Meet the Osage

The Osage are American Indians who once lived in the eastern part of Kansas and the western part of Missouri. Today they live all over the world. The Osage tribal headquarters is in Oklahoma. Some Osage still live in Kansas.

Originally, the Osage lived in the woodlands of the Ohio River Valley. Americans who wanted more land pushed the Osage west. By the time Kansas became a state, the Osage were living in southeastern Kansas.

The Osage were a sedentary tribe. This meant they lived in permanent villages. Osage houses were not portable. They were made with hickory saplings that were set into the ground on one end. Two hickory saplings were bent until they came together in an arch. These arches were tied together with other saplings into a frame. The frame was then covered with buffalo hides.

The Osage hunted buffalo, but much of their food came from plants and small animals they could kill near their homes. They had gardens where they grew corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins. Sometimes they traded these crops for buffalo meat.

Twice a year the entire Osage village would go on a buffalo hunt. When they were away on the hunt, they lived in structures similar to their permanent homes. A series of wood lodge frames were in place across their hunting grounds. Each lodge was a day’s travel from the next. As the Osage reached each structure they would cover it with buffalo hides to make their temporary house.

In the eastern part of Kansas there is more water. Trees grow along the rivers and creeks. Just below the ground surface, the soil has moisture nearly year-round. The Osage lived in this region where people could stay in one place longer. They could grow crops and gardens because they knew there would be enough rain to keep them growing. There also were many types of wild plants that people could use for food. Many types of animals lived in this region, so people could hunt often for meat.

When people live in one place for several months or even years at a time, they are called sedentary.
Mr. Sibley’s Report

In the 1820s the Osage lived on lands that later became part of Kansas and Missouri. The government assigned Indian agents to work with tribes. George Sibley was the Indian agent assigned to the Osage. He worked at Fort Osage in present-day Missouri. On October 1, 1820, he wrote the following report.

They raise annual small crops of corn, beans and pumpkins. These they cultivate entirely with the hoe, in the simplest manner. Their crops are usually planted in April, and receive one dressing before they leave their villages for the summer hunt in May. About the first week in August, they return to their villages to gather their crops, which have been left unhoed and unfenced all the season.

Each family, if lucky, can save from ten to twenty bags of corn and beans, of a bushel and a half each, besides a quantity of dried pumpkins. On this they feast, with the dried meat saved in summer, till September, when what remains is [saved], and they set out on the fall hunt, from which they return about Christmas. From that time, till some time in February or March, as the seasons happens to be mild or severe, they stay pretty much in their villages, making only short hunting excursions occasionally, and during that time they consume the greater part of their [saved food].

In February or March, the spring hunt commences; first the bear, and then the beaver hunt. This they pursue till planting time, when they again return to their village, pitch their crops, and in May set out for the summer hunt, taking with them their residue, if any of their corn.

This is the circle of an Osage life, here and there indented with war and trading expeditions, and thus it has been with very little variation their twelve years past. The game is very sensibly diminishing in the country which these tribes inhabit; but has not yet become scarce. Its gradual diminution seems to have had no other effect on the Indians than to make them more expert and industrious hunters, and better warriors.