12. Various villages, families, and individuals had sporadic contact with Catholic missionaries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1821, the United Foreign Missionary Society (UFMS) established two missions: Union and Harmony. Union Mission was built along the Neosho River, near the Arkansas Osage villages, and Harmony was built along the Marais des Cygnes River just above its junction with the Osage River, near the Great and Little Osage villages. The UFMS accumulated sizable debt in maintaining these missions and failed in converting the Osages to Christianity. After the Treaty of 1825, the Osages eventually moved over 100 miles from the mission sites, increasing costs and further limiting the missions’ impact. In May 1826, management of these missions was transferred to the larger and more financially stable American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). But in 1833, the ABCFM faced the same challenges as its predecessors and closed the Union Mission; Harmony followed suit in 1835. Willard H. Rollings, *Unaffected by the Gospel: The Osage Resistance to the Christian Invasion (1673–1906): A Cultural Victory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 7, 46, 82, 85, 105–106, 112.

13. Though Arkansas Osage leader Claremore signed the treaty, the Osages remained in their lower Verdigris villages until 1839, when removal treaties with eastern nations forced federal officials to provide twenty years of annuities and thousands of head of livestock to motivate the Arkansas Osage to finally move. DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 224–226; Rollings, *The Osage*, 253–256; Rollings, *Unaffected by the Gospel*, 118.


to care for them, in these cases likely due to disease and insecure village life.\textsuperscript{16}

In Kansas, the Osages attempted to reestablish their long-successful agricultural, hunting, and trading economy. However, they struggled to find permanent village sites suitable for farming. As a result, their transitory existence made it difficult for traders to reach them for the first five years after removal, “and this compelled them to suffer a great deal for want of needed provisions.” They eventually selected locations believed to be the most fertile soil on the entire reservation, allowing women to attempt farming for the rest of their time in Kansas. The records of federal agents, travelers, missionaries, and settlers repeatedly document Osage women cultivating corn, pumpkins, squash, beans, and melons with hoes. Even though women continued agricultural production, settlers repeatedly document Osage women cultivating effort farming for the rest of their time in Kansas. The fertile soil on the entire reservation, allowing women to attempt farming for the rest of their time in Kansas. The records of federal agents, travelers, missionaries, and settlers repeatedly document Osage women cultivating corn, pumpkins, squash, beans, and melons with hoes. Even though women continued agricultural production, settlers repeatedly document Osage women cultivating

In the late 1820s, volatile weather, lack of permanent villages, and infrequent trade all compromised food provision and health, presenting opportunities for disease to spread. A dry winter in 1825–1826 was followed by flooding in the spring, a wet summer, and massive flooding in the fall. Missionaries estimated that the Neosho River rose 15 to 20 feet in September, washing away fields and stored crops. In May 1826, influenza emerged, and by August dysentery. In 1827–1828, smallpox attacked. The summer of 1828 brought another crop-destroying drought, and influenza epidemics continued through the remainder of the decade.\textsuperscript{18}

The Osages started settling permanently in their Kansas villages along the Neosho and Verdigris rivers in 1830, and for the next fifteen years, diseases repeatedly struck. In 1831–1832, attacks of “fevers,” choler, and measles combined with scurvy (a vitamin C deficiency indicating an inadequate diet) and a plains-wide smallpox epidemic. “This terrible scourge made a great destruction of life among them, and in a few months almost decimated the nation” and so weakened survivors that they could not hunt. In response the federal government used annuity moneys to buy rations for the Osages and provided smallpox vaccinations for roughly one-third of the nation in the late summer and early fall of 1832. However, the vaccination effort was poorly planned and ill timed. The doctor struggled to find enough vaccine matter and could not contact all of the Osages because many were on their summer hunt. It is important to note that federal officials never provided systematic or preventive vaccinations, nor were vaccinations ever provided to all of the Osage people. Massive flooding in 1833 was followed by extreme heat and drought in 1834 that coincided with a cholera outbreak that killed an estimated 300 to 400 people. More cholera outbreaks continued through the 1840s, often as the result of contact with Americans traveling across the plains. The Osages died at higher rates from cholera than did other Native groups in the same area because of their densely populated villages (ranging from several hundred to sometimes more than 1,000 residents), where individuals confined to a small geographical area were repeatedly exposed to the illness-causing bacteria. On the Kansas reservation, the unprecedented (in Osage history) close proximity of Osage villages to one another limited their long-standing method of placing waste on the outskirts of the village. Starting in the 1830s, the outskirts


of multiple villages overlapped, contributing to poor sanitation and disease virulence.\textsuperscript{19}

To survive, the Osages became an increasingly mobile people. To limit the impact of disease, they disbanded and moved away from infected areas, individuals, and overland trails. Osage communities also depended more and more on hunting, and thus mobility, for subsistence and trade. On the Kansas reservation, federal officials and Catholic missionaries wanted the Osages to abandon hunting for American-style farming. But the climate did not consistently support agriculture—even for white settlers—and hunting provided a more reliable income and an escape from the efforts of agents and missionaries to change the Osage culture and religion. In the especially harsh and frigid winter of 1855–1856, a Catholic missionary wrote of the Osages: “Being well housed in their winter towns with an abundance of fuel to keep themselves comfortable, having plenty of dry meat for daily use, and being most all well supplied with a large amount of buffalo robes for trade, they had nothing to envy of their white neighbors, and winter found them all prepared for it.”\textsuperscript{20}

To expand their economic opportunities in Kansas, the Osages also opened trade with the Comanches. The Comanches and their Kiowa allies had long excluded Osage hunters from access to the sizable bison herds west of the Arkansas River along the salt plains. In the 1830s, the Comanches and Kiowas had limited access to American trade goods because of warfare with the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Texas settlers; they sought


\textsuperscript{20} The first sustained Catholic missionary effort to the Osages began in April 1847 when Father John Schoenmakers arrived and “took formal possession of the two log houses put up by the Indian Department for the use of the mission” in present-day St. Paul, Kansas. On May 10, 1847, he opened the Osage Manual Labor School for boys. On October 10, 1847, the Sisters of Loretto opened the female branch of the school. This remained a Catholic mission site even after Osage removal to Indian Territory in the early 1870s. ARCIA, 1848, 166; Ponziglione, “The Osages and Father John Schoenmakers,” 81, 163.
peace with the Osages in order to open trade. The Osages then served as middlemen between the lucrative Comanche trade system and U.S. traders. The Osages would take their annuity goods or purchase merchandise from U.S. traders—including such items as kitchen utensils, blankets, guns, gunpowder, and lead—and exchange them for Comanche mules, horses, or pelts. In 1847 alone, the Osages exchanged $24,000 worth of goods for 1,500 head of Comanche livestock worth $60,000. With this trade, the Osages gained undisturbed access to large bison herds, providing another avenue for subsistence and profitable trade. Unfortunately, this trade ended in 1853 when a treaty between the U.S. government and the Comanches, Kiowas, and Apaches provided annuities and direct access to American goods to these nations. The treaty eliminated the critical trade income and led to renewed competition and warfare over the western bison herds, which undercut Osage economic stability.

Loss of the Comanche trade coincided with the advent of grasshopper plagues on the reservation. Again the Osages used mobility to try to alleviate the impact of infestations. In the summer of 1854, grasshoppers descended on southern Kansas—the first time in Osage memory that such an infestation had occurred—devouring dried meat, cached produce, and agricultural fields. The Osages packed up and left immediately for their hunt, with some bands headed to the Platte River and others toward Turkey Creek’s junction with the Cimarron River. The latter hunting ground in particular had plentiful wood; water; pasture for horses; and large bison herds, yielding a successful hunt. In the spring of 1855, grasshoppers started hatching, forcing Osage women to abandon planting their crops so everyone could leave the villages and commence hunting. In this year, the Osages again had a successful hunt, obtaining a large amount of game and rare peltries that brought high trade prices. When another grasshopper swarm arrived in August 1866, the Osages immediately departed on another hunt to avoid the pests.

But mobility could not overcome the scale of colonial disruption or fully protect the Osages from disease. In exchange for land cessions, federal officials negotiating the 1825 and 1839 treaties had promised the Osages twenty years of annuity payments. These payments were expected to arrive before the winter hunts, but they were often late, with devastating results. For example, delayed annuities in the fall of 1851 prevented the Osages from obtaining arms and ammunition; thus, they had to rely on limited credit from traders for supplies. They returned early from the hunt in a “destitute condition” with little protection from the weather and few provisions for the winter. Missionaries noted that the winter of 1851 was particularly severe, followed by a rapid transition to almost midsummer heat in March. That winter and the following spring, measles, typhoid fever, whooping cough, and scurvy killed at least 1,000 people. Drought, floods, and grasshoppers worked independently or in concert to destroy crops and gatherable foods throughout the 1850s, and periodic successful hunts were unable to stem the multiple waves of smallpox and other contagious diseases that killed hundreds at a time.

While out on the winter hunt in November 1854, Osage warriors came upon a small, temporary Comanche village, and in light of the renewed conflicts between the two nations, the Osages attacked. The Comanches, though few in numbers, had a subversive plan.

At that time [the Comanches] happened to have in their camps a poor man afflicted with a most loathsome and contagious distemper resembling leprosy, and they agree to sacrifice this unfortunate to avenge themselves of the Osages. The poor Indian being in the very last stage of his sickness, not able to survive but few days, was then painted all over with vermilion and dressed up in rich style as chiefs are accustomed to be buried. They place by him his arms, his pipe, and a good supply of tobacco, their object being to entice their enemies to rob the sick man of all he had, knowing that by so doing they would most certainly contract the same sickness, and this by gradually developing in the coming spring would most likely cause the death of many of them! This really most barbarious [sic] and wicked stratagem proved in due time terribly successful, and produced the intended result.

It was smallpox, not leprosy, that killed an estimated 400 people in the spring of 1855. In the wake of the epidemic,
Neosho Agent Andrew Dorn organized another round of vaccinations for an estimated 2,000 people.24

It appears that there was some debate among the Osages as to the causes of these epidemics and how they should be treated. Osage doctors had long used a variety of herbal and ritual remedies, with great success. But repeated outbreaks and substantial death rates created opportunities for Christian rituals and western medical practices to enter Osage life. The Osages had an inclusive spirituality, meaning they could add new spiritual practices to their existing ceremonial structure in hopes that participation in all of these rituals, new and old, would contribute to success in a variety of contexts. Hence, some people participated in Catholic rituals such as baptism, often while on their sickbeds, hoping for a cure. Sometimes this approach seemed to be successful. For example, in 1850 a missionary baptized a woman who seemed near death, and within two hours she had fully recovered. The next time the missionary returned to the woman’s village, parents gave him twenty-five children to baptize, hoping it would protect them from disease. At first the Catholic missionaries appeared to hold spiritual power that protected them from disease, but illnesses at the mission school and among the missionaries themselves eventually dispelled this notion. In addition, the missionaries, beginning in the 1850s, annually distributed $100 in medicine to the Osages and often nursed the sick. Missionary medical care was not welcomed by the established Osage doctors, who often attributed diseases to the presence of missionaries. Osage doctors argued that missionaries intentionally caused disease and did not know how to provide proper treatment or disrupted the Osage doctors’ power over the malevolent spiritual forces credited with causing disease. It seems that the Osage people understood that new and old diseases were killing them in unprecedented numbers, and they utilized all the medical care available to them, both Native and non-Native, medicinal and ritual. In most instances, they turned first to their local doctors and then to the missionaries for assistance. Unfortunately, both forms of medical care proved insufficient to stem the tide of epidemic death.25

The particularly virulent years corresponded, not coincidentally, with the arrival of American settlers. As early as March 1853—more than a year before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which officially created Kansas Territory—an Indian appropriations bill included an authorization for the president to enter into negotiations with “Indian tribes west of the States of Missouri and Iowa for the purpose of securing the assent of said tribes to the settlement of the citizens of the United States upon the lands claimed by said Indians, and for the purpose of extinguishing the title of said Indian tribes in whole or in part to said lands.” To eager speculators and squatters, it seemed clear that Native removal from Kansas was inevitable, and by the time Congress debated the Kansas-Nebraska bill a year later, Natives faced significant encroachment from emigrating Americans. One missionary noted, “Squatters were not very particular about keeping in the lines and would pick up claims wherever they liked, intruding frequently on Indian lands, putting up houses, and opening fields wherever they got a notion, not caring about the limits of the Osage reservation.” By 1854 it was primarily settlers, rather than the federal government, who took the lead in colonizing Native people in Kansas. Though Americans certainly viewed expansion as “manifest destiny” that strengthened the republic and nobly advanced civilization, it was more likely a desire to profit from newly available resources that motivated settler encroachment. These settlers then established territorial and state governments that shifted power away from Natives and federal officials to themselves. Increased American settlement threatened Osage survival in Kansas. Throughout the 1850s missionaries and government agents documented settlers coming into the region daily, disregarding reservation boundaries, building homes, tilling fields, and destroying game.26


The challenges facing the Osages only worsened in the 1860s. A severe drought in 1860 resulted in the Neosho River having “no water to be proud of. . . . Here and there for a distance of a quarter of a mile, the river was perfectly dry, a thing no one remembered of having happened before.” During this drought, the majority of Osage hunting bands deserted the plains and instead sought game along the Arkansas and its tributaries.

In so doing, to use a western expression, they struck a real bonanza, for the dry season having compelled most all kind of game to come down to quench their thirst in the waters of the big rivers, the Osages had an excellent hunting season, they procured an abundance of meat and had an unexpected harvest of rare furs. Hence this drought which proves so ruinous to the new settlers as well as to the emigrants then on their way to Pike’s Peak, was rather I might say beneficial to the Indians.27

The good news was short-lived. Dietary reliance almost exclusively on meat resulted in scurvy striking the nation the following spring, killing people in every village.28

Since their arrival in Kansas, the Osages had battled another disease: alcoholism. Traders from western Missouri frequently exchanged whiskey for horses, goods, and annuities. Once American settlement in Kansas expanded, so did the alcohol trade. Agents, missionaries, and Osage leaders lamented the widespread access to “intoxicating and adulterated spirits”; although various state and federal laws prohibited Native access to alcohol, enforcement was virtually nonexistent. Alcohol,

especially when combined with malnutrition—as it often was for the Osages—produced a wide range of maladies that could affect the blood, nervous system, and major organs including the heart and liver. These effects only weakened the immune system and made people more vulnerable to other illnesses. In many years, alcohol was responsible for as many, if not more, deaths than were communicable diseases. For example, during the 1860 drought, the majority of American settlers “had to live on a half ration, for they had raised no crops of any kind. . . . Many of them had to travel over 2 miles to procure a barrel of water.” However, the Osages enjoyed their “bonanza” hunt, and desperate settlers traded whiskey for Osage dried meat throughout the winter. “Once intoxicated, [many Osage men] would not mind lying down for the night either in the woods or on the high prairies, exposed to the sudden changes of the weather without any shelter against the terrible Kansas blizzards. And more than once in the morning some poor Indians would be found frozen to death or in such a miserable condition that they would die after a few days.”

Of course, the reasons for Native alcohol consumption were complex. One major factor was that throughout this period, Americans—especially in the trans-Missouri west and along the overland trails—drank in large quantities, so Native consumption was hardly unusual in the broader American, and certainly regional, culture of the time. There is widespread debate on whether biological, psychological, or a combination of factors lead any individual to abuse alcohol. There is ample evidence,


Eastman’s map of Kansas and Nebraska territories shows “the location of the Indian Reserves according to the Treaties of 1854.” Made between 1854 and 1856, it situates the Osage reservation between the state of Missouri and Comanche and Kiowa lands to the west. The map also implied that areas north of the Osage reservation were “unassigned,” which hastened settler encroachment.
however, that social and economic upheaval correspond with increases in alcohol consumption, and the Osages clearly faced monumental challenges and changes to their lives in Kansas. Meanwhile, federal agents and missionaries constantly preached temperance, which led one Osage leader to ask,

We have seen many buried because they loved and drank fire-water. One thing astonishes us. We are ignorant; we are not acquainted with books; we never heard the words of the Great Spirit: but the whites, who know books, who have understanding, and who have heard the commandments of the Great Spirit,—why do they drink this fire-water? Why do they sell it to us? Or why do they bring it to us, while they know that God sees them [emphasis in the original]?  

For the white traders, the alcohol exchange produced profits, sometimes in exchange for annuities but also in terms of whiskey’s relative cheapness compared with Native-supplied meat, horses, and hides. In 1847, the Osages traded 500 mules (which they obtained in trade with the Comanches) for 500 gallons of whiskey, meaning the traders earned an astonishing $40 per gallon in this exchange. At the same time, it was widely known that alcohol destabilized Native communities and produced loss of life. All of these effects aided colonialism and increased American power at the expense of Native power.30

Osage leaders—well aware of U.S. political instability—retreated across the plains to the mountains when the Civil War began and eventually settled in temporary villages in Indian Territory along the Cimarron and Washita rivers. After completing a successful hunt in late 1862, the Osages returned to the region surrounding the Osage Mission in southeastern Kansas. Situated in a borderland between the warring factions, the Osage reservation attracted roaming regiments and robbers who plundered or burned villages, agricultural fields, homes, and horse herds throughout the war. The Osages remained relatively neutral during the Civil War, concerned primarily with subsistence rather than taking sides.31

Survival proved difficult throughout the 1860s. In 1862, a drought ruined crops, and measles plagued Osage students at the mission school. An illicit cattle trade carried on throughout the war disrupted bison herds, forcing the Osages to travel 100 miles beyond their usual hunting grounds to find game. In the spring of 1866, floods washed away crops, followed by drought in the summer and another grasshopper infestation. Competition over access to bison herds led to warfare between the Osages and the Arapahoes and their plains Native allies, beginning in the fall of 1867. The Osages lost hundreds of horses in this conflict and failed to procure meat and hides sufficient to support the nation. The following spring, they lost their crops to another drought and had to trade all the horses and household items they could spare for food. The Osages were starving.32

To make matters worse, before, during, and after the Civil War, white settlers stole hundreds of Osage horses. Sometimes Osage men would reclaim their livestock, prompting the squatters to complain to state and federal officials that they were victims of Osage violence. Neosho Agent G. C. Snow reported in 1867,

Since the war, horse stealing has been carried on to an alarming extent. There is not a horse lost by these new settlers but what the “Osages have got it.” The people of Neosho, Labette, Wilson, Greenwood, Woodson, and Allen counties claim that they have lost about 80 head of horses this spring and summer. A large portion of these “horses” were Osage ponies, bought of irresponsible traders, renegade Indians, and thevening white men for a mere trifle. Many of these “horses” stray away from their pretended owners and go back to the Indians. Most that are stolen are taken by white men who go to the Indian camps, so the theft may be charged to the Indians.33


This systematic theft was incredibly destructive to an Osage economy reliant on horses for hunting, trade, and subsistence.34

During the Civil War, federal and state officials remained committed to removal policy and repeatedly tried to persuade the Osages to relinquish their Kansas reservation and move to Indian Territory. In 1863, the Osages needed additional economic support to survive and agreed to cede the eastern portion of the Kansas reservation and move their villages farther west onto a “diminished reservation.” This treaty promised renewed annuity payments to compensate for the increasing difficulty the Osages had in subsisting, due to encroachment and the war. The treaty languished in Congress, and in 1865, the Osages agreed to another version of the treaty, which was finally ratified in 1866.35

The delay of the official treaty until 1865 and funding for Osage removal until 1867 only aggravated settler encroachment, which rapidly increased after the initial negotiations in 1863. In 1867, Agent Snow reported American squatters on the diminished reservation. He visited the nearly seventy families and ordered them to leave, but they said they would not move until he had sufficient arms to force them, rightly arguing that state officials supported this settlement, meaning the Osages and their federal agents had no real authority in the matter. Hostilities reached such proportions in 1867 that “four companies of ‘militia’ have been organized on the border by the State authority, who are threatening the Indians with ‘extermination.’” By 1869, 500 families made illegal claims on the “diminished reservation.” These squatters


35. Rollings, Unaffected by the Gospel, 164–166.
built houses, began farming, stole Osage crops, allowed their livestock to graze in Osage fields, and prevented Osage women from gathering timber on “their claims.”

In 1867, federal and state officials agreed the Osages needed to leave Kansas altogether, and in a series of illegal negotiations involving bribery and threats, the Osages “agreed” to a treaty that transferred all of their Kansas reservation land directly to the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston Railroad. Heated debates erupted in Congress over control of public lands, which prevented treaty ratification. Finally, in July 1870, Congress simply added provisions to the Indian Appropriation Bill to buy the Osage land and to provide for their removal to Indian Territory. The new reservation, situated inside Cherokee lands, required an additional three years of negotiations to ensure Osage title. Finally, in the spring of 1872, the Osages rebuilt their villages in Indian Territory.

Needless to say, the Osage population in Kansas dramatically declined. Estimates indicate that in 1820, prior to moving to Kansas, the Osages numbered 10,000 to 12,000. By 1850, the total was an estimated 8,000. In 1860, the population was near 3,500 and in 1870 about 3,000. When the Osages were removed from Kansas, it is believed that one in four died within the first year in Indian Territory. Throughout this period, there were years of population growth and increasing birth rates.

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37. Rollings, Unaffected by the Gospel, 166–168, 171.
but children were particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and epidemics, and overall the population continued to decline through the 1880s.  

One missionary visited the new reservation in July 1874 and reported that “the majority of this nation still depend on the buffalos which they hunt on the far western plains. This last winter they had a very good hunt, killing over ten thousand buffalos; so that altogether their condition is not bad.” Again, this good news was short-lived. Though men continued hunting through 1876, the bison herds dwindled, and warfare between plains groups and the U.S. Army disrupted Osage hunting parties. In the 1870s, women also continued cultivation, but drought and grasshoppers repeatedly devastated this food source. By the late 1870s, the people were starving because the subsistence and trade activities that had sustained Osage life since at least the early eighteenth century no longer existed. Thanks to tribal leaders’ activism (which local Indian agents opposed and attempted to thwart), beginning in 1880, each individual Osage annually received four payments from interest earned on the sale of their Kansas reservation land, finally putting an end to starvation and population decline.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Osage life had changed more dramatically than perhaps at any other time in their history. During French and Spanish colonization, the Osages had been the dominant power in the Arkansas River Valley and had enjoyed prosperous and healthy lives. The advent of U.S. colonization, however, changed everything by disrupting virtually every aspect of their lives and endangering their health. The federal government removed eastern Natives onto Osage land, leading to violence and economic decline. Then the Osages were also removed and confined to a new reservation home. Americans—including missionaries, overland travelers, and settlers—moved into the region in large numbers. They too were competition for resources; they brought disease and destroyed Osage property.

Nevertheless, the Osages found ways to preserve their culture and people through a reliance on mobile hunting that facilitated survival in a drought-, flood-, and grasshopper-plagued environment. But encroachment continued, bison herds disappeared, and farming failed, allowing disease and malnutrition to reduce the population. European contact did not fundamentally alter Osage life; instead the scope and scale of U.S. colonialism obliterated the Osage population and dismantled the way of life that had supported the Osages since before contact.
