



An 1877 photograph of We-He-Sa-Ki, or Hard Rope, one of the most impressive figures in Osage history.

We-He-Sa-Ki (Hard Rope): Osage Band Chief and Diplomat, 1821–1883

by Isaias McCaffery

Just north of Independence, Kansas, lies the junction of the Elk and Verdigris Rivers in a wide alluvial floodplain. There the rich black soil is cultivated intensely for corn, wheat, and soy—and scattered across the agrarian landscape are creaking oil derricks that rise and fall in lazy defiance of the prevailing stillness. The spot is a seasonal beacon for migrating Canada geese, and at dusk the white-tailed deer depart from the shelter of the cottonwoods to forage in the open breeze. When the temperatures plummet, winter brings juvenile eagles to two large ponds just a quarter mile away up the forested course of the Elk, and passing motorists on Highway 75 pause to watch the big black birds seize silver-bodied fish through breaks in the dazzling white ice. Nothing betrays the fact that one of the last Kansas towns of the once mighty and renowned Osage Nation was situated here, administered by a man who nearly rose to the office of principal chief before his death on an Oklahoma reservation. In the autumn of 1870, the village’s inhabitants rode slowly westward into the Flint Hills, never to return to the familiar lodges that clustered along the shaded waters. Sun-baked mud from wattle-and-daub walls once lay in clumps among the row crops planted by white settlers, but a century and a half of disc tilling has long since obliterated any visible signs of occupancy. At the entrance to the single gravel road leading to the forks, a hand-lettered purple sign peppered by buckshot warns any curious passerby to “keep out.”¹

The infant We-He-Sa-Ki of the Heart-Stays band (the *No-Tse-Wa-Spe*) resided in his parents’ home village near the meeting of the Marais des Cygnes, Marmaton, and Osage Rivers in present-day Vernon County, Missouri. While still a toddler, he and his family joined a Native American exodus triggered by the Osage Treaty of 1825, which propelled woodland-based elements of the northern Osages onto the rolling grasslands of Kansas Territory. During the mid-

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1. “Recalls the Osages,” *Daily Republican* (Cherryvale, KS), February 5, 1916. E. B. White recalled the village of “Hard Rope” as being “on the west side of the [Verdigris] river above the mouth of the Elk river.” Adolph P. Wildgrube, a resident who attended a one-room schoolhouse at Gravel Hill—a half mile north of the fork of the Verdigris and Elk—described the surviving nineteenth-century features of the area before his death in 2012 at the age of ninety-three. Like E. B. White, he could locate vestiges of Osage hunting trails and pioneer wagon ruts at river fords.

States, formalizing the final loss of the Missouri and Arkansas territories that had been home for generations. Violence, disease, and the depletion of game contributed to a deepening emergency that made removal a strategic if not a desirable option.⁴ Even before Congress ratified the treaty, several villages had departed from the banks of the Osage and Marais de Cygnes Rivers for safer quarters in Kansas and Oklahoma. Shielded (for a time) from the colonial aggression of white settlers, these locations offered continued unobstructed access to high plains hunting. In 1834, Osage holdouts who clung to their Missouri homes died of cholera by the hundreds, and after this additional trauma, the mourning survivors joined their kin who were already established along the Neosho and Verdigris Rivers in southeast Kansas.⁵

The life of We-He-Sa-Ki (Hard Rope) was shaped by the challenges imposed by rapid cultural, economic, technological, and social change over a half century that placed the very survival of the Osage Nation in jeopardy. His sound leadership decisions reflected priorities and personality traits that establish him as one of the most impressive figures in Osage history. The composite image left by nineteenth-century documents is consistent. What emerges is an articulate figure who resorted to diplomacy

greater mobility and trade guns, they controlled the buffalo grounds of western Kansas and Oklahoma by the 1700s (Rollings, *The Osage*, 101). The Osages still held a commanding position on the salt prairie west of the Arkansas River in 1806, according to western explorer William Dunbar; see "Observations," *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser* (Washington, DC), November 12, 1806. Numbering around ten thousand during the early eighteenth century, the Osages had the power to trade with the French on their own terms and to deny neighboring Indians access to European imports. The Osage relationship with France was not one of colonial domination but more a mutually beneficial partnership. Kathleen Duval, "'A Good Relationship, & Commerce': The Native Political Economy of the Arkansas River Valley," *Early American Studies* 1 (Spring 2003): 80–81, 88.

4. Mathews, *The Osages*, 518–19; Tai S. Edwards, "Disruption and Disease: The Osage Struggle to Survive in the Nineteenth-Century Trans-Mississippi West," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 36 (Winter 2013–2014): 222, 233. Edwards demonstrated how U.S. colonization played a central role in the deterioration of Osage life after 1800. Escalating disease rates, competition from displaced eastern Indians, mounting destruction of natural resources, and the illegal squatter invasion of the remaining Osage lands had catastrophic effects. The previous resilience to the effects of crop failure brought on by drought, flood, and grasshoppers was reduced with lethal consequences. In addition to settler colonialism, Levi Gahman adds the feminist identification of "hegemonic masculinity" at work in the violent dispossession of the Wah-Zha-Zhi. See Levi Gahman, "White Settler Society as Monster: Rural Southeast Kansas, Ancestral Osage (Wah-Zha-Zhi) Territories, and the Violence of Forgetting," *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 48 (March 2016): 314–15.

5. Jeremy Neely, *The Border between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,

before violence, showed skill in negotiating with the formidable power of the United States, bargained tenaciously in the best interests of his constituents, and resisted the pressures of assimilation to preserve traditional Osage folkways. We-He-Sa-Ki belonged to a generation of chiefs who assiduously maintained the illusion of embracing the white man's agenda, often going through the motions of accepting the idea of transitioning to American education, social institutions, agriculture, and governance while limiting substantive change within their community. As they had done successfully with earlier religious missionaries, the Wah-Zha-Zhi gave white observers just enough superficial evidence of "reform" and cooperation to suggest progress toward Indian acculturation—reducing pressures in the short term until Anglo approval subsided amid growing evidence of delay and resistance. Then "progressive" hopes would flare again as renewed Osage expressions of support for "civilization" encouraged the whites to see what they wanted to see. While engaged in such posturing, the Wah-Zha-Zhi leaders wrested whatever material and policy concessions they could secure for their people from government officials.⁶

Extended hunting expeditions on the plains of western Kansas and Oklahoma would have generated some of the most important early experiences in the life of young We-He-Sa-Ki. Like their cousins the Kansa Indians, the Osages embarked on two extended buffalo hunts each year, transporting virtually the entire community in seasonal migrations.⁷ Poaching by rival Indians and whites destroyed vital game resources in eastern Kansas, making the harvest of cured buffalo meat essential for community survival. The sale of horses and hides collected during expeditions onto the prairie provided further incentive to travel, as did the peace and freedom of vast grass-

2007), 20. For the Osage Treaty of 1825, see Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties: 1778–1883* (Mattituck, NY: Amereon House, 1972), 217–21.

6. Rollings, *The Osage*, 215. The Osages resisted being Christianized by the Jesuits but participated in those elements of Catholicism that aligned with traditional native spirituality. Many mission priests greatly overestimated the actual extent of conversion. See Willard H. Rollings, *Unaffected by the Gospel: Osage Resistance to the Christian Invasion 1673–1906* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 155–56.

7. William E. Unrau. *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673–1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 38–39. Alanson Skinner described the selection of Kansa buffalo hunting leaders, the maintenance of discipline during expeditions, and the eventual distribution of meat—all echoed in Osage practice. Alanson Skinner, "Societies of the Iowa, Kansa and Ponca Indians," in *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 11, part 9 (New York: Order of the Trustees, 1915), 746–47.

covered expanses. The interminable troubles generated by encroaching white frontiersmen and displaced eastern Indians were left far behind while a hunt was under way. In 1817, a raid by hostile warriors on the village of Chief Claremore demonstrated the peril of leaving women, children, and elders unprotected at home. The so-called Battle of Claremore's Mound was a slaughter, and as a result, nearly all of the remaining Osages would participate in future excursions onto the high plains. This practice left unattended property and crops vulnerable to theft or vandalism, but the risk was far preferable to losing loved ones in undefended villages.⁸

The French journalist Victor Tixier joined a buffalo hunt in 1839–40, observing the vital responsibilities of the boys [or *kangas*] employed as camp lookouts, messengers, and pony herders. As future warriors who might oppose Pawnee, Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, and Wichita opponents on the southern plains, male children mastered the formidable riding, tracking, and navigation skills that later earned We-He-Sa-Ki acclamation as a U.S. Army scout. Tixier visited the Heart-Stays village along Labette Creek in western Neosho County, translating the name of the inhabitants as "Coeurs-Tranquilles." This appellation (a solid Gallic translation of "No-Tse-Wa-Spe") referred to people whose heartbeats remain steady and are not elevated in the face of danger. Tixier may well have met the teenaged future chief, who was probably a relative of Mo'n-Sho'n-Shpshe-Mo'Tn—the presiding band chieftain, whose name could be translated as Crawls-upon-the-Earth. The Heart-Stays settlement of the 1840s and 1850s was positioned about five miles away from the Neosho Mission on the opposing western side of the Neosho River near present-day Oswego. This distance served to insulate We-He-Sa-Ki from the full religious and cultural proselytizing efforts of Jesuit missionaries and teachers. Although he grew into a patient and courteous diplomat when interacting with whites, We-He-Sa-Ki would never master the English language, learn to read and write, adopt Euro-American-style clothing, or embrace the Christian god.⁹

8. Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 66–67. Only well into the twentieth century did deer return to southeast Kansas, having been hunted to extinction there. See also Victor Tixier, *Tixier's Travels on the Osage Prairies*, ed. John Francis McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 140.

9. Tixier, *Tixier's Travels*, 259; Mathews, *The Osages*, 597. The nineteenth-century Osages incorporated calico (rough cotton), linen, wool, and other trade textiles into their attire, but photographs from the

The 1850s proved to be a decade of horrifying pestilence, featuring virulent attacks of typhoid fever, smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, cholera, and other unnamed diseases. The coming of renewed epidemics coincided with a massive surge of white homesteaders into "Bleeding Kansas," and the two events were surely connected. The compaction of dispersed Indian settlements into more confined spaces resulted in poorer sanitation, and greater population density facilitated the transmission of Old World diseases. In 1850, Osage children faced a terrible plague of measles that took the lives of eight hundred boys and girls, according to Jesuit missionary Father John Schoenmakers. An outbreak of scurvy followed with "alarming effects," killing at least forty adults near the Neosho Mission. Typhoid claimed another eight hundred Osage lives in 1852 alone, and in 1854, smallpox carried away another four hundred.¹⁰ In the sweltering heat of the following June, the Leavenworth *Kansas Weekly Herald's* editor reported that "small pox was killing up the Osage Indians to an alarming degree. During the short space of two weeks near two hundred died." Burning with fever and covered in painful sores, the afflicted sought relief in the cool water of creeks and streams—where many expired.¹¹

The succession of We-He-Sa-Ki to chieftain of the Heart-Stays band occurred at some point during this apocalyptic period, likely hastened by the numerous deaths of tribal elders. Historian Willard H. Rollings documented the breakdown of the traditional Osage political system during the first half of the nineteenth century. Extreme loss of life necessitated the ascension of the matrilineal relatives of former chiefs because no direct male descendants remained alive.¹² The psychological impact of these losses on the Osage Nation is unrecorded, but mortality rates approximated those generated by the bubonic plague in fourteenth-century Europe, an experience that had a shattering effect across the continent.

1870s and 1880s show We-He-Sa-Ki and other full-blood chiefs wearing traditional clothing styles of Native American manufacture. Male heads remained shaved except for a scalp-lock in this period—in contrast to Cheyennes, Comanches, Arapahos, and other "longhairs."

10. Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 238, 240–41; "Great and Little Osage," *Humboldt (KS) Union*, July 1, 1876.

11. "Smallpox among the Indians," *Kansas Weekly Herald* (Leavenworth), June 15, 1855. At the same time as the epidemics, Nebraska grasshoppers "fell like snow" near the Neosho Mission, obliterating Osage crops. "Whispers of History," *Daily Commonwealth* (Topeka, KS), June 17, 1877.

12. Rollings, *The Osage*, 277; Edwards, "Disruption and Disease," 224–25. Mobility was one strategy for resisting disease, but white missionaries and officials promoted sedentary life as more civilized.

The confirmation of a new Osage leader involved ritual recitations, songs, gift-giving, and sometimes symbolic tattooing. A band chief's authority came from the consent of the governed, and an unwise or unjust headman soon had no followers. Although whites would later label We-He-Sa-Ki as "Hard Rope the war chief," this description is erroneous. According to ethnologist Francis La Flesche (a member of the Omaha Nation), such hereditary elders were "men of peace, not war. Their concern and responsibility was for the health, life and general well-being of the Osage people." Evidence indicates that We-He-Sa-Ki was faithful and conscientious in bearing this burden, consistently minimizing any tendency to resort to warfare and maintaining a committed following in his community.¹³

After marrying a woman named Moh-Shon-Tse-e-Tah (Born on the Earth) and fathering at least one surviving son during the 1850s, the Heart-Stays chieftain faced a critical test of his leadership in the spring of 1861. The eruption of civil war among the whites forced Native Americans to choose sides in a high-stakes struggle that few Osages understood.¹⁴ Eager to curry support on its western frontier, the Richmond government dispatched Commissioner Albert Pike to bind the western tribes into an alliance with the South—and thereby prevent Abraham Lincoln's administration from brokering a similar pact. The Confederates invited Osage headmen to a grand council at Tahlequah that promised feasting, dancing, and the possible bestowal of gifts. Canny Cherokee negotiators demanded and eventually collected \$70,000 in southern gold, but We-He-Sa-Ki's people received only elegant words and platitudes. The solemn ceremonial atmosphere, the glib assurances of the leonine General Pike, and the compliant example of the more acculturated Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole representatives swayed a majority of Osage delegates. Confederate agents flattered and complimented the dignified chieftains, who sat stiffly arrayed in their most regal attire and dance paint. At the close of the council, nearly all these men signed a forty-five-article treaty accepting client status under the protection



We-He-Sa-Ki, pictured here in 1874, was one of only four Osage leaders to reject the entreaties of Confederate Indian Commissioner Albert Pike in early 1861. This pronorthern minority used diplomacy and military events to gradually win back 80 percent of the people for the Union, all while maintaining cordial relationships with those bands that continued to serve the South. Later in the war, Hard Rope successfully defeated pro-Confederate guerillas in southeastern Kansas, but this did not prevent the seizure of additional Osage lands after the war. Courtesy of the Osage Nation Museum, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

of the Confederate States of America. Only We-He-Sa-Ki, Wa-Cabe-Shinkah (Little Bear), Chetopa (Four Lodges), and one Little Osage delegate rejected the agreement. Unmoved by what seemed to be empty gestures, the four holdouts voiced their doubts, refused to make their marks on the paper, collected their horses, and rode north. Shortly thereafter, Wa-Cabe-Shinkah enrolled in the Ninth Kansas Infantry (Union), and We-He-Sa-Ki would soon make his own unique contribution to northern arms. Knowing the power of Washington from long experience, these men were right to question the comparative vitality, resources, and staying power of the ragged southern confederacy. How could such a shaky entity protect them from encircling enemies with no actual troops or matériel available to reinforce paper promises? Never completely severing ties with their fellow Osages who had signed

13. Francis La Flesche, *The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche*, ed. Garrick A. Bailey (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 275; Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 41. For example, James Edwin Finney wrongly asserted that "Hard Rope, who was a member of Pawhuska's band, was the war chief of the Osage tribe." James Edwin Finney, as told to Joseph B. Thoburn, "Reminiscences of a Trader in the Osage County," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33 (Summer 1955): 155.

14. Louis F. Burns, *The Osage Annuity Rolls of 1878* (Fallbrook, CA: self-published, 1981), no pagination.



Severe food shortages led We-He-Sa-Ki to answer General Philip Sheridan's call for Indian scouts for the army's 1868 winter campaign against the Cheyennes and Arapahos. Although there are varying accounts of the resulting Washita Campaign, led by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer, all agree that the Osage presence proved invaluable. This undated photograph shows Custer with a group of Osage Scouts. Courtesy of the Frank F. Finney, Sr. Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society.

the Pike Treaty, the pronorthern minority allowed gentle diplomacy and unfolding events to gradually win back 80 percent of the people for the Union. Only portions of the Claremore and Black Dog bands remained active in the service of the South—and We-He-Sa-Ki maintained ties of brotherhood with even those factions. An Osage was an Osage, regardless of passing “white politics.” The wisdom of correctly predicting the winning side in the Civil War—at a time when doing so bucked the prevailing tribal establishment—confirmed a growing impression that We-He-Sa-Ki possessed a superior intellect. The decision to back the Union would redound to the future interests of the Osage people by preventing a punitive reckoning with Washington at the end of the war. Effectively helping to forestall a serious political split within the Osage Nation was also a noteworthy accomplishment. A rising figure in tribal government, We-He-Sa-Ki accepted an appointment as “primary counselor” to the hereditary principal chief of the Osages—Pawhuska (Pah-Hiu-Skah, or Little White Hair VI).¹⁵

15. Burns, *History of The Osage People*, 261; Mathews, *The Osages*, 635–37. Later the Confederates promised the Osages \$17,000 in gold, but

By the summer of 1862, the tide of Osage alliance had shifted decidedly toward the soldiers in blue. Union forces repelled a threat posed by Cherokee Confederate Colonel Stand Watie’s mounted rifles, and afterward, a mixed body of four hundred Osages and Cherokees switched sides and enlisted with northern forces encamped near Fort Scott.¹⁶ Sixty miles to the southwest, the Heart-Stays people’s relationship with Union troops stationed at Humboldt became close, with frequent friendly contact. Major Willoughby Doudna, the commander of the Ninth Kansas Cavalry, was an Ohio-born Quaker and a member of the Powhatan Agricultural Association that had founded Chetopa, Kansas, in 1857. After the war erupted, pro-southern irregulars destroyed the homesteads of local members of the Society of Friends, forcing antislavery Quaker families to flee the region. This bitter experience likely played a role in Doudna’s abandonment of his forefathers’ pacifism to take up the carbine, pistol, and saber. Not content merely to attack white settlers, some pro-southern guerrillas laid

waste to the corn and bean crops of the Big Hill, Heart-Stays, and White Hair bands, destroying Osage livestock, lodges, and possessions during the Indians’ absence for the summer buffalo hunt. A vocal abolitionist, Father John Schoenmakers fled the Neosho Mission and narrowly avoided capture by pro-secessionist gunmen. The targeting of the Catholic mission’s leader helped to further blacken the Confederate reputation in Osage country. Once the blue-clad troopers of the Ninth Kansas and We-He-Sa-Ki’s braves became well acquainted, the Heart-Stays band began to screen the eastern approaches to Humboldt—

Albert Pike resigned after reputedly embezzling these funds—which the Indians never saw. Robert L. Kerby, *Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 41. For an impression of the larger-than-life Albert Pike, see Fred W. Allsopp, *The Life Story of Albert Pike* (Little Rock, AR: Park-Harper, 1920). The general was at least six feet tall, weighed nearly three hundred pounds, wore his hair long, and had a full beard. He might have played the role of Bacchus in a play.

16. “From the Cherokee Nation,” *White Cloud Kansas Chief*, July 24, 1862. Also, many Osages were recruited for Union Colonel John Ritchie’s Second Indian Home Guards. “South-West Missouri,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1862.

aided by neighboring Big Hill scouts led by Shaba Shinka (Little Beaver). Traditional Indian vigilance regarding trespassers would serve to alert the federal cavalry to any armed threat that sought to penetrate the row of Osage villages that stretched along the Verdigris River valley. Early in the war, a few poorly disguised southern scouts were followed by amused Wah-Zha-Zhi patrols, and after being relieved of horses, weapons, and “gifts,” these terrified men were happy to walk back across the border into the Cherokee Nation (Indian Territory).¹⁷

In May 1863, a group of twenty-two Confederate officers attempted to slip through the Wah-Zha-Zhi cordon, perhaps acting on the untested assumption that the inhabitants were still far away hunting buffalo. General Edmund Kirby Smith dispatched this small force to provoke high plains Indian attacks against the United States and to recruit any white pro-southern elements that might still linger in the far reaches of Kansas and Colorado.¹⁸ Given the sorry state of Confederate fortunes in the Trans-Mississippi West (where General Ulysses S. Grant’s army was closing in on Vicksburg), the undertaking seems tinged with desperation. Crossing the state border from Jasper County, Missouri, and cantering straight through the pro-Union Osage domain was an act that bordered on madness, but this venture featured an unconventional rebel commander with a record of dangerous antics. Colonel Charles Harrison, a comrade of Missouri guerrilla William Quantrill, was a cardsharp, former gambling hall operator, and infamous gunslinger who had rioted with secessionist miners in Denver, Colorado, in 1861. Following bloody exploits on the Kansas-Missouri frontier, the flamboyant guerrilla colonel hoped to escort his detachment west beyond the

ninety-eighth meridian—assuming that good fortune smiled during their long and dangerous passage over the plains.¹⁹

We-He-Sa-Ki and nine Heart-Stays scouts picked up the unmistakable trail of the Confederates and confronted them five miles east of the Verdigris River near Drum Creek (Tse’-Xe-Ni-u-e). The heavily armed colonel and his party wore U.S. military-issued blue coats and claimed to be a Union patrol out of Humboldt, but the Osage leader knew the faces of all the local federal cavalrymen. Not wishing to provoke unnecessary bloodshed or to commit an error of identification, We-He-Sa-Ki suggested that the entire assemblage embark for Humboldt, where the situation might be sorted out. In response, a nervous Confederate horseman shot an Osage warrior on May 15, 1863, triggering a running battle that ended in what Montgomery County residents call the “Rebel Creek Massacre.”²⁰

We-He-Sa-Ki summoned two hundred reinforcements, including dozens of nearby Big Hills led by Shaba Shinka, and proceeded to drive the intruders across the tallgrass prairie as if conducting a buffalo hunt. Skilled Wah-Zha-Zhi riders flanked the Confederates and blocked any attempts to turn, maneuvering their harried enemies straight toward the steep, unfordable bluffs along the Verdigris River (in Osage, the Wa-The-To-Xo-e, or “green clay roarer,” where green paint was collected). Twenty rebels died fighting, while two hid below the overhanging river banks and managed to limp back to Missouri. Osage casualties were minimized in the final combat because the thick trees along the Verdigris afforded valuable

there.” With no organized southern forces in the Rockies, a recruitment effort was required.

19. “Life in the Far West,” *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), August 16, 1860. Charles Harrison was denounced for “wanton murder” well before the start of the war and gained a violent reputation for settling arguments with a navy revolver. “Pike’s Peak,” *Mountaineer* (Salt Lake City, UT), December 8, 1860. Despite his southern sympathies, Harrison fought a duel with a Virginia lawyer named Riley; W. B. Vickers, *History of the City of Denver, Arapahoe County, and Colorado* (Chicago: O. L. Baskin, 1880), 193–94; “Later from Pike’s Peak,” *White Cloud Kansas Chief*, August 9, 1860; Thomas J. Noel, “The Multifunctional Saloon: Denver, 1858–1876,” *Colorado Magazine* 52 (Spring 1975): 128–29. Editor William Byers called the secessionist “rag” above the Wallingford & Murphy store “a disgrace” to the premises; next door was Harrison’s Criterion Saloon. *Emporia (KS) News*, June 6, 1863. On the news of his death, the Emporia News editor called Colonel Harrison “the well-known gambler and desperado who was once so notorious here and in Denver.”

20. Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 263; “Seventeen Confederate Officers Killed by Osage Indians,” *Smoky Hill and Republican Union* (Junction City, KS), June 27, 1863. Some versions of the story have the Osages holding a council and deciding to escort the unidentified horsemen to Humboldt. Given the timing of events, it would have been a brief meeting.

17. Mathews, *The Osages*, 638; 656–57; William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), accessible from the Kansas Collection at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/labette/labette-co-p18.html#CHETOPA>; “Interesting Incident,” *Parsons (KS) Weekly Sun*, July 13, 1878; “Reminiscences of Early Days,” *Humboldt (KS) Union*, July 1, 1876; John Mack, “Osage Mission: The Story of Catholic Missionary Work in Southeast Kansas,” *Catholic Historical Review* 96 (April 2010): 265, 272–73. Mack noted that most Osages preferred the Jesuit “Black Robes” over the rival Presbyterian missionaries, in part because the priests had no families and thus required no additional land to support them. Over the years, the Osage Mission priests demonstrated deep devotion to the community. The Belgian Father John Bax contracted measles while faithfully attending to Osage patients during the epidemic of 1850 and lost his own life in service to the tribe.

18. Paul F. Harper, *Surely It Floweth with Milk and Honey: A History of Montgomery County Kansas to 1930* (Independence, KS: Independence Community College, 1988), 6–7; “Bushwhackers Killed by the Osages,” *Emporia (KS) News*, June 6, 1863. The paper reported that recovered documents showed that the Confederates were bound for Colorado, where their leader would “assume command of the Confederate troops

cover, allowing the attackers to close their distance and then concentrate their superior firepower. Beneath his broad slouch hat, Colonel Harrison had a smooth bald head, but because he was the enemy “chief,” a victorious warrior collected his luxurious “fan-shaped beard” in place of a scalp. Two Osage messengers summoned Major Doudna’s cavalry, and a detachment of bluecoats retrieved Confederate documents and interred the rapidly decaying human remains (bodies and severed heads) on a gravel bar by the river. We-He-Sa-Ki and his band came away with new weapons, fine horses, unspecified amounts of gold, and the gratitude of northern authorities. The one-sided result of this bloody clash avenged the loss of the two warriors who fell, reinforced Osage pride, and reasserted tribal sovereignty over the remaining Indian lands.²¹

Southwest Kansas suffered no further wartime military incursions through the Osage Reserve, and the high plains tribes never rose in support of Dixie. Northern newspapers spread the welcome news of the Confederate debacle, and now “Hard Rope’s braves” counted squarely as Union allies.²² A month after the fight at “Rebel Creek,” pro-Confederate irregulars threatened the fringes of Kansas City, and the editor of the *Emporia News* suggested that “the State had better hire a few hundred Osage Indians to track down the bushwhackers.” Shortly after these remarks were published, 150 men of the Ninth Kansas Cavalry were routed near Westport, losing fourteen troopers during the retreat. For a time, the rebels achieved “almost total domination of the countryside” around Jackson County, Missouri, causing many Unionists to flee across the

21. Mathews, *The Osages*, 640–41; for the Osage term for the Verdigris River, see La Flesche, *Dictionary*, 186; “Lone Survivors Story,” *Oswego (KS) Independent*, January 21, 1916. The account by Confederate survivor Warner Lewis offers another interesting view of the fight.

22. “How Our Loyal Indians Deal with Guerillas,” *Daily Green Mountain Freeman* (Montpelier, VT), June 10, 1863. Accounts in northern papers vary, including dubious details—including the story of a “small, smart Indian boy” spy sent among the encamped Confederates by the Osages to determine their identity. According to W. David Baird, “the assault made the tribe heroes in the eyes of Kansas authorities.” W. David Baird, *The Osage People* (Phoenix, AZ: Indian Tribal Series, 1971), 53. Lawrence J. Hogan estimated that at least 244 Osages fought for the North (out of an adult male population of perhaps a thousand). This number represents a considerable contribution to the Union war effort. Lawrence J. Hogan, *The Osage Indian Murders* (Frederick, MD: Amlex, 1998), 19. Osage Agent Peter P. Elder reported that by 1863, the tribe had “furnished about 400 stalwart warriors for the Second Indian Regiment,” but not all of these men may have seen action. *Executive Documents Printed by the Order of the House of Representatives during the Third Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress: 1862–63*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Washington, DC:

state line. Considering the relative inertia of local militia regiments, Hard Rope now appeared to be a weapon of choice in the minds of some insecure Kansans.²³

Brothers-in-arms or not, white efforts to acquire coveted Osage lands continued unabated despite the ongoing war. The unratified treaty of 1863 sought to peel away 1,500 square miles of the Neosho River Valley, including the Oswego area where We-He-Sa-Ki had spent much of his childhood. Among the issues that stalled acceptance was an Osage requirement that Father John Schoenmakers of the Neosho Mission be granted a tract of land on which to reside. Even if most Osages balked at embracing orthodox Catholicism, the much-admired Jesuit numbered among the few whites ever to acquire an almost native command of the Osage language. Indian mediators refused to sign away Father John’s home. At war’s end, the Canville Treaty of 1865 accomplished the goals of the 1863 pact, legalizing settlement in Neosho and Labette Counties and leaving the Osages in possession of what became known as the Diminished Reserve. Even before the ink was dry, eager private and governmental interests anticipated the complete removal of the Wah-Zha-Zhi from Kansas—along with the exit of every other Indian nation within state borders.²⁴ After the final Senate ratification of “Canville” in 1866, the *Emporia News* complained that the agreement was “sort of half-way justice. . . . The treaty ought to have opened *all* the lands for settlement.” A new wave of illegal homesteaders agreed. Intent on

Government Printing Office, 1863), 288–89. It is likely that a greater percentage of Osage men than of northern white men fought for the Union in the Civil War.

23. “Another Raid,” *Emporia (KS) News*, June 13, 1863; Albert Castell and Tom Goodrich, *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerilla* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 23. Following the Confederate defeat, Agent Peter P. Elder penned a letter to Major General James G. Blunt at Fort Leavenworth, praising Osage loyalty to the Union, denying any rumored “collusion with these rebel bands,” and suggesting that a company of Osage warriors be raised immediately for the defense of southeast Kansas under the command of cavalryman Major W. Doudna. This suggestion was not pursued—perhaps due to the widely attested friction between infantry and cavalry commands echoed by modern-day interservice rivalries. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series I, vol. 22, part 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 286.

24. Burns, *History of The Osage People*, 281–82; “Kansas Indians: Lands Purchased for Their Colonization,” *White Cloud Kansas Chief*, September 17, 1863. Early talks to buy “colonization lands” for Kansas Indians from the Cherokee Nation were already under way during the Civil War. Even German newspapers in eastern Pennsylvania were promoting “ungefähr 1,000,000 Acker” (approximately one million acres) of Osage lands open for homesteading. Unfortunately, the editor of *Der Lecha County Patriot* erred in describing the area as about 100 miles north of Lawrence. Present-day “Lecha County” is Lehigh County. “Vertrag

pleasing the electorate, Washington declined to deploy U.S. forces to protect the (nonvoting) Osage Nation's legal property.²⁵

Several coinciding factors worsened the plight of the Wah-Zha-Zhi. Conflict erupted with rival Cheyennes and Arapahos, constricting Osage access to the high plains buffalo range. Meanwhile, the already depleted deer, elk, bear, and turkey stocks on the Diminished Reserve vanished under the guns of poachers. The federal government withheld Osage money that might have purchased emergency food, and regional harvests became unreliable due to drought and grasshoppers. By January 1868, Indian Agent G. S. Snow observed, "I find that many of the Little Osages and White Hair's town are very destitute. They are near suffering for provisions. . . . Something must be done for these people at once." During the same period, Wah-Zha-Zhi leaders complained to Indian commissioners that Agent Snow himself "cheated them out of their annuities" and tried to prevent them from talking to officials from Washington. Arapaho warriors stampeded over three hundred Osage horses in lightning raids, and the shrinking tribe now lacked the numbers to take back its vital pony herd, further deepening the prevailing sense of despair.²⁶

With hunger stalking the Wah-Zha-Zhi villages, the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Railroad (LL&G) used every means at its disposal to acquire the eight-million-acre Diminished Reserve. Railroad president William Sturgis spearheaded negotiations that offered twenty cents per acre for territory valued at more than five times that amount. The railroad men offered bribes, attempted to unseat a defiant Chief Pawhuska, and apparently forged the signatures of some Osages. The LL&G asserted that recently acquired Arapaho scalps were in fact those of murdered white settlers and promised violent military reprisal if the Wah-Zha-Zhi refused to sign the "Sturgis Treaty" of 1868. An ailing



In this 1874 photograph, a delegation of Osages poses with several Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel, including Indian Agent Isaac T. Gibson, standing third from left. Following ratification of the 1870 Osage Removal Act, which forced the band from their Kansas reserve, We-He-Sa-Ki served on a committee charged with selecting a new Osage reservation south of the Kansas line. The committee convinced Gibson to support a larger tract of territory with access to the buffalo range, thus prolonging sedentary agrarianism. Courtesy of the Osage Nation Museum, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

and sorrowful Pawhuska protested that "I have no lands to sell," but eventually tribal leaders, including We-He-Sa-Ki, acquiesced under unbearable pressure. Twenty cents per acre seemed a better option than death by starvation or bullets. In the end, the treaty was withdrawn in March 1869 by the newly inaugurated President Grant in the face of white settlers' outrage over the prospect of a railroad beating them in the race to acquire the remaining Wah-Zha-Zhi lands. Not surprisingly, "Gilded Age" Washington did not factor in the principle of fair treatment for "blanket Indians."²⁷

In the summer of 1868, We-He-Sa-Ki helped to mediate a crisis involving the killing of two Butler County settlers, Samuel Dunn and James Anderson, who were known to be "in the habit of getting timber from the lands still belonging to the Osages." Upon sighting a group of mounted warriors, Dunn and Anderson "ran out with their guns"—purportedly hoping to recover a couple

mit den Indianern" (Contract with the Indians), *Lecha County Patriot* (Allentown, PA), October 10, 1865.

25. "Military," *Emporia (KS) News*, July 7, 1866; "The Osage Lands," *Kansas Daily Tribune* (Lawrence), June 23, 1866. The *Tribune* reasoned that although "strictly speaking," the illegal settlers "have no right upon these lands," they had "in good faith, brought under cultivation a large extent of country," thus expanding "the area of civilization, in so doing." The legal owners had delayed economic and cultural "progress," making the usurpation of their land more a misdemeanor than a serious crime.

26. Mathews, *The Osages*, 666–67; "Letter from Henry," *Kansas Daily Tribune*, October 26, 1867.

27. Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 300–02; Mathews, *The Osages*, 673–76. The editor of the *Fort Scott Weekly Monitor* called the use of bribery and intimidation by Sturgis "the most outrageous swindle," and the *Emporia News* identified the primary victims of the "Osage Land Swindle" as honest white settlers who wanted land. "Big Land Jobs," *Fort Scott (KS) Weekly Monitor*, June 17, 1868; "The Osage Land Swindle: The Whole Story Told," *Emporia (KS) News*, June 25, 1889.

of stolen mules. Later the neighbors found two scalped bodies, and Kansas authorities demanded that ten Indian murderers be turned over at once for justice. In place of the young braves, We-He-Sa-Ki and another Osage elder surrendered themselves in order to prevent a bloodbath. While en route to El Dorado, deputy sheriffs unshackled the prisoners and allowed both men to depart. One rumor alleged that the Osages must have bribed the lawmen, but a simpler explanation is that the prisoners convinced the sheriffs of their innocence. Hard Rope was gracious, likable, and renowned for his ability to frame a compelling argument—even in broken English. Later We-He-Sa-Ki observed that “we took our lives in our hands, not expecting to return alive, in order to save our nation from war with the United States.” With a rumored lynch mob awaiting in El Dorado, this strategy was a serious gamble that confirmed the Heart-Stays chieftain’s bravery and commitment to the cause of Osage survival.²⁸

The worsening food shortage prompted We-He-Sa-Ki to answer the call of General Philip H. Sheridan to provide Indian scouts for the U.S. Army’s 1868 winter campaign against the Cheyennes and Arapahos. A successful strike against the plains tribes might reopen hunting access west of the Arkansas River, and it also promised vengeance for recent Osage war casualties. Sheridan recognized the invaluable skills of the Wah-Zha-Zhi—natives who knew every feature of the southern plains topography—so he sent an officer and a translator to negotiate for their services. According to the terms of the resulting understanding, We-He-Sa-Ki’s people received critically needed rations immediately, as well as weapons, clothing, and sturdy horses for the thirteen men who were selected to serve. When the time came to depart, however, the Osage trackers elected to wear their own winter buffalo robes and otter-fur crowns, asserting cultural independence by refusing to accept blue woolen greatcoats. We-He-Sa-Ki and Shaba Shinka, the victors over the Confederates at “Rebel Creek,” became the lead scouts. The army’s expeditionary commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, was correct in describing We-He-Sa-Ki not as a *war chief* but as “the counselor or wise man of his people.”²⁹

28. “The Late Indian Outrage in Butler County,” *Emporia (KS) News*, May 29, 1868; *ibid.*, November 6, 1868; “Osage Indian Council,” *Leavenworth (KS) Times*, October 6, 1869.

29. George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains: Personal Experiences with Indians* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006 [1874]), 257–58; De Benneville Randolph Keim, *Sheridan’s Troopers on the Borders: Winter Campaign on the Plains* (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, 1885),

The varying accounts of Custer’s Washita campaign in November 1868 agree on certain basic points. Without Hard Rope and Little Beaver out front on foot breaking the trail, it is unlikely that Custer would have located and destroyed the winter camp of the Cheyenne peace chief Black Kettle. The Osage band chiefs detected almost invisible snow-covered tracks, heard the subtlest sounds, and perceived the faintest odors. Following the raid, the jubilant Wah-Zha-Zhi returned with strings of captured ponies, enemy scalps, accumulated wages, and brand-new rifled Springfield needle guns. Benjamin H. Clark, chief of scouts for the Seventh Cavalry, detested his new nonwhite associates and proclaimed them “bloodthirsty wretches” whose uncivilized appearance and behavior “disgraced the regiment.” Colonel Custer saw things differently, issuing words of commendation to Hard Rope for “distinguishing himself by his skill in discovering and following trails. He is a man of excellent judgement, and is a true friend of the white man.”³⁰

Following the bloody winter campaign, a new party of white commissioners arrived in Kansas to resume the effort to purchase the Osage Diminished Reserve. As Pawhuska’s counsel, We-He-Sa-Ki explained the tribe’s past decision to accept the Sturgis agreement. It was not rooted in eagerness to sell. The Osages had received innumerable threats in the name of Washington, and past government agents had warned them that without their capitulation, the “white people would drive them off and get their lands for nothing.” Although the homeland in Kansas was precious, the Wah-Zha-Zhi “had lost all hope of saving it . . . and to save their women and children, had let it go.” Now Hard Rope wished to know why the new commissioners did not seem to know about the words and behavior of the previous group. Why had a Chicago railroad executive spoken on behalf of the U.S. government—something that the Osages had learned about only after the fact? If William Sturgis did not reflect the will of the United States, then why had Congress entertained the idea of ratifying his dishonorable contract for so long? Was the price offered for Osage lands so

81. Keim describes the Osage band chiefs negotiating “that their people should be fed by the Army.” When all “sources of obtaining a livelihood failed” at this time, the Osages “literally starved to death.”

30. Edwin L. Sabin, *On the Plains with Custer* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1913), 193–95; Richard G. Hardorff, *Washita Memories: Eyewitness Views of Custer’s Attack on Black Kettle’s Village* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 205, 228, 392. Hardorff recorded that twelve of the Osage scouts were full bloods, with the mixed-blood Métis Gessau “Gesso” Chouteau serving as interpreter.

paltry because Washington lacked the money to purchase such a vast domain at a fair rate? In fact, Wah-Zha-Zhi holdings stretched “so far west” that We-He-Sa-Ki feared that a cash-strapped “Great Father” might “not be able to buy them.” We-He-Sa-Ki closed by pointedly inquiring about the precise nature of a proposed new Osage reserve in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). None of the flustered government agents had an answer. It was obvious that the Wah-Zha-Zhi were in no mood to be rushed or bullied.³¹

In the end, the agreement to remove the Osages from their Kansas reserve required over a year to negotiate and ratify. Meanwhile, sickness and disease continued to claim Osage lives, including that of Little Pawhuska—the sixth and last of his hereditary dynasty to serve as chief. This final patriarch bearing the name White Hair had lost two wives and all but one child to illness, and the remaining son eschewed high office, finding “the robes of his ancestors too large for him.” In an 1870 tour of Indian agencies, Dr. William Nicholson of the Society of Friends noted the arrival of “Hard Rope and his band of Osages” amid “a good deal of fever and chill in this section.” Compounding the trials caused by widespread sickness, an escalating invasion of preemptive white homesteaders fired Osage tempers. Descending like a cloud of enthusiastic Caucasian locusts, these men included the squatter Charles Ingalls, whose daughter Laura would later publish *Little House on the Prairie*, recalling her family’s experience in Kansas. The federal government’s unwillingness to expel the intruders frustrated and disillusioned We-He-Sa-Ki and Chetopa. The two leaders issued their own directive for all newly arrived white trespassers to vacate the Diminished Reserve immediately—and return only when a treaty was finalized. If the situation did not improve, the disgusted headmen talked of the Osages making a doomed final stand against the U.S. Army, electing to die with their war songs “on their lips.” Amid great native suffering and bitterness, the Osage Removal Act was enacted on July 15, 1870.³²

31. “Letter from the Osages,” *Republican Daily Journal* (Lawrence, KS), October 5, 1869; Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 304–05. We-He-Sa-Ki and nine other chiefs revoked their earlier endorsement of the Sturgis Treaty and signed a written protest when it became clear that the negotiations had included patently false promises, such as the suggestion that the Osages might linger in Kansas for “four or five years.”

32. William Nicholson, “A Tour of Indian Agencies in Kansas and the Indian Territory in 1870,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 3 (August 1934): 319; “Editorial Correspondence,” *Chetopa (KS) Advance*, February 23, 1870; Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 317; Penny T. Linsenmayer, “Kansas Settlers on the Osage Diminished Reserve: A Study of Laura

Just weeks prior to ratification, a friendlier encounter occurred between settler C. Wood Davis and Hard Rope in Kingman County near the site of the future town of Norwich. During the summer buffalo hunt, Davis loaned the Heart-Stays chieftain his field glasses, with which large herds of bison could be observed on the prairie twenty miles to the west. Perched on the rooftop of the farmer’s cabin, We-He-Sa-Ki exclaimed, “Heap long eye shoot” after obtaining a better sighting of the great black mass through the binoculars. Two weeks later, the Osage leader returned with fresh bison tongues, a fine buffalo robe, and an invitation for Davis to share a pipe of tobacco. In exchange, the settler presented the chief with a gift of flour, coffee, and his own tobacco blend—sealing a mutual friendship.³³

With a successful hunt concluded, We-He-Sa-Ki led 120 members of his band into Arkansas City, Kansas, for the purpose of trading buffalo products for sugar, coffee, flour, and calico. The Osages erected a large tent supported by willow poles, and city residents took up a collection to entice the Indians to perform a dance. When sufficient cash was offered, twenty young men attired in paint and finery formed a circle around two large drums accompanied by fifes and whistles. Chief “Hard Robe [sic]” was “seated in smiling dignity at one side.” The dancers carried shields, spears, hatchets, and bows and entertained an excited crowd of townsfolk. Despite the “extravagance of gesture, unearthly noises, indescribable contortions and very profuse perspiration” from “a pack of howling devils just let loose from the pit,” the Osages and whites mingled in a casual and festive manner. The Heart-Stays men “remained camped in town all night, entirely peaceable and quiet, except for the strange ululation with which, at daybreak, they mourned their dead.”³⁴

We-He-Sa-Ki carried out two noteworthy duties during the year prior to removal. First, he traveled to the Creek capital of Okmulgee to represent the Wah-Zha-Zhi at a pan-Indian constitutional convention. Washington had

Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Autumn 2001): 179. For the death of Little Pawhuska, see “Letter from an Osage Indian,” *Kansas Daily Tribune* (Lawrence, KS), February 10, 1870; see also John Joseph Mathews, *Wah’Kon-Tah: The Osage and the White Man’s Road* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 223.

33. C. G. Davis, “Among the Osages in the Ninnescah Valley in 1870,” *Wichita Beacon*, October 28, 1913; “Down the Verdigris,” *Republican Daily Journal* (Lawrence, KS), March 31, 1870. A visitor to Hard Rope’s village along the Verdigris in March 1870 reported that the chieftain employed an African American interpreter through whom he observed that “this land is mine, and it is good.”

34. “From Arkansas City,” *Emporia (KS) News*, August 19, 1870.



Isaac Gibson sought to transform Osage life by replacing traditional identity with a reflection of Anglo-American society. He believed that if the chiefs could be made compliant, then the Osage people would follow suit. Leaders like Hard Rope and Paw-ne-no-pa-she, or “Governor Joe,” however—pictured here with four fellow Osage leaders in 1875—continued their adherence to traditional Osage culture despite appropriate expressions of submission and obedience. The resulting tribal discord and division ultimately led to Gibson’s dismissal from the Osage Agency in 1876. Courtesy of the Osage Nation Museum, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

urged the indigenous peoples of Indian Territory to unite in forming their own state government. In fact, the native convention crafted a well-refined document before the U.S. Congress changed course and abruptly decided that an Indian state was a bad idea.³⁵ In addition to this venture, We-He-Sa-Ki served on the fourteen-member committee charged with selecting a new Osage reservation south of the Kansas line. This delegation convinced Agent Isaac T. Gibson to support a larger tract of territory located west of the Caney River Valley—country much better suited to grazing and hunting interests than “civilized” dirt farming. Maintaining access to the buffalo range would prolong traditional Osage mobility and forestall the monotony of sedentary agrarian confinement. Unlike most other Indian nations, the Osages purchased their reservation.³⁶

As 1870 ended, the Heart-Stays people left their homes along the Verdigris to embark upon a long winter buffalo hunt. Then, in the spring of 1871, the band crossed into Indian Territory instead of returning to southeast Kansas. Before beginning the journey, about fifty Osages attended a farewell feast in the hamlet of Independence, where Osage historian Louis F. Burns records that there were “damp eyes” among both whites and Indians. No doubt many white farmers felt relief and joy at what historians

Craig Miner and William E. Unrau called “the end of Indian Kansas.” Government agents blundered in leading the Osages to the rich bottomlands near Silver Lake, Oklahoma. On closer examination, this tract lay to the east of the new reservation. A corrected 1872 land survey required We-He-Sa-Ki to remove his community for a second time—abandoning a year’s worth of preparations at the original site. The people selected a second village location on Salt Creek near the western edge of the reservation, and later many settled along Bird Creek north of the site of the future town of Pawhuska.³⁷

With the removal from Kansas completed, no single person possessed greater power over the destiny of the Osage people than Indian Agent Isaac T. Gibson. The Quaker administrator’s ultimate goal was to transform Wah-Zha-Zhi life, replacing traditional identity with a reflection of Anglo-American society. This aim placed Gibson squarely in opposition to the will of the majority of reservation residents, including Chief Hard Rope. As workers erected wooden agency buildings above Bird Creek, the Osages fled what they regarded as impending incarceration for the vastness of the high

35. “Journal of the Adjourned Session of the First General Council of the Indian Territory,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 3 (June 1925): 135.

36. Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 337–38; Mathews, *The Osages*, 692.

37. Mathews, *The Osages*, 693–94, 698; Louis F. Burns, *Osage Mission Baptisms, Marriages and Internments: 1820–1866* (Fallbrook, CA: Ciga Press, 1986), vii; Frank F. Finney, “The Osages and Their Agency during the Term of Isaac T. Gibson, Quaker Agent,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 36 (Winter 1958–59): 430; Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854–1871* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 138.

plains—extending the duration of buffalo hunts well beyond necessity. The Osage agent formulated a gradual strategy to effect cultural change, focusing first on winning over the tribal leadership. If the chiefs could be made compliant, then the people might be eased into a new life of sedentary agriculture and adoption of Euro-American-style dwellings, clothing, behavior, schooling, and speech. With the eradication of the plains buffalo, the agent foresaw that the migratory warrior tradition would disappear, and Christianity might blossom as a consequence. The first step after the death of Chief Pawhuska VI was the creation of a new “principal chief” in the person of Joseph Pawnee-No-Pah-She—also called “Governor Joe” and “Big Hill Joe.” Gibson saw great promise in the handsome, bilingual, and missionary-educated Joe, but the charismatic leader frustrated him by saying all the right things about “civilization” while studiously adhering to traditional Osage culture.³⁸ With no practical alternative, We-He-Sa-Ki embraced the rhetoric of “reform” as well, traveling to Lawrence in 1873 and taking his first journey by railroad—an exercise designed to demonstrate Anglo superiority. In 1874, the agent’s fine two-story sandstone house (on the heights above what became Pawhuska) was completed and became another symbol of white power in stark contrast to the small unpainted Indian cabins lining the creek below. These shacks were fashioned from warping rough-cut boards, and many Osages refused to live in them. Despite appropriate expressions of submission and obedience from the chiefs, Gibson eventually realized that he was being “played” and took forceful steps to shatter Wah-Zha-Zhi passive resistance to “progress.”³⁹

Gibson’s solution was to reorganize the existing six bands into eleven, creating additional “tame” chieftains who owed their elevated status to their white benefactor. The agent worked to undercut community support for hereditary leaders whom he deemed unsatisfactory, withdrawing material support and “throwing away” We-He-Sa-Ki, “Ogeese” Augustus Captain, Watianka, and George Beaver. In the case of George Beaver, Gibson

explained that because “he shows himself opposed to civilization, I claim the right to depose him.” The agent appointed a mixed-blood woman, Rosalie “Mother” Chouteau, as second chief to the Beaver Band—over Chouteau’s strenuous protestation in favor of restoring the expelled headman. In place of We-He-Sa-Ki as “White Hair chief counselor,” Agent Gibson promoted the mixed-blood Dick Holston, who had departed from the Heart-Stays village with forty families and relocated along Bird Creek—where the suddenly generous Quaker agent “helped a great deal.” Echoing his patron’s position, Holston observed that Hard Rope “did not want to settle down and civilize, so I took a part of the band and separated.” For his part, We-He-Sa-Ki observed that in fact his followers strove “to make farms, raise domestic animals, fowls and other stock; we want to do this ourselves; we don’t want to be controlled in this by anybody outside, by a white man or some other people.” But “control” was not negotiable. Gibson rewarded those with a compliant and subordinate attitude and punished chiefs who displayed “misguided” autonomy. We-He-Sa-Ki noted that “a portion only of the people get the benefit of our money. It belongs not to them alone, but all the people. It is like stealing our money to spend it only on a few. If you could see the people of my band in that section [Salt Creek] you would think that they had no money at all.” In the wake of voluminous and compelling testimony indicating tribal discord and division, investigators dismissed Isaac T. Gibson from the Osage Agency in 1876, prompting his return to Ohio.⁴⁰

Conflicts large and small continued to require the attention of a skilled Osage diplomat. When roving Wah-Zha-Zhi hunters killed Chief Isadowa of the Wichita Nation, We-He-Sa-Ki joined in oratory that contributed to a nonviolent settlement. Later this episode was echoed in the slaying of a young Otoe man during the summer hunt. Generous compensation invariably followed the initial warlike posturing on both sides, maintaining honor and defusing intertribal tensions.⁴¹ When white Kansans rustled over a dozen Osage horses in 1873, Chief Hard

38. Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 348–49.

39. “Chieftains on the Peace Path,” *Republican Daily Journal* (Lawrence, KS), September 24, 1873. A similar encounter with Euro-American technology occurred in the late 1870s, when Judge Charles Hatton of Wichita recalled the Heart-Stays chieftain experiencing the “mysteries of the telephone” and learning that white men possessed the power to “talk with the lightning.” “An Indian’s First Telephone,” *Wichita Daily Eagle*, March 16, 1902. John Joseph Mathews called the sandstone agency buildings “stern and powerful” and “symbols of might.” Mathews, *Wah’Kon-Tah*, 14. “The lumber warped and buckled in such a way that

they [the Osage cabins] were not much use.” Finney, “The Osages and Their Agency,” 421. See also information about the agent’s house at the Osage Nation website: <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/news-events/news/osage-agent%E2%80%99s-house-agency-hill-pawhuska>.

40. *Executive Documents Printed by the Order of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Forty-Fourth Congress, 1875–1876* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1876), 12, 17, 83, 88–89; “The Osage Investigation,” *Leavenworth (KS) Times*, August 24, 1875.

41. Laban Samuel Records, *Cherokee Outlet Cowboy: Recollections of Laban S. Records*, ed. Ellen Jayne Maris Wheeler (Norman: University of



An unidentified illness claimed the life of We-He-Sa-Ki in the summer of 1883, the same year this photograph was taken (he is on the far right). His legacy is one of sound leadership, diplomacy before violence, and skilled negotiating with the United States—all in the name of preserving traditional Osage folkways in the face of pressure to assimilate. Courtesy of the Osage Nation Museum, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

Rope, Governor Joe, and a party of young men followed the northward trail “like greyhounds” to Wichita, where they recovered most of their animals without a struggle. Later We-He-Sa-Ki gave sworn testimony through an interpreter in Sedgwick County Court, and two Anglo horse thieves received seven-year prison sentences.⁴² If the burden of guilt fell upon the Osages, then the Heart-Stays chieftain responded with equal concern for fairness. In 1871, Texas cattleman Cal Watkins followed the tracks of straying horses to We-He-Sa-Ki’s village, boldly entering the encampment alone to inform the chief that his young braves had collected branded ponies. Hard Rope invited Watkins to stay the night in his family’s lodge, sharing dinner and a pipe. After breakfast the following morning, every missing horse was accounted for, and the rancher was aided in getting them “started on the road back to his home.”⁴³

By the late 1870s, with the problem of Agent Gibson resolved, We-He-Sa-Ki reclaimed his status as “White

Oklahoma Press, 1995), 44–45; “Southwest,” *Emporia (KS) News*, July 18, 1873; Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 312.

42. *Atchison (KS) Daily Patriot*, March 8, 1873; “From the Southwest,” *Junction City (KS) Weekly Union*, June 7, 1873.

43. Records, *Cherokee Outlet Cowboy*, 33.

Hair counselor,” participating in important negotiations with Washington authorities. The Osage chiefs petitioned the U.S. Senate, expressing strong opposition to the creation of a white territorial administration in Indian Territory without Native American consent. We-He-Sa-Ki was the ninth signer of twenty-nine Osage leaders.⁴⁴ A second appeal asked for the release of Wah-Zha-Zhi money to feed struggling families, given a dramatic decline in the collection of buffalo robes and meat. The message noted that Congress had been “very lenient” about collecting payments from poor white homesteaders occupying former Osage land and that this policy had reduced the interest income accumulating in the tribe’s government-managed account. Confirming distress on the reservation, Agent Cyrus Beede endorsed the disbursement of emergency funds, which the Senate duly authorized.⁴⁵

In 1882, Hard Rope was the third signer of a document submitted by 378 male Osages averting a congressional proposal to reduce the sale price of ceded Kansas lands “from \$125 to 75 cents, and thereafter to 50 or 25 cents per acre.” A potential windfall for white homesteaders, this would have constituted a huge loss for the Wah-Zha-Zhi. The written dissent of two-thirds of adult Osage men prevented this disgraceful evisceration of the 1870 treaty.⁴⁶

Although suffering from poor health, We-He-Sa-Ki stood for election in 1882 as principal chief on the “Union” ticket, losing to Joseph Pawnee-No-Pa-She of the “National Party” by four votes. There is no evidence of differing opinion or enmity between the candidates, although the press speculated that the election of a

44. Miscellaneous Document No. 112, Documents of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Forty-Fourth Congress (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1876).

45. Miscellaneous Document No. 72, The Miscellaneous Documents of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Forty-Third Congress and Special Session of the Senate (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1875).

46. Executive Document No. 124, Index to the Executive Documents of the House of Representatives for the First Session of the Forty-Seventh Congress, 1881–1882, vol. 22 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1882).

“progressive” meant that “the Osages have made another long stride toward civilization.” In fact, both men sought the retention of Wah-Zha-Zhi identity, both opposed the division of the communal reservation into individual allotments, and neither yielded to white sensibilities by abandoning their Osage speech or attire.⁴⁷

An unidentified months-long illness claimed the life of the Heart-Stays chief in the summer heat of 1883. He had participated in an intertribal Fourth of July celebration at the Osage Agency, delivering a formal address that was “well received.” Two weeks after this public appearance, death came without warning, prompting lengthy reflection by the *Coffeyville Weekly Journal*. The editor noted that Hard Rope’s “sense of right was superior to that of a great many of his white brothers” and that he was “a natural orator” whose “remarks were brilliant and full of good logic.” With his departure, the Osage people “sustained a great loss,” as “he would no doubt have been elected governor of the whole Nation.” In addition to his eloquence and intellect, the band chief had been “a friend to all” and a vigilant “protector of the needy.” The death of We-He-Sa-Ki’s colleague Governor Joe had occurred during the middle of winter, just six months earlier.⁴⁸ A generation of Osage leaders melted away with the last of the bison. The passing of Chief Hard Rope was followed by three days of ritual mourning and two days of dancing. Several horses were sacrificed and interred near the chief’s cairn, and friends purchased a large lock of hair from a white man to deck the burial in lieu of a scalp. The body was enclosed in a small mausoleum atop a hill, placed in a seated position facing east toward the rising sun.⁴⁹

47. “Condensed Telegrams,” *Inland Tribune* (Great Bend, KS), March 31, 1882. Agent Isaac T. Gibson deplored the fact that after leaving the Neosho Mission school, the educated “Governor Joe” promptly shed his American clothes for a “blanket and loincloth.” Gibson was convinced that only dirt farming and heavy labor could purge “savagery.” Osage leaders during the 1870s selectively took what was good or useful from Anglo culture while retaining traditional Wah-Zha-Zhi identity. Upon graduating, Governor Joe is said to have observed that it took Father Schoenmakers “fifteen years to make a white man of me, and it will take just fifteen minutes to make an Osage of myself.” See Terry P. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 21–23.

48. “Osage Agency, July 5, 1883,” *Coffeyville (KS) Journal*, July 14, 1883; “The Osages,” *Coffeyville (KS) Journal*, July 21, 1883; “A Dead Ingin,” *Parsons (KS) Daily Sun*, February 8, 1883. Smallpox had returned to the Osage reservation in late 1882, claiming at least sixteen members of Black Dog’s band in September alone. The loss of many prominent Osage elders at about this time may be connected. “The New Northwest,” *Press and Daily Dakotian* (Yankton, SD), September 21, 1882.

49. “The Osages: Osage Agency, July 31,” *Coffeyville (KS) Journal*, August 4, 1883; Wilson, *The Underground Reservation*, 23, 32, 54. In

In 1921, almost forty years later, Wah-Zha-Zhi students at Haskell Institute (the Native American school in Lawrence, Kansas) planned to erect a monument beside the grave of this “mighty man of valor,” but the actual site—then believed to lie outside Fairfax, Oklahoma—proved elusive.⁵⁰ Like the chieftain himself, the Heart-Stays band had vanished into history, its remnants absorbed into other Osage communities amid a shocking population decline that abated only in the twentieth century. Nearing death in 1931, We-He-Sa-Ki’s old friend Agent Laban J. Miles may have resolved a mystery. Osage historian John Joseph Mathews recorded that “as if from a dream, [Miles] mumbled ‘I know where Hard Robe [sic] was buried—don’t let them tell you—’” Slipping in and out of consciousness, the frail old man recalled that “my little girl saw them lead the [sacrificial] horses up the hill” across from the Osage agent’s residence.⁵¹ Thus, the wise old spirit of We-He-Sa-Ki may be peering down from a quiet spot on Cedarvale Hill (in present-day Pawhuska, Oklahoma), standing watch over the people and culture that he fought so vigorously to preserve. [KH]

the final year of his life, We-He-Sa-Ki served as one of three justices who made up the new Osage Supreme Court. This body heard local criminal cases not unlike the infractions that band chiefs traditionally adjudicated. Undoubtedly the adoption of an American-style court pleased whites, and Osages could support a new structure that kept tribal justice in respected Wah-Zha-Zhi hands. Terry Wilson described Hard Rope as a leader who—in the view of Agent Gibson—resisted “the white man’s road” while leading one of the “most recalcitrant bands.” The late-nineteenth-century white distinction between “progressive” and “conservative” Osage leaders was the projection of outsiders who assumed that government must be the domain of opposing political forces rather than a state of communal consensus. It overlooked the prevailing unity of goals and objectives among the chiefs in the 1870s and 1880s. Of course, some Anglo officials desired and even promoted division in order to drive factional wedges in pursuit of their own objectives.

50. *Indian Leader*, May 6, 1921. The recognition in the Haskell campus newspaper of a student plan to memorialize an independent-minded nineteenth-century Osage band chief is a curiosity for several reasons. Exactly why did Osage college students admire We-He-Sa-Ki forty years after his death? What oral history accounts of him were still circulating? Why did white administrators bent on acculturating young Osages apparently endorse the students’ project? According to Myriam Vučković, the goals of the Haskell Institute were “assimilation, education and subordination”—hardly making We-He-Sa-Ki an acceptable role model. See Myriam Vučković, *Voices from Haskell: Indian Students between Two Worlds, 1884–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 2–3.

51. Mathews, *Wah’Kon-Tah*, 306–07.