

Republican Thomas Andrew Osborn ran for governor and won in 1872 and began actively promoting settlement in the state.

Fear, Politics, Myth, and Memory:

Governor Thomas A. Osborn and the Osage Border War of 1874–1875

by Isaias McCaffery

In high summer, the Gypsum Hills of south-central Kansas can radiate heat like a vast oven. The iron oxide-tinted ridges shimmer like embers on days when the mercury crosses the hundred-degree mark and keeps rising. The dusty two-lane highway to Medicine Lodge provides dramatic vistas straight out of a Western movie, showcasing scarlet-banded buttes, towering mesas, eroded arroyos, and rugged boulder-strewn canyons.¹ The arable remainder is devoted mostly to stock grazing, and as human populations have waned over the past century, the opportunistic wildlife has rebounded. Returning natives include deer, turkeys, mountain lions, and pronghorns—to which can be added some grouchy seven-foot-long western diamondback rattlesnakes from neighboring Oklahoma. The indigenous groves of red cedars are a relentless colonizer, ruining extensive pasturage as aggressive root systems seek out whatever marginal moisture the soil retains. Fire remains the primal force that preserves the equilibrium between tall grass and cedar. This is a beautiful land, but one with a measure of menace for those who fail to respect its rules, realities, and limitations. The historical balance between successes and failures—between personal and familial triumphs and tragedies—seems to have tilted toward the negative side of the scales here. Only a minority of the original nineteenth-century pioneer families established an enduring generational presence in the “Gyp Hills.” As in much of the Great Plains, the countryside is dotted with the evocative weathered stone foundations of abandoned homesteads. This enchanting landscape served as the backdrop for one of the most deceitful chapters in Kansas history, featuring the fabrication of a phony Indian war, the distribution of related political patronage, and the reelection of an administration that was openly contemptuous of Indians and their rights. Hundreds of pioneer families suffered needless terror in anticipation of phantom attackers, and cynical state authorities rationalized the murders of innocent Native Americans. In the aftermath of the Osage Border War, the Wah-Zha-Zhi people still receive undeserved censure for the tragic loss of white settlers who died at other hands.

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1. Highway 160 has been labeled the Gypsum Hills Scenic Byway by the Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks and Tourism; see <https://www.travelks.com/ksbyways/gypsum-hills/>. The University of Kansas GeoKansas website refers to the Permian geological formation by its other name, the “Red Hills”; see <http://geokansas.ku.edu/red-hills>.

After a prolonged effort to clear the Osage title to the region, expansionist interests including land speculators, railroads, bankers, bond brokers, and others with a nose for profit labored to populate the newly opened borderlands. Four separate rounds of negotiations commenced during the Civil War and concluded with the Osage removal to Indian Territory in 1871. By 1872, the promoter-in-chief of white colonization was Governor Thomas Andrew Osborn, who approved citizen petitions to organize the new counties and spoke passionately of the promise represented by the march of civilization. The newly elected governor and many of his supporters shared a heroic vision of taming the plains frontier. It that was tied to the nation's manifest destiny, and the Topeka government afforded Native American communities no place in the prosperous and free society that would arise out of the wilderness. Speaking to state legislators in January 1874 after the first full year of mass migration, Osborn proclaimed that the "rapid and continuous" growth had occurred mostly in Barber, Harper, Comanche and adjoining counties, "a significant and cheerful indication" that "the future of the State is found in the gradual extension of settlement and the corresponding extension of our frontier limit."² Like many of his fellow Kansans, the effusive governor appears to have coveted the lands of the Osage Reserve for years—since long before Anglo settlement was actually legal there. When Osborn, a youthful Pennsylvania-born carpenter's son, was elevated to the editorship of the *Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence) in 1858, the paper noted that

2. The drive to remove the Osages from Kansas was well under way during the Civil War, and after the false start of the unratified "Canville Treaty of 1863," the Indians ceded eastern lands centering around the Neosho River Valley in the Treaty of 1865. Later, the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Railroad (LL&G) tried and failed to acquire the remaining eight million acres in 1868. The Osages sold this "diminished reserve" in 1870, and their actual relocation to Indian Territory was completed the following year. See Louis F. Burns, *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 281, 289, 321–24; "Annual Message of Thomas A. Osborn, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas, 1874," *Leavenworth (KS) Times*, January 16, 1874; and Thomas A. Osborn, "Proclamation" (Recognizing Barbour County Census), April 14, 1873, Barber County Organization Files, Kansas Secretary of State's Office, ca. 1861–1912, DaRT Id 21605, Kansas State Archives. For bond and railroad booster activity, see Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 96–98. See also "Concerning the Fraudulent Issue of Bonds in Kansas," *Kansas Farmer* (Topeka), February 5, 1875; Congress tried to reserve set aside the former Osage Reserve for "actual settlers" and to prevent land speculation. As was true elsewhere, many people dodged residency and other legal provisions to acquire cheap land at \$1.25 per acre that they may have always intended to sell as soon as possible. See "Governor Osborn's Message: A Splendid Exhibit for Kansas," *Weekly News-Democrat* (Emporia, KS), January 17, 1873.

the Verdigris River Valley was "beautiful and fertile" and predicted that "a large emigration to southern Kansas can be accommodated the coming spring and summer." Prospective squatters were falsely informed that "the coal mines below here, on the Osage Indian lands, are from four to five feet thick, and the timber ten miles wide." The coming Civil War slowed but did not prevent the avalanche of squatters stimulated by such propaganda.³

Starting in late 1871, after the former Native occupants had been removed, the Kansas papers fed the reading public a steady diet of booster material extolling the superlative qualities of the border. The *Girard Press* called "Sumner, Harper, Barbour, Comanche and Clark" Counties "the most desirable body of farming lands in the State" and described them as "rich, undulating prairie, well-watered and supplied with timber." In late 1872, the excited editor of the *Olathe Mirror* revealed news that "iron ore has been discovered on the Medicine Lodge [River], in Barbour County in the south-western part of the State." The *Wichita Eagle* trumpeted that "a five foot vein of coal underlies a large portion of that [Barber] county." Widely reprinted columns churned out by the "Board of Emigration at Medicine Lodge" concluded that the area was "a brilliant prospect" and informed readers that "the indications are" that fertile limestone "exists in considerable quantities." Perhaps the most accurate statement was the prediction that a settler might discover a superabundant supply of rock that could be quarried for "excellent building stone." While it is impossible to quantify the collective impact of all this printed "intelligence," it is clear that in 1873 hundreds of settlers flooded into the new counties.⁴

3. "Southern Kansas," *Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence, KS), March 27, 1858. At this time, the primary Osage villages lay on the Verdigris River and its tributaries. Substantial coal reserves existed well to the east in Crawford and Cherokee Counties but not along the Verdigris. Homer E. Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 99–101. For a concise description of Osage troubles related to declining buffalo populations, clashes with Plains tribes, and the growing hostility of Kansas settlers in the early 1870s, see James E. Sherow, *The Chisholm Trail: Joseph McCoy's Great Gamble* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2018), 224–25. Cattle ranching proved to be more suitable for the Osage reservation than the plow.

4. "The Osage Diminished Reserve Lands," *Girard (KS) Press*, September 15, 1871; "State News," *Olathe (KS) Mirror*, December 19, 1872, "City and County News," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, April 12, 1872; "Barbour County Kansas: Location—Soil, Timber, Water and Other Advantages," *Hutchinson (KS) News*, January 2, 1873; a rare alternative description of Barber County appeared in the *Longton Weekly Ledger* "It is a poor, miserable, barren waste, that no sensible man can be humbugged by. The soil in the valleys is sand; The upland is red clay, washed out into deep canyons from fifty to two hundred feet deep. A few scrubby cedars and some low, scrubby elms and cottonwoods comprise the timber. . . ."

The Kansas Historical Society’s “History and Biography” sketch for the state’s sixth chief executive observes that “the promotion of continued colonizing and land settlements and the encouragement of settlers to permanently homestead was the Governor’s highest priority.” Later in life, Osborn strove to enshrine the pioneer legacy of his generation and became president of the Kansas Historical Society in 1890.⁵ However, in 1873, the buoyant optimism and expansionist confidence with which Osborn and fellow Republicans had sailed into office dissipated in the midst of escalating crises. To clearly interpret the acrimonious arguments that erupted in the wake of the Osage Border War, one must recognize the sharp partisan divisions within the state. Osborn’s policy agenda cannot be separated from his personal political ambition and his determination to vanquish his reformist opponents in the coming 1874 gubernatorial contest—and in the races to follow. Hitching his electoral fortunes to support for struggling frontier colonists, the governor exploited the existing fear and hatred of Native Americans and vented unjust abuse upon the Osage Nation. It was, Osage historian Louis F. Burns noted dryly, “surely not the finest hour in Kansas history.”⁶ A century and a half later, clashing versions of the related events are still repeated, but a logical weighing of evidence supports the general conclusions of Osborn’s critics and the traditional



Three unidentified Osage chiefs sit for this photo taken circa 1860s.

accounts of the Wah-Zha-Zhi people. The inhabitants of south-central Kansas deserve an accurate recasting of the border-war mythology that is still in circulation—both for themselves and for generations to come. A fact-based assessment should replace the self-serving misrepresentations of long-departed office holders. Victimized by interests that often treated Native Americans as a political issue rather than as human beings, the Osages might even receive an overdue apology.

The questionable nature of the “Kansas-Osage Border War of 1874” was first examined in detail in 1985 by historian James R. Christianson in a *Chronicles of Oklahoma* article that was partly derived from a doctoral dissertation. Regarding the true nature of the episode, the subtitle of the article questions whether the war was a case of “fact or wishful thinking.” While the text does not

It is the most worthless county I ever saw.” “Superiority of the Neutral Land,” *Longton (KS) Weekly Ledger*, November 22, 1873.

5. See “History and Biography,” Governor Records, Thomas A. Osborn Administration, 1873–1877, at <https://www.kshs.org/p/governor-s-records-thomas-andrew-osborn-administration-jan-13-1873-jan-8-1877/13845#intro>; and “Thomas A. Osborn,” *kansapedia*, Kansas Historical Society, at <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/thomas-andrew-osborn/17104>. Osborn rose rapidly from a compositor of newspaper type to shop foreman and then to editing by the age of twenty-two. Journalism was a common nineteenth-century stepping stone to politics, as was the legal profession, which was Osborn’s next undertaking.

6. Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 350–51.

explicitly answer this question, it concludes that Governor Osborn triumphed in the ugly debate with his detractors despite the many weaknesses of his arguments and that Osage autonomy was further eroded as a result. In truth, there was no “war” in any meaningful sense, merely a preemptory mobilization of the Kansas state militia. The only related bloodshed was two series of disconnected murders near Medicine Lodge—first of unfortunate white settlers and then of unlucky Osages. The killings fanned public fear, created an opportunity for Osborn to strengthen his rural political base, generated conflicting federal and state investigations, and triggered a circus of partisan antagonism in the press.⁷

The recently settled farm families of south-central Kansas were already in desperate straits before the advent of the Indian troubles. While a national economic depression in 1873 slowed commerce, it seems to have actually increased homesteading on the Kansas border by creating a wave of impoverished people frantic to make a new start. Osborn noted that hard times had hardly reduced the number of incoming settlers and was gratified to report that since 1870, “the frontier has been pushed further west a hundred miles or more.” Where “the buffalo roamed, and the Indian pursued the chase,” now “the entire face of the country is changed.”⁸ Geographer James R. Shortridge discovered that a sizable percentage of the human influx into the Gypsum Hills came from the Border States. Migrating from states such as Missouri and Kentucky, these cash-strapped people were still attempting to rebound from the terrible disruption of the Civil War. However, relocation to the semiarid Kansas border country brought yet another round of hardship and disappointment for most struggling pioneer families. In the case of Barber County, the percentage of transplanted southerners declined “from forty-eight in 1875 to thirty-four in 1885” as tough conditions eliminated transitory plowmen in favor of cattle ranchers.⁹

Displaced eastern Kansans contributed another important element to the clusters of agricultural operations springing up around Medicine Lodge. At least

one of these farmers would lose his life in what appeared at first glance to be an Indian raid. The Pennsylvania German Isaac Keim had journeyed west to Liberty, Iowa, where he married a fellow member of the German Baptist Brethren Church named Fannie Brown. The two relocated to Ozawkie, Jefferson County, Kansas, with their ten children, beginning with an estate worth \$400 that rose to the substantial value of \$3,000, according to the 1860 and 1870 federal censuses. Isaac Keim took up the ministry in 1863, but by Brethren tradition, this calling was unpaid. Therefore, after trying his hand at carpentry, he continued to farm. In the midst of drought and economic depression, the Keims abandoned the Ozawkie farm in 1873, leaving it to be auctioned for delinquent taxes. The next year found them tilling the rocky red soil less than four miles west of the rough plank houses of Medicine Lodge. An unknown party murdered Isaac Keim and stole his horses on June 17, 1874, prompting his surviving family to permanently flee the Gypsum Hills. The widowed Fannie Keim resided in the security of the Jefferson County Dunker community until her death almost forty years later.¹⁰

Isaac Keim’s brutal death was part of a cluster of murders. Four individuals were killed and scalped in close proximity to Medicine Lodge on June 17, 1874, and the news reached Hutchinson the next day. The fallen included John H. Martin (age twenty-four), Elijah R. Kennedy (age forty, often spelled “Cannaday”), Isaac Keim (age forty-one), and George Koons (age fourteen). With the Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Kiowas already engaged in open hostilities to the west, the public naturally directed most of its suspicion toward these allied combatants. On April 9, a band of Cheyennes had raided nearby Sun City (twenty miles from Medicine Lodge), and the Sixth U.S. Cavalry afterward successfully intercepted and engaged the retreating war party.¹¹ The *Sumner County*

10. The sizable German Baptist Brethren colonies in northeast Kansas included the family of Dwight David Eisenhower’s grandfather Jacob Frederick. Elmer LeRoy Craik. See *A History of the Church of the Brethren in Kansas* (McPherson, KS: Daily Republican Press, 1922), 209–10; U.S. Federal Census of 1860, Rock Creek, Jefferson County, Kansas, Roll M653 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1870); U.S. Federal Census of 1870, Ozawkie, Jefferson County, Kansas, Roll 593-435 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1870); “Delinquent Tax List of 1873,” *Oskaloosa (KS) Sickle*, April 11, 1874; Kansas State Census of 1865, Jefferson County, Ozawkie Township, June 11, 1865 (Topeka, KS: State Printing Works, 1865). See also “Fannie ‘Fanny’ Brown Puderbaugh,” Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/37220476/fannie-puderbaugh>; and “Eisenhower/Eisenhower Family History,” Kansas Heritage Group, <http://www.kansasheritage.org/abilene/ikehist.html>.

11. *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74* (Topeka, KS: State Printing Works, 1874), 6; “The Late Indian Massacre,” *Weekly*

7. James R. Christianson, “The Kansas-Osage Border War of 1874: Fact or Wishful Thinking?,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 63 (September 1985): 308–09.

8. *Annual Message of Thomas A. Osborn, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas, 1875* (Topeka, KS: State Printing Works, 1875), 3, 5.

9. James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 87, 192.

Press blamed the Cheyennes for the four June murders and reported wide-spread public panic, but it attributed the deaths to “roving bands without concert of action.” The editor maintained that “the fear of an Indian war upon our frontier is groundless, and no one need apprehend any more danger than though he or she was living in the heart of Pennsylvania.” “Absurd rumors” had been “set afloat by foolish persons,” and frightened settlers had abandoned their farms and fled to the newly fortified towns of Kiowa and Medicine Lodge. Armed scouting parties in Barber County now had the situation in hand, and the alerted inhabitants appeared to be as safe as “the people of Ohio or Indiana.”¹² On that same day, the *Topeka Weekly Commonwealth* suggested that a company of a hundred “old plainsmen” with their “thorough knowledge of the country” would be “effective in check-mating any hostile designs of the Indians.” Despite the militant headline “From the Front,” the general tone was one of rebounding confidence and returning calm.¹³



This photo post card of an unidentified Osage man and woman dates between 1870 and 1890.

Not everyone agreed unequivocally that the killers were Native Americans. General John Pope, the veteran field commander of federal troops patrolling the southern plains, strongly suspected that the crimes

were the work of notorious white horse thieves known to haunt the border region.¹⁴ In early May, just weeks before the Medicine Lodge murders, the *Osage County Chronicle* reported that a band of rustlers in Barber County—including “both Indians and whites”—was “committing depredations on the settlers and running off stock.”¹⁵ Thomas Allen McNeal, an early pioneer of the Gypsum

Atchison (KS) Champion, July 4, 1874. Plains tribes were outraged by the massive slaughter of buffalo by white hunters in western Kansas and Indian Territory. “Indian Affairs,” *Weekly Commonwealth* (Topeka, KS), July 1, 1874.

12. “Indian Raid,” *Sumner County Press* (Wellington, KS), July 2, 1874.

13. “From the Front,” *Weekly Commonwealth*, July 2, 1874. Doubtless many Kansas journalists remembered the lurid reports that Indians had massacred nineteen residents of Barber County in May 1873. Related stories proved to be “utterly false.” So-called Indian panics on the Kansas frontier were frequent affairs. “Medicine Lodge, Kansas,” *Wichita Eagle*, May 15, 1873.

14. “The Indian Scare Over,” *Sumner County Press*, July 2, 1874. The editor questioned General Pope’s judgment, speculating that Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors were the true culprits.

15. “State News,” *Osage County Chronicle*, May 1, 1874, p. 2.

Hills, later remembered that the Indian scare generated by the uprising of the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Arapahos had driven numerous cutthroat horse thieves toward the border towns, including Caldwell. McNeal recounted the rescue of two ranchers, J. C. Hopkins and his brother, from a pack of roving criminals. Word spread that the thieves intended to murder the brothers, rob them, “run off their stock, loot the [Pond Creek Ranch] store, and then charge the crime up to the Indians.” A posse of ten armed citizens led by Sheriff Joe Thralls intervened to thwart the plot. McNeal’s story demonstrated a nineteenth-century awareness that the scalping of murder victims could be an effective method for Anglo killers to evade the gallows by throwing suspicion elsewhere. Illustrating this point, in August 1874 the *Wichita Eagle* reported that “some of the murders committed in the territory a few weeks since for which Indians were blamed have been confessed to by the men who were hung in Wellington last week and some of the property belonging to the murdered persons was found in the possession of the horse thieves.”¹⁶

Matter-of-fact testimony from three Cheyennes provided an intriguing scrap of evidence relating to the true identity of the Barber County murderers. Speaking to reporters through a translator in late July 1874, the trio confirmed that the four men killed near Medicine Lodge had been the targets of a marauding band of Kiowas. The Cheyennes were not attempting to shift blame or escape retribution because they freely admitted slaying a fifth man south of Fort Dodge, but they did regret the loss of several of their own warriors in the fighting that ensued. These Cheyennes had no obvious motive to lie, and it is believable that they could have heard about their Kiowa allies’ exploits by the time of the interview. If the Cheyennes had been responsible for a successful raid near Medicine Lodge, then it is likely that they would have taken the credit. Although the account cannot be verified, the circumstances and timeline are plausible, and the story lacks obvious factual flaws. What also stands out is that prior to the events of August 17, 1874, not a single source assigned responsibility to the Osages in the deaths of Kennedy, Keim, Martin, and Koons.¹⁷

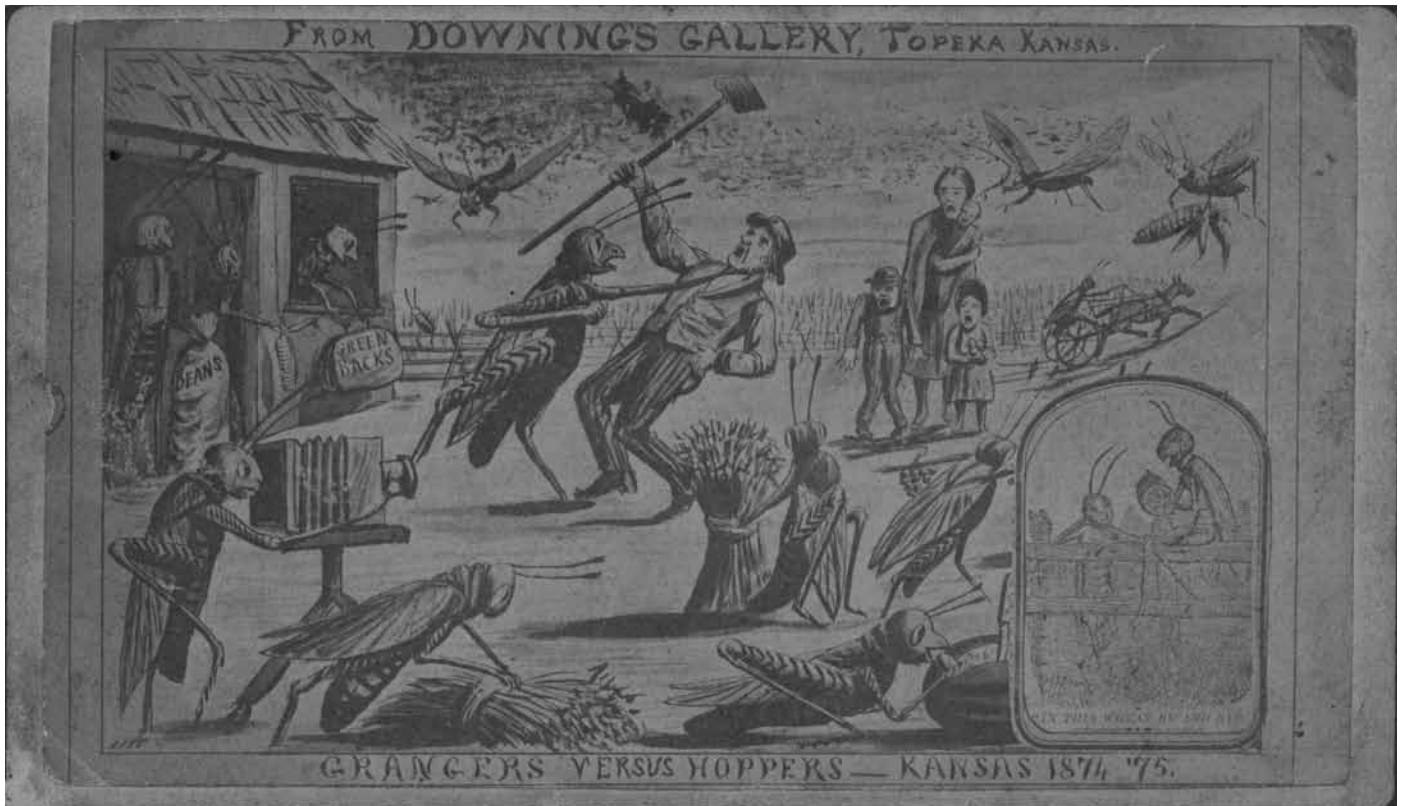
16. Thomas Allen McNeal, *When Kansas Was Young* (New York: McMillan, 1922), 16–17. McNeal interestingly remarked that “the cattle men saw to it that if there was no genuine Indian scare, one was manufactured, in order to discourage immigration of grangers who spoil the free range” (143). “Not all Indian,” *Wichita Eagle*, August 6, 1874.

17. “Die Feindseliger Indianer,” *Der Deutsche Correspondent* (Baltimore, MD), July 27, 1874. Some Kansas newspapers also identified the Kiowas as the Barber County raiders; see, for example, “Indians,” *Elk County Ledger* (Elk Falls, KS), July 2, 1874.

At the time, many Kansans still remembered that the Wah-Zha-Zhi had supplied valuable service to the Union during the Civil War and that only five years earlier, Osage scouts had rendered vital assistance to Colonel George Armstrong Custer in his 1868 winter campaign against Chief Black Kettle’s Cheyennes. In the southeast Kansas border towns 150 miles east of Medicine Lodge, many residents had personal relationships with the Osages stretching back for years, and the Indians made frequent visits (town merchants profited from Native American trade). In September 1873, the residents of Coffeyville sponsored a multiday powwow called the “Gathering of the Reds,” featuring “all of the Osage chiefs including Big Hill Joe, Chetopa and all the others.” Visitors poured into local hotels to enjoy the “war paint, wild costumes, and curiously contrived weapons” of dancers from multiple tribes, with Friday predicted (with just a touch of hyperbole) to be “the greatest day in the history of Kansas.” Having suffered its own bitter losses in the intertribal contest for control over the buffalo range, the Osage Nation could hardly be expected to be in league with the High Plains warriors terrorizing the Kansas frontier in 1874. Had the army decided to do so, it likely could have recruited Osage scouts to serve once more under the U.S. flag.¹⁸

The volatile cyclical climate of the plains played a decisive role in the behavior of both whites and Osages as autumn events unfolded. Intense drought gripped the region just as a deepening national depression that followed the Panic of 1873 pummeled the farm economy, bringing many residents to the brink of starvation. The crops of both settlers and Indians withered under a cloudless sky, and then millions of ravenous grasshoppers swarmed out of the Rockies to devour any surviving

18. Isaias McCaffery, “We-He-Sa-Ki (Hard Rope): Osage Band Chief and Diplomat, 1821–1883,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 41 (Spring 2018): 12. For the Coffeyville powwow, see “Kansas,” *Atchison (KS) Daily Patriot*, September 25, 1873. Within the Verdigris River Valley, which contained the 1860s Kansas settlements of the Osage, relations with white settlers had been mostly positive. One witness recalled that “as a general thing the whites and the Indians got along very well. The Indians as a rule were friendly in their intercourse.” The well-mannered Anglos who knew the Osages seem to have harbored little fear of them. A Montgomery County rifle company was organized for defense against possible Indian attack in 1870, but this response was based on a rumor of Comanche raiders, not a threat from local Osages, who probably would have been enlisted to help fight the Comanches if the rumors had proved to be factual. “Reminiscences of the Settlement of Cherry Township,” *Independence Kansan*, January 2, 1878. While Medicine Lodge pioneers sheltered from Indians behind palisade walls, a thousand Arkansas City residents watched forty Osage dancers at a “grand carnival”; see “From the Border,” *Weekly Commonwealth*, July 16, 1874.



Kansas artist Henry Worrall's cartoon depicts farmers (Grangers) fending off grasshopper swarms, with indications of their devastating impact on lives and food production in Kansas during the mid-1870s. Governor Osborn was forced to consider emergency public relief.

vegetation.¹⁹ In Topeka, reports of devastation and pleas for state assistance accumulated on Osborn's desk, including emotional handwritten accounts that survive in the collections of the state archives. In September, Osborn took the unprecedented step of convening the legislature to consider authorizing emergency public relief (for the first time in state history) because "the western and new settled portions of the state have been invaded by an army of grasshoppers . . . destroy[ing] the growing crops upon which the people relied for subsistence, thus . . . rendering destitute many of our citizens." Without a rapid reaction, the governor's dream of populating the western Kansas counties might dissipate as quickly as the fading food reserves on the stricken frontier. At least one

letter, written by T. M. Helm from the Solomon Valley, combined a discussion of the insect plague and its political ramifications. Helm noted that grasshoppers "have destroyed every thing [sic] of vegetation even to eating the foliage of the trees" and concluded that "unless assistance is rendered," some settlers would inevitably starve. Helm raised the question of whether (in the absence of state aid) "the people will support you for reelection" with "quite a feeling being cooked up against you here." With Kansas facing famine, economic stagnation, and Indian attack, Thomas Andrew Osborn's reelection prospects were on the line.²⁰

Meanwhile, on the Osage reservation, administrator Isaac T. Gibson's position was also in jeopardy, with a growing number of vocal Indian opponents favoring

19. Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10 (October 2011): 403-04; and "The Grasshopper Plague," *Walnut Valley Times* (El Dorado, KS), August 14, 1874. The editor of the *Walnut Valley Times* reported that the cloud of insects darkened the sky, and "the roar of their coming was like heavy artillery."

20. Thomas A. Osborn, "Grasshopper Relief Proclamation," September 15, 1874, Kansas Memory, item 675, Kansas Historical Society, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/675>; T. M. Holm to Thomas Osborn, July 30, 1874, Governor Thomas A. Osborn Papers, box 4, folder 70, "Relief 1873-74," State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society;



This cartoon sketch, signed by F.T. Vance in 1875, represents the bleak and devoured countryside in the wake of the state's grasshopper plagues. Vance titled it, *Mr. G. Hopper Kansas*.

his replacement. Although Gibson was still committed to his vision of substituting “civilized” horticulture for traditional bison hunts, the unforeseen 1874 influx of grasshoppers had disrupted that agenda. Rising Osage dissatisfaction over Gibson’s supervision of the tribe was receiving attention in Washington, D.C., and the widespread poverty and hunger on the reservation lent substance to the charges of mismanagement. With no better alternative, Gibson yielded to persistent Wah-Zha-Zhi appeals for an emergency buffalo hunt in mid-July. He

and Kansas State Treasurer, *Fourteenth Annual Report* (Topeka, KS: State Printing Works, 1874), 8. Osborn and the Kansas legislature issued and sold \$73,000 in relief bonds to finance aid for destitute farmers on the drought-stricken frontier. This patronage was an important part of the governor’s strategy to win the November election.

explained later, “I authorized and advised them . . . to go to the plains and procure a supply of buffalo-meat and tallow for food. . . . It was necessary for them to obtain a few weeks subsistence on the plains, or starve.” The abundant sustenance promised by the adoption of European-style farming had been incinerated by drought or consumed by the grasshopper horde, and Osage survival now required recourse to the “savage” pursuit of game. Surely this was a blow to the image of the modern agricultural system underpinning Anglo-American society—although naturally, no one at the agency in Pawhuska said as much.²¹

Unknowingly, more than a thousand Osage men and women trekked northwestward toward a territory gripped by panic and anti-Indian hysteria. Within a month of the Medicine Lodge murders, at least ten companies of Kansas militia were under arms, with two units in Barber County (one sanctioned and one ad hoc) partly equipped with modern Sharps rifles and bracing for the impending assault of an imaginary force of “2000 mounted warriors from the Cheyennes, Kiowas and Arapahoes.”²² At Osborn’s urgent request, the U.S. secretary of war shipped 500 breech-loading carbines and 50,000 rounds of ammunition by express train from the federal Rock Island Arsenal. More than a month had passed since the Barber County murders, and public emotion was shifting from terror to anger and a lust for vengeance. In early July, the *Kansas Chief* reported armed vigilantes departing from

Medicine Lodge on “a little expedition of reprisals for scalps.” To this posse’s frustration, the prairie proved to be devoid of Indian targets. Posted at Sun City on July 23, militia Captain L. H. Bowlus of the “Barbour County Guards” informed Governor Osborn of continuing

21. John Joseph Mathews, *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters*, The Civilization of the American Indian Series 60 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 706–09. On August 1, 1874, the trader James A. Coffee (who spoke Osage) was instructed by Agent Gibson “to take a few Indians” to warn hunting Osages and Kaws to vacate Kansas to avoid violence. *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for the Year 1874*, U.S. Department of the Interior (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1874), 93, 96; for militia company deployment, see “From Cowley County,” *Weekly Commonwealth*, September 10, 1874. The piece caustically calls the Indians “government pets” of the “Quaker Indian policy.”

22. Untitled, *Eureka (KS) Herald and Greenwood County Republican*, July 23, 1874, 4.

“quiet” in the vicinity but also wrote of fresh sightings of “free squads of Indians” moving up from the south. In Bowlus’s judgment, his small force was primed for action. The company included “old buffalo hunters and men who will stand fire and are all eager to revenge the death of our citizens.” Precisely which Indians deserved this retribution was undefined.²³

With a violent collision imminent between scattered parties of Wah-Zha-Zhi buffalo hunters and an aroused Kansas citizenry—and ongoing clashes continuing between the Cheyennes and federal forces—Gibson became justly concerned that the Osages crossing into Kansas west of the Arkansas River would be misidentified as enemies and attacked. Gibson dispatched runners on August 1 to recall the hunting parties after Major J. J. Upham of the U.S. Sixth Cavalry—also apprehensive about possible violence—gave “peremptory orders” for all Osages to depart from the state. Upham declared that any “Indians found off their reservations would be regarded as hostile and treated accordingly.” Given the huge geographical area involved and the difficulty of pinpointing small groups of individuals moving unpredictably in search of equally mobile bison, the recall worked remarkably well, and riders located and safely extricated nearly all the Osages. Only a single small party failed to receive the warning, resulting in what Burns termed the “Medicine Lodge Massacre.”²⁴

Bowlus and his Barbour County Guards did not see the action that they craved, although Governor Osborn learned of the influx of Osage hunters and promptly dispatched Bowlus’s mounted men westward into Comanche County in hot pursuit. Osborn instructed the militia captain that if he encountered any Indians, he was to “arrest them and hold them as hostages until something definite” could be learned about possible culpability for crimes along the border. The editor of the Topeka *Weekly Commonwealth*, a paper that often served as the governor’s mouthpiece, observed that “there may be a locking of diplomatic horns betwixt the state of Kansas and that godly, shad-bellied fraud, Agent Gibson, ere long.” Picking a quarrel with the Quakers in the Indian Service was a shrewd political tactic

given widespread public disgust for the pious, pacifist, “Indian loving,” African American Exoduster-assisting Society of Friends. Critics of the Friends cast them as aloof and naive moralists who coddled murderous savages or alternately as unpatriotic cowards who did not salute the flag and had not fought to defend the Union. Embracing the tactic of negative politics, the governor and his surrogates expanded and consolidated their base by heaping scorn upon groups already unpopular with the electorate, including Native Americans, Quakers, and elitist East Coast federal bureaucrats. This strategy served to deflect the prevailing anger and discontent from the administration in Topeka and lent the governor the tough, combative, “manly” image of a fighter (in contrast to the meek Quakers and their skulking Indian charges). Dispatching a force of poorly drilled, heavily armed and vengeful amateurs to arrest a people who were despised on both cultural and racial grounds was a recipe for murder, but it was perfectly reasonable from the vantage point of frontier politics. For Osborn, a bit of timely violence probably appeared to be just the thing to help him clinch another two years as Kansas governor. His traumatized constituents would equate attacks on Indians as meting out justice. In addition, Osborn may have reasoned that after weeks of quiet along the border, some armed conflict could legitimize the ballooning costs of extended militia deployments and his continuing requests for further federal aid.²⁵

With the departure of the Barbour County Guards, it was the Medicine Lodge mounted riflemen under Cyrus M. Ricker who actually spilled Osage blood. Yet another

23. Captain L. H. Bowles to Thomas A. Osborn, July 23, 1874, Governor Thomas A. Osborn Papers, box 3, folder 57 “Indians,” Kansas Historical Society; “The Indian Panic,” *Kansas Chief* (Troy), July 2, 1874; and *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74*, 7.

24. *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74*, 9–10; and Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 350–51.

25. “Indian Matters—the Cheyenne Still Threatening,” *Weekly Commonwealth*, August 6, 1874. In this context, “shad-bellied” means “gutless.” In July, the *Commonwealth* had criticized “government Quaker Indian agents” and suggested that a random “baker’s dozen” of their “docile charges” ought to be executed for the Barber County killings without specifying which Indian nation to punish (suggesting that such distinctions did not matter); untitled, *Weekly Commonwealth*, July 2, 1874. Although many Quakers had served in the Civil War, the perception of the Friends as unpatriotic shirkers and cowards was widespread; see Jacquelyn S. Nelson, *Indiana Quakers Confront the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1991), 98. The governor liked to chronicle the expenses incurred by Kansas in its defense against Indians and then demand that the federal government reimburse the state. By 1875, the amassed figure was \$191,917.06. He also repeatedly called for Indian Affairs to be turned over to the War Department, which might apply vigorous military force to crush Native American resistance. In Osborn’s view, Indian communities were not “independent nations” but “a race of savages.” This perception of Indians as a singularity helps explain why the governor included incidents involving other tribes when condemning the Osages (besides simple misrepresentation). *Annual Message of Thomas A. Osborn, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas, 1875*, 21–22.

Pennsylvanian (like Osborn and Keim), Captain Ricker was a man with no documented experience confronting Native Americans. A decade earlier, he had served for nine months as a private in Company H of the 126th Pennsylvania Volunteers, surviving the terrible Union debacle under General Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville, Virginia, before being mustered out of his regiment in May 1863. After the Civil War, Ricker joined the large westward migration of homesteading veterans; according to some sources, he operated a Medicine Lodge saloon. In the wake of the Osage Border War and its contentious aftermath, the discharged militia captain would permanently leave the Gypsum Hills and take up farming in his native Franklin County, Pennsylvania, until his death in 1909.²⁶ In July 1874, the citizens guard at Medicine Lodge had selected Ricker as captain, but Osborn had withheld official authorization of a second rifle company for Barber County. The eager men decided to mobilize anyway with just a sheriff's approval. Militia officer positions were commonly dispensed as political patronage, and perhaps Ricker lacked the requisite connection to the Osborn administration. When he requested that state rations be sent to his hungry volunteers, with "not one pound of coffee or bacon [available] in Medicine Lodge," the governor ignored the unsolicited telegram. Only after a bloody encounter with the Osages was Ricker's commission quickly granted and supplies suddenly made available. Just a week after these killings, both he and Bowlus boarded a train to Topeka as delegates to the 1874 Kansas Republican state convention, publicly endorsing "favorite candidate" Thomas A. Osborn's nomination for another term as governor.²⁷

As the Osages later recalled in their sworn testimony, the summer buffalo hunters—comprising nearly the entire tribe of men, women, and children—departed from the reservation in early June 1874, crossed the Arkansas

River (the Ni'-zhu-dse Ton-ga, or "Big Red River"), and slowly fanned out into western Oklahoma (Indian Territory) and ultimately parts of Kansas. Over many hot days, the people located depressingly few bison. Finally, a group of eighteen men, ten women, and two boys left a larger column and traveled on alone for four days, led by Wa-tse'-gi-don-a-bi (meaning "One Whose Trophies Are Seen"). They crossed a road and encamped near a group of white men without incident, departing the next day and soon arriving at a small Anglo settlement (later Kiowa) near the Kansas line. Inquiring whether anyone knew where buffalo could be found, they were told to cross the Cedar Mountains to the other side, where there were "plenty." A witness named Levi Davis remembered seeing at least "three women" with the party and recalled that "the Indians acted friendly to me." The Osages "had said they were after buffalo," and "none of the horses I saw were painted (for war)." Glad to acquire a solid lead in their quest, the *Wah-Zha-Zhi* advanced to a point about fifteen miles northeast of Medicine Lodge by the next day. The Cedar Mountains cover western Barber County, and an 1883 account described them as "largely bluffly and broken"; thus, Wa-tse'-gi-don-a-bi's people had skirted the roughest terrain on a generally northward track out of Oklahoma. Three days of productive hunting and meat curing ensued.²⁸ On August 6, S. J. Shepler and his son observed the Osage encampment at "close range" and then proceeded toward town with no noticeable response from the Indians. On reflection, Shepler "had a strong impression" that the *Wah-Zha-Zhi* might "have harmful intentions toward someone," so he duly reported the sighting to Ricker.²⁹

The following day, August 7, the Osages were still processing their meat at the same location, obviously with no premonition of any coming trouble. When Ricker's armed men approached them, Ah-ke-tah-ki-he-ka ("Chief Protector") of the Black Dog Band rode forward with another Osage who spoke some English to

26. "Cyrus M. Ricker," *Waynesboro (PA) Record*, March 24, 1909; Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-65* (Harrisburg, PA: State Printing Office, 1871), 143; and "A Square Issue," *Triumph* (Ottawa, KS), August 27, 1875. The *Atchison Daily Patriot* noted that C. M. Ricker was "a saloon keeper"; "Osborn's Indian Campaign," *Atchison Daily Patriot*, April 2, 1875. To the many Kansas supporters of temperance, this occupation made him a scoundrel.

27. James R. Christianson, "A Study of Osage History prior to 1876" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1968), 319; "The State Convention," *Weekly Commonwealth*, August 27, 1874; and "Letter from Barbour Co.," *Weekly Commonwealth*, October 28, 1874. The paper erroneously referred to Captain L. H. Bowlus as "Major." A writer from Barber County complained that the Republican "Hutchinson Ring" was sending "a lot of dead-beats" south to fill militia positions, denying locals the needed patronage jobs "simply because they were not Osborn men."

28. *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners*, 91; Francis La Flesche, *A Dictionary of the Osage Language* (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1931), 111, 206.

29. Christianson, "A Study of Osage History," 320; and *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1875* (Topeka, KS: State Printing Works, 1875), 13. Three men named Shepler were listed on a June 25 roster of C. W. Ricker's company, with "T. F. Shepler" appearing twice. It is possible that S. J. Shepler himself was part of the Barber County unit. William G. Cutler's 1883 *History of the State of Kansas* describes the Cedar Mountains in Barber County: see <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler//barber/barber-co-p1.html>.

determine their intentions. The two Osages were rapidly disarmed, as were two more who approached and then two additional individuals. At this juncture, one of the detained Indians called out to the others to stay back, fearing the unfriendly intentions of the nervous Medicine Lodge volunteers. Ricker ordered the "hallooing" Osage to be silent, and some of the Indian prisoners began to shake hands with the white men around them as a peaceful display. At that moment, a trooper discharged his weapon, and all the Osages who could do so fled, pursued for over three miles by the shooting whites on horseback. Riflemen killed at least one of the six Wah-Zha-Zhi prisoners, but others, including Ah-ke-tah-ki-he-ka, regained their freedom. According to the white men's accounts, the group's leader, Wa-tse'-gi-don-a-bi, was among the fallen—and he is absent from the 1878 tribal rolls, unlike two other sworn witnesses who corroborated the Osage account: twenty-six-year-old Che-hah-nah-she of the Big Chief Band (Chi'-ha-non-ge, or meaning "Horse's Cut Hoof") and thirty-six-year-old Ne-Kah of the White Hair Band (Ni'-ka, meaning "Man" or "Person"). The Osages claimed that after the firing erupted, their people did not shoot back because the captured individuals had yielded up the best weapons (only a few old muzzle-loading pieces remained), and the position of the six Indian captives obstructed a clear line of fire. Before retreating to "the Lodge," Ricker's men seized everything of value from the camp, including a sizable herd of about fifty horses and mules.³⁰

30. Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners, 91–92; Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74, 15. The Kansas adjutant general suggested that the Osage leader shot by militia near Medicine Lodge was a son of Chief Broke Arm, who had fought as a Confederate officer during the Civil War. This suggestion may have been an effort to blacken the reputation of the fallen Osages as rebels who had previously served the failed southern rebellion. In fact the majority favored the union. The names, ages, genders, and roll numbers of the Osage witnesses can be found in Louis F. Burns, "Osage Annuity Rolls of 1878" (Fallbrook, CA: self-published, 1981). Bound in three volumes, these booklets provide annotated cultural and linguistic information in addition to the Bureau of Indian Affairs roster data held in the National Archives. Further clan affiliations can be traced in Louis F. Burns, *Osage Indian Bands and Clans* (Fallbrook, CA: Ciga Press, 1984), 87. For example, Ah-ke-tah-ki-he-ka was a member of the Ne-ke-wakon-ta-ke Clan as well as the Black Dog Band, a name designation that Burns rendered as the "Man of Mystery Clan." Burns believed that the Wah-Zha-Zhi who were attacked were "Hard Rope's [We-He-Sa-Ki's] people," affiliated with the Heart Stays and White Hair Bands. Multiple traditional groups were actually represented due to the ongoing nineteenth-century blurring of tribal divisions. Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 351; for Osage orthography, see La Flesche, *A Dictionary of the Osage Language*, 107.

Hours later, a few Wah-Zha-Zhi men backtracked to the site of the killing to attempt a rapid burial for the dead. They discovered three victims but failed to find the fourth in the fading light. One man had been scalped and methodically riddled with four shots in the head, one in the neck, two in the chest, and one in the bowels. His fallen mount lay beside him. The searchers discovered a second Osage at the site where the six had been captured. His body was scalped, with two rounds in the chest and a leg that had been broken by a powerful high-caliber projectile. A third casualty had died in the abandoned Osage camp, struck by a bullet that entered through the small of his back and exited from his chest (a wound consistent with retreat rather than attack). His scalp was intact, but his "finely-worked belt" of leather was missing. The fleeing Osages had seen a fourth gunshot victim tumble from his saddle, but his remains could not be found. Days later (on or about August 12), the hungry and traumatized survivors, including two pregnant women who were "ready for confinement," arrived back at the reservation with a harrowing story that ignited months of public charges and counteraccusations. Federal officials requested an immediate investigation given their strong suspicion that Kansas civilians had brutally murdered, robbed, and mutilated peaceful Indians.³¹

Early Kansas press accounts of the incident registered jubilation, and one of Ricker's elated men informed the *Emporia Weekly News-Democrat* that "fifty or sixty Little Osages" had been "whipped." According to E. W. Iliff, the Indians displayed no stomach for a stand-up contest and bolted while "pursued by the avenging hand of the long outraged settlers." The pony herd taken from the Wah-Zha-Zhi encampment also constituted "a useful substitute for many of our men." The tone of the public discourse darkened abruptly when word circulated that federal authorities questioned the actual legality of the fight; officials were now investigating possible murders and horse theft by an unauthorized mob.³²

31. According to Osage historian John Joseph Mathews, the three recovered dead were laid at the bottom of a cut bank, and crumbling soil was quickly collapsed over them to provide a minimal earth covering. Mathews, *The Osages*, 711. By August 17, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Enoch Hoag had commenced an inquiry into the Wah-Zha-Zhi deaths, and Governor Osborn had retroactively mustered their killers into the Kansas state militia. For the Osage survivors, the journey of approximately 120 miles back to the reservation required several days of riding. *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74*, 15, 17–18.

32. "The Osages Whipped," *Weekly News-Democrat* (Emporia), August 21, 1874; *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1875*, 18; and "Barney O'Conner Tells of Indian Scraps Here," *Barber County Index*

With an eye to the approaching November 1874 election day, Osborn reversed his earlier course and came to the vigorous defense of Ricker and his men. Belatedly, he legitimized “Company A” of the Barber County militia and formally commissioned Cyrus M. Ricker as its captain, backdating the paperwork by ten days to provide some legal standing for the killing of the Osages. At last the state dispatched the requested food and supplies to the now official post at Medicine Lodge.³³ Kansas historian Craig Miner expressed surprise that “even at such an early date, the Indians had local defenders, and the military local detractors.” Miner found “the severity of criticism from Kansans” in portions of the press over the treatment of the Osages “surprising.” Unfortunately, a cross-check of the political affiliations of newspapers in relation to their editorial positions undercuts any initial impression that progressive principles were the primary motivation behind journalistic criticism of the killings. Publications in support of Osborn and mainstream Republicans also endorsed the actions of the militia and heaped condemnation upon the Osages and the Quaker officials of the Indian Service. The papers that backed independent reform candidate James C. Cusey or liberal Republican Thaddeus H. Walker also defended the Osages. The latter outlets printed the detailed findings of federal investigators and used them to condemn Kansas’s “Grant Republican” governor and his lawless militia. Conversely, Osborn’s newspaper allies published the texts of his speeches and excerpts from the official state reports that he endorsed. The issue of the unwarranted slaying of Osages was just one useful item in a thick dossier of material employed to oppose Osborn’s reelection. Such uniform patterns of partisanship in public debate make it difficult to gauge the actual underlying ethical sensibilities of nineteenth-century Kansans. It is doubtful that defending Native American rights was really a high priority for the large majority. In 1874, no one ever suggested publicly that Ricker and his men should actually stand trial for killing a few Native Americans.³⁴

On August 23, state residents unfolded their morning newspapers to learn that based upon a report attributed to Kaw Agent Mahlon Stubbs, the Osage Nation had just “declared war on Kansas.” The editor of the *Emporia News* remarked that “the country was somewhat surprised” because the Osages had always “been quite friendly with the whites.” However, if the news was accurate, then the “struggle with these Indians would probably be brief, as they are both weak in numbers and great cowards.” Still, the local militia under Captain G. H. Norton was “anxious to get at them.” Osborn and his associates radiated confidence that the Wah-Zha-Zhi faced a terrible reckoning, but the governor nonetheless fired frantic messages to Washington requesting 2,000 more carbines and 100,000 cartridges—supposedly because the state of Kansas was in dire peril of invasion.³⁵ The initial bubble of excitement burst just a day later, when Stubbs denied the report printed in his name and stated that the Osage people had issued no such declaration of war. All was quiet in Pawhuska, although the Indians still desired “the restoration of their horses and ponies captured by Captain Ricker’s militia.”³⁶

The lack of an actual Osage uprising did not discourage those who benefited from the notion of a border war. Chilling rumors of Indian incursions continued, spectral sightings of hostile raiders were commonplace, and hundreds of militia men would patrol the empty plains for months. Although the actual bloodshed was over, the flow of food and military pay continued for hundreds of troopers who could be expected to mark the November ballots in favor of their devoted champion, the governor. Stubbs believed that “the excitement in Barbour County is being kept up for the purpose of keeping the militia of that county in active service so that they can receive supplies from the State.” That agenda served the interests of both the

(Medicine Lodge, KS), March 27, 1930. When federal authorities later pressed for the return of the Osage horses, Ricker contradicted E. W. Iliff’s judgment concerning their worth, declaring the “ponies captured of inferior quality and small value.” Decades later, in an account full of obvious inaccuracies, one aged pioneer recalled a victory dance on the main street of Medicine Lodge after the defeat of the Osages.

33. *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners*, 95.

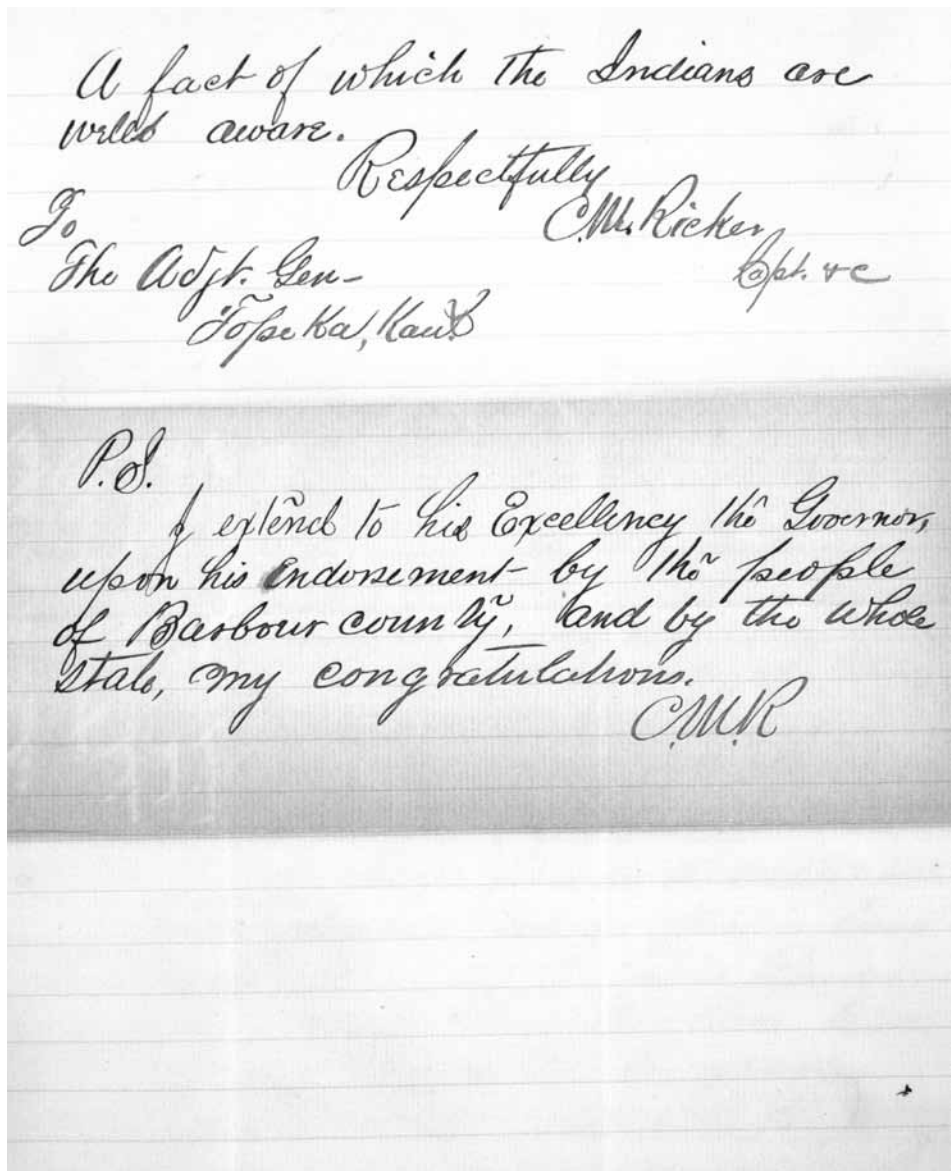
34. Miner, *Kansas*, 119–20. For a description of Osborn as a corrupt “Grant Republican,” see the *Fort Scott (KS) Daily Monitor*, September 18, 1872. A good example of a paper that supported James C. Cusey and attacked Thomas Osborn’s corruption is the *Kansas Daily Tribune*

(Lawrence), with “Osborn and the Eight Thousand Dollar Matter,” November 3, 1874. The *Daily Tribune* took the Osage side in the ongoing controversy, characterizing Osborn’s demands that the Indians prove that they knew nothing of a recall to the reservation, and also disprove Ricker’s claim that they had fired first as “impossible to comply with.” “Kansas: Indian Affairs,” *Kansas Daily Tribune*, August 25, 1874

35. “The Osage Indians Declare War,” *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, August 23, 1874; “War with the Osages,” *Emporia Weekly News*, August 28, 1874. James Christenson’s description of the Osage Border War as “wishful thinking” comes into play here, as Osborn and the state militia hoped that the Osages would resort to violence.

36. “Indian Affairs,” *Walnut Valley Times*, August 28, 1874; “A War with the Osages,” *Ibid.*

giver and the receivers of public patronage. The *Kansas Tribune* observed that “even the plagues are made to contribute to the success of Thomas A. Osborn,” giving him opportunities to organize charitable aid for those with crops wiped out by grasshoppers. Likewise, the dread of the “scalp snatchers” had afforded the governor “a chance to appoint lots of colonels and captains, etc.” Quoted in the *Topeka Daily Blade*, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Enoch Hoag labeled the use of the state guard for the distribution of political spoils as Osborn’s “militia swindle.” Reform candidate Cusey faced an uphill fight against a man who “understands fully the advantages and benefits of his position” in awarding public largesse. The Osborn campaign skillfully promoted its candidate as the “settlers’ friend” and as “Our Thomas.”³⁷ The editor of the *Kansas Tribune* groaned that given the governor’s dodgy career of guiding a lawyer’s pen in place of a plow, he was hardly a legitimate man of the people: “To call upon the State to reelect him governor because he was the ‘settlers friend’ lacks thickness and solidity. It is indeed too much.” By November 6, however, the *Wyandotte Gazette* had conceded that Osborn had in fact secured a second term, losing 14,000 votes from his prior margin of victory but still vanquishing the coalition of reformers. Given the significant reduction of



This letter by Barber County Militia Captain C.M. Ricker to Adjutant General Charles Morris suggested that some prairie burning was being done deliberately by a Pawnee band to exacerbate settlers’ circumstances. The letter ends with Ricker’s congratulations for Governor Osborn’s reelection.

Osborn’s first-term mandate, his opponents were in no mood to abandon their cause.³⁸

With the 1874 Kansas elections decided, the contest over assigning responsibility for the Medicine Lodge killings continued in full force. The governor and his allies advanced multiple arguments in their attempt to

37. *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners*, 95; “Editorial Notes,” *Kansas Tribune*, August 20, 1875; and untitled, *Topeka Daily Blade*, March 31, 1875. Captain G. H. Norton’s telegram to the governor is an example of false rumors of Osage war parties. Norton passed on “reliable information” that “from seventy five to one hundred Osage warriors [are] out.” Captain G. H. Norton to Thomas A. Osborn, September 21, 1874, Governor Thomas A. Osborn Papers, box 3, folder 56 “Indians,” State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society.

38. “The Lesson,” *Wyandotte (KS) Gazette*, November 6, 1874.

discredit the narrative of the Osages and the federal authorities. The basic proposition that once Indians left the confines of reservations, they became legitimate targets of lethal force was presented repeatedly.³⁹ Supporters of the militia based one line of reasoning on race, stating that the word of whites was always more credible than that of Indians and that unlike Gibson, who accepted the Indians' "word of truth against that of the white men . . . we prefer to believe our own people, those who are trying to plant homes on that distant and dangerous border." Another statement declared that the Wah-Zha-Zhi could not have been on a real buffalo hunt because "there had been no buffalo in that quarter for weeks," making their claim of hunting a false cover for what was actually a marauding war party.⁴⁰ Denying the presence of any women and children, Ricker asserted that "the Indians were all young men" who behaved in a hostile manner and some of whom obstinately "refused to understand" English. It was the "universal" opinion of "those best qualified to judge such matters" that these Osages were guilty of the earlier "murder of Keim, Martin and Kennedy." By authorizing a buffalo hunt and releasing a "horde" of savages upon the prairie, Gibson and Hoag had become the true murderers.⁴¹

Unfortunately for Osborn and company, the testimony in Kansas Adjutant General Charles A. Morris's voluminous reports (1874 and 1875) was full of details and inconsistencies that seriously undercut the state militia's own case. For example, the sworn statements of M. V. Garlinghouse, Levi Davis, and Levi Smith all noted the presence of at least one, two, or three Osage women, directly contradicting Ricker's recollection of encountering only warriors. The issue was important because the Wah-Zha-Zhi never included women in raiding parties. Ricker claimed that the Osages had fired first, but trooper Darius van Slyke swore that "there was great excitement in ours and the Indian line; we saw rapid movements on their part, for what purpose we did not know. So far as I was

concerned, and those around me, we supposed a battle had commenced and we commenced firing." Van Slyke's version helps to explain why not a single white rider or militia horse was struck by Indian bullets. W. M. Lampton echoed that story, explaining that "we all thought that the Indians would fire on us, so the firing commenced on our side." The sole militia injury involved a man who was clubbed after he attempted to seize an Osage horse bridle. Based on the collective testimony, no credible evidence exists that the Wah-Zha-Zhi near Medicine Lodge ever discharged their rifles during the encounter.⁴²

Ironically, the assertion that the Osage party was not actually hunting bison was undermined by an article that appeared in a pro-Osborn Republican newspaper early in the controversy, when the implications of the story were still unclear. On September 11, five Wellington residents had left home on a hunting trip of their own "for the sake of a little fun and the prospect of a buffalo steak." L. W. Bishop related that he and his comrades sighted some bison and opened fire but were unable to hit them. As a result, they had to satisfy themselves with "luscious buffalo steaks" . . . "in imagination," which were "in reality the hindquarters of sundry jackrabbits." Several days out, the men happened to pitch their tents a short distance from the scene of the former Osage camp near Medicine Lodge. There they encountered "buffalo carcasses and hides, with the sticks and poles on which [the Indians] were drying their meat... scattered around promiscuously." With little available wood, the white hunters scavenged the abandoned Indian tent and drag poles for fuel to cook their rabbits, "in view of the vultures that sailed around, attracted by the remains of the buffalo and dead Indians [Osages]." This *Sumner County Press* account of a recreational outing of no great consequence—devoid of any partisan agenda—effectively destroyed the theory of an Osage war party masquerading as phony hunters on a prairie devoid of big game. By November 12, the same paper was celebrating the reelection of Osborn as a standard-bearer of the "great National Republican party." Therefore, editor John H. Folks had no clear

39. "Governor Osborn to Secretary Delano," *Wathena (KS) Reporter*, September 18, 1875; *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1875*, 10.

40. "Mr. Kirkpatrick's Letter," *Western Home Journal* (Lawrence, KS), August 27, 1874. Trooper Eli Smith believed that the Osages "were in the country not for buffalo, but for scalps and robbery"; see *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1875*, 68. Osborn asserted that there was "almost conclusive" evidence of Osage guilt in recent murders in "Ford, Barbour and Comanche counties"; see *Annual Message of Thomas A. Osborn, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas, 1875*, 19.

41. *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1875*, 17–18; "The Quaker Policy: The Truth as to the Osages," *Weekly Commonwealth*, September 10, 1874; and *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor*

1873–74, 10–11. Gibson was demonized because he "knew at the time" but "gave no warning" to the people of Kansas "of the departure of this band of murderers (the Osage)" on the hunting expedition. He had not outwardly expressed sympathy for the bereaved family of Isaac Keim, whose loved one had been "killed by treacherous Osages" whose "conduct he admires."

42. *Report of the Adjutant General to the Governor 1873–74*, 59 (one woman present), 60 (three women present), 67 (two women present), E. W. Iliff struck, 62, D. Van Slyke, 70, W. M. Lampton, 62.

rational motive to fabricate evidence that supported the Wah-Zha-Zhi. It is safe to conclude that the Osage group attacked by Ricker's posse was in fact hunting bison, that it was composed of both men and women, and that it had no connection to the murders of white settlers fifty-two days earlier on June 17.⁴³ If Wa-tse'-gion-a-bi's small band was in fact a "war party" guilty of multiple homicides, what had the group done during the seven and a half weeks between June 17 and August 7, when the Barber County area was "quiet" with no Indian encounters reported by the alerted settler patrols? Why would the perpetrators make a successful escape only to return to the scene of their crimes, allow themselves to be repeatedly observed and then simply wait to be attacked? What happened to the material evidence of the murders—the settler scalps and Anglo (shod) horses that the June raiders had collected? Ricker's troopers recovered no such evidence from the Wah-Zha-Zhi nor any of the artifacts from other possible robberies or killings that an actual war party might possess.

Osborn won the political fight over the Osage Border War by stubbornly ignoring facts, capitalizing on anti-Indian prejudices and public fears, shoring up political support through patronage, promoting his own skewed counter-reports, and eventually simply waiting out the controversy. The state of Kansas never indemnified the families of the slain Osages, but in the wake of the unambiguous federal findings, the U.S. Department of the Interior paid the heirs of the slain men a total of \$5,000 between 1877 and 1885. What ultimately compromised Osborn's further career in elective office was not his Indian policy but rather the political and social changes that were transforming the sunflower state. Nationally, Republican reformers attacked the old-line stalwarts of the Grant regime mainly on the grounds of graft and corruption, but in Kansas, personal moral fitness and temperance emerged as the issues that gained the most traction. Osborn was a notorious whiskey drinker (like U. S. Grant) who had never joined a church congregation—

43. "A Buffalo Hunt," *Sumner County Press*, September 24, 1874; "The Kansas Election," *Sumner County Press*, November 12, 1874; C. M. Ricker to Thomas A. Osborn, November 6, 1874, and Enoch Hoag to Thomas A. Osborn, December 8, 1874, Governor Thomas A. Osborn Papers, box 3, folder 56 "Indians," State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society. When fifty Pawnees escorted by white agents hunted buffalo in southern Kansas in November, Ricker reported the incursion and claimed that they were burning the prairie, likely hoping for permission to attack. Intervention by the superintendent of Indian affairs ensured that the Pawnees were not molested. A sighting of actual Native Americans by the militia in late 1874 was a rarity.

facts that made him a marked man in a state that led the country in the prohibition movement and harbored zealots such as Medicine Lodge resident Carry Nation. Stories of the governor's embarrassing public intoxication and his frequenting of raucous Topeka bars were far more damaging than whispers of graft, land speculation, bond fraud, or Indian abuse.⁴⁴ The maturing state was moving beyond the wild frontier era that Osborn represented. Out of office after losing a Senate bid in 1877, "Our Tom" accepted an appointment as U.S. ambassador to Chile. He was overseas in 1878 and did not witness the massive weeklong Women's Christian Temperance Union camp meeting at Bismarck Grove outside Lawrence. This event foreshadowed the ratification of an 1881 prohibition amendment to the state constitution, the first of its kind in the United States.⁴⁵ The amendment to make Kansas "dry" was the culmination of a statewide campaign led by John St. John, the charismatic temperance crusader who soon occupied Osborn's old desk. By 1888, even the *Medicine Lodge Cresset* was voicing a "lively and emphatic protest against Thomas A. Osborn being pushed forward as Kansas' member of the [Benjamin Harrison] cabinet."

44. Forty-Eighth Congress, Session II, ch. 359, *The Statutes at Large of the United States of America from December 1883 to March 1885 and Recent Treaties, Postal Conventions, and Executive Proclamations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885), 464; and "Stop and Think," *Topeka State Journal*, January 30, 1877. In language typical of the rising temperance critics, the *Journal* observed that "Thomas A. Osborn is a drunkard. He was drunk while in attendance at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. . . . He has been drunk upon the streets of the Capital City of Topeka and in its saloons, to the shame and disgust of all honorable, Christian citizens. . . . He is the candidate of every saloon keeper and gambler in Topeka." See also H. Edward Flentje and Joseph A. Aistrup, *Kansas Politics and Government: The Clash of Political Cultures, Politics and Governments of the American States Series* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2010), 14–15, 193–94. Osborn possessed a clear motive for covering the murders of the Osage hunters and thereby winning the support of the compromised Medicine Lodge posse members and their families. Anti-Indian rhetoric was already widespread in the wake of the 1874 summer raids by plains warriors. The notion that the Osage Border War was engineered to cover the original settler murders is interesting, but such a scenario requires a deeper level of corruption and conspiracy that to date is unprovable. How the killings of Martin, Kennedy and Keim could profit a group of white conspirators (apart from common bandits) is unclear. One theory maintains that cattle interests hoped to scare away competing farmers and maintain open grazing, but how would such a plot connect to officials in Topeka? Throughout the early 1870s, Thomas Osborn was promoting agrarian settlement, not discouraging it.

45. Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 29, 48; "Outrageous Proceedings," *Wyandotte Gazette*, February 26, 1875. Even in 1875, Osborn was labeled a "drunken and thieving vagabond," with the alcoholism featured first. The governor's other sins, including "the murder of peaceable Indians," were secondary to the issue of inebriation.

For all appearances, “Our Thomas” had been slowly supplanted by the spirit of “Hatchet Carry” in the Gypsum Hills.⁴⁶

Elements of Osborn’s factually challenged version of the Osage Border War remained fixed in the popular memory of the Gypsum Hills region. No institution does more to preserve local lore concerning the events of 1874 than the Stockade Museum, situated next to the Carry Nation Home on Highway 160 in Medicine Lodge. The stockade is a 1961 reproduction of the palisade erected by frightened pioneers in 1874, but it is much smaller with significantly higher walls (perhaps partly inspired by colonial Boonesborough, Kentucky). The museum is dedicated mainly to the theme of the stockade defenders’ hardship and suffering during the Indian raids, but visitors also learn that “Marin [sic],” Keim and Kennedy were murdered by Osage Indians in June 1874. The August 7 killings of the Wah-Zha-Zhi are not examined in any depth, although visitors read that the militia engaged “about 50 Indians” and killed six, taking “fifty-four ponies, six mules and all the Indian camp outfit, saddles, guns, bows, arrows and clothes.”⁴⁷ Asked whether Osage guilt in the murder of local settlers is a solidly established fact, a friendly docent explained that this episode is widely known in Kansas frontier history, and many Barber County residents learn about it as children. Likely drawing upon pro-Osborn press articles written over 140 years ago, local Internet-based historical sketches continue to refer to elements of the Osage Border War mythology. Readers of one website may learn that Osage raiders threatened the town of Kiowa but not that a friendly band of Wah-Zha-Zhi buffalo hunters visited to seek advice there.⁴⁸

Much closer in time to the events in question, in 1883, Kansas historian William G. Cutler found Barber County

residents undecided about exactly what had happened in their community. The speculation that the killers of the four settlers were actually white men in disguise was still in wide circulation. Perhaps the “so-called Indian raid” was the work of “a band of Indians, led by a number of white men.” The “rascality” of local “bond-swindlers” was also suspected. Cutler observed that already, “old settlers don’t like to say much about that raid, preferring to let the dead past bury its dead.” Today, with all the participants long departed, a corrected account of early Kansas border history is overdue. An “Osage War” in the Gypsum Hills never occurred.⁴⁹

A final point is in order here. James R. Christianson’s well-researched article “The Kansas-Osage War of 1874: Fact or Wishful Thinking?” concluded with Osborn emerging “the victor” and the abused Osages banished. As had happened in Missouri in 1837, the “borders of Kansas were likewise closed,” and the Osages “were to live as unwelcome neighbors on their reservation in the Indian Territory. The citizenry of Kansas was free of the Osage and free it would remain.”⁵⁰ In actuality, abundant evidence indicates that the confinement was more theoretical than substantive. Various authorities may have ordered the Osages to stay on their reserve, but the Wah-Zha-Zhi have always been willing to test limits and to circumvent undesirable rules—in fact, they never stopped visiting Kansas. They and their cousins the Kaws were still sighted regularly after 1874 on the streets of border towns such as Arkansas City, Caldwell, Caney, Coffeyville, Winfield, and Independence. When Native Americans carried packets of annuity money to spend, they found that they were especially welcome, and if sufficient cash was lacking, many merchants extended credit. As early as September 1875, the Osages journeyed off their reservation to conduct yet another buffalo hunt due to food shortages—likely elevating Osborn’s blood pressure to dangerous levels.⁵¹ In 1879, “full blood Osages”

46. “Osborn and the Cabinet,” *Medicine Lodge Cresset*, December 6, 1888.

47. Medicine Lodge Stockade Museum, “Stockade History,” at <https://medicinelodgestockade.org/stockade-history/>. Visitors to the museum also receive a printed handout with text that appears to be derived in part from Jennie Stoughton Osborn, “Early Days in Barber County,” *Barber County Index*, September 29, 1927. Another possible source of erroneous information may be Nellie Snyder Yost, *Medicine Lodge: The Story of a Kansas Frontier Town* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1970), xv, 47–48. This book was created at the behest of Mayor I. N. Hewitt in 1969 and includes many unattributed local legends. Yost reported that Ricker’s posse killed six or seven Indians and that it even captured a “fat squaw,” who was then released. No sources are cited for these unique details. The author does not explore the circumstances of the attack.

48. Typical of these local websites is the [genuinekansas.com](http://www.genuinekansas.com) page, which claims that the Osages threatened the town of Kiowa twice

during the early 1870s. No source citation is provided; see http://www.genuinekansas.com/city_kiowa_kansas.htm; another example is the [Cyberlodge.com](http://www.cyberlodge.com) site, which states that Kennedy, Keim, and Martin were killed on June 17, 1874, when “the Osage Indians made a raid on Kansas.” Keim’s name appears as “Kein,” and no source is given; see <http://www.cyberlodg.com/mlcity/>.

49. See section on Barbour County in Cutler, *History*.

50. Christianson, “The Kansas-Osage War of 1874,” 308–09.

51. “The Osage Indians,” *Atchison Daily Champion*, September 29, 1875. A brief panic about a possible Osage attack faded quickly. “Lo! The Poor Indian,” *Leavenworth Times*, April 25, 1875. In 1874, friendly Kaw Indians had “supplied almost every urchin in Arkansas City with bows

drove wagon teams into Coffeyville, both to purchase supplies and to market loads of hides. Chief Augustus Captain visited town to buy lumber for his house, while Osages John N. Florer and Morris Tisdale ventured north as weekend travelers to lodge at the posh Eldridge House in Lawrence.⁵² Caney hosted a festival in 1887, featuring an “Indian War Dance by a band of Osages.” After the performance, the Caney Glee Club sang, and Indians and

whites were entertained by a local speaker.⁵³ The long-established relationships between many Wah-Zha-Zhi and their Anglo neighbors in southern Kansas were not severed by political manipulation, inflated rhetoric, or imaginary outbreaks of war. As the years unfolded, the round of ordinary life continued for a Native American community that never surrendered its freedom of movement. [KH]

and arrows.” The presence of visiting Indians was a normal part of life in border communities; see “Southwest,” *Emporia News*, March 20, 1874. In the middle of the Indian scare of 1874, Arkansas City was hosting a “Grand Carnival” featuring Osage dancers; see “From the Border”. The following year Osborn asked President Grant to open Indian Territory to white settlers, requesting Indian removal from the same lands where he had demanded that Native Americans be confined; untitled, *Emporia Weekly News*, July 16, 1875. The 1875 food shortage on the Osage Reserve was due to government shipping problems that stranded tons of freight at Wichita; see “Latest News,” *Parsons Weekly*, October 2, 1875.

52. “Additional Local,” *Coffeyville (KS) Weekly Journal*, July 19, 1879; “Local Gossip,” *Coffeyville Weekly Journal*, June 15, 1878.

53. “Caney Celebrates in All Her Glory,” *Coffeyville Weekly Journal*, July 7, 1887. In the years after removal, reported retired professor Marsha Hayes of Independence Community College, some Osage men periodically traveled north from Indian Territory and camped on a farmer’s land adjoining her present-day property north of Coffeyville. The Indians stayed on one side of a creek, and the farmer stayed on the other. There was never any friction, although when the visitors came, the landowner could sometimes hear them singing. At an Independence Public Library discussion on September 23, 2018, Hayes speculated that perhaps there was something special about that location for the Osages. The only complaint from the farmer involved his suspicion that the Wah-Zha-Zhi had a taste for his chickens, although he never actually saw any Indians cross the creek.