

The Osage in Missouri

“People of the Middle Waters”



The Missouri River was an important highway of travel utilized by many tribes over the centuries. Many village sites and camping sites are located on both banks of the river. The Arrow Rock vicinity shows evidence of campsites established expressly for gathering flint to make points. Several fire pits and quantities of burned rocks have been found in the recreation area of the State Historic Site (Pers. Comm. from M. Dickey). The rocks were scorched making it easier to break out flint from limestone or break apart large flint bearing stones. This gave rise to a quote from Stephen Long in 1819, “Arrow Rock is so-called from its having been formerly resorted to by neighboring Indians for the stone used to point their arrows”.

A trail ran from the Osage villages (Vernon County, MO) to Arrow Rock, where it crossed the Missouri River. Another trail followed the river from Arrow Rock to the vicinity of the mouth of Kaw River and on westward. This “Osage Trace” became the road between the Boone’s Lick settlements and Fort Osage (1808-1821). From 1822 on, this part of the “Osage Trace” was known as the easternmost leg of the Santa Fe Trail.

The principal village of the Missouri tribe (Oneota in pre-contact history) was located at Van Meter State Park about 25 miles NW of Arrow Rock. The Missouri inhabited the area until about 1790. The Little Osage tribe located their village adjacent to the Missouri village (c. 1719-1778). This gave the Osage easy access to European traders and control over traders trying to go up the Missouri.

The Osage dominated trade with the French in the Midwest. During this time, they expanded their dominion to include most of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Kansas pushing out other tribes with the exception of the Missouri, and sometimes the Kansa (Kaw) and Illinois. The Osage were in a virtual state of war with all their neighbors.

Spain did not favor the Osage as the French had. Osages virtually closed the Missouri, Arkansas and Red Rivers to Spanish traders. Spain retaliated by encouraging Sauk, Fox, Ioway, Shawnee, and Delaware to attack Osage with little lasting results. The U. S. found the Osage to be the largest and most formidable tribe encountered in the Louisiana Purchase. U. S. policy sought to keep the Osage friendly, or at least neutral, to the U. S. President Jefferson feared their stature and warlike prowess.

In September 1808, the Osage cede most Missouri and Arkansas lands in return for the Fort Osage trading post. Despite this cession, many Osage continued to hunt in Missouri well into the 1830s. The Osage then remained friendly to the U. S. in the War of 1812. In June 1813, Fort Osage closed due to the War of 1812 and isolation on the frontier. At the Arrow Rock bluff a trading house was set up by George C. Sibley in October. The volume of trade and monetary value were equal to Fort Osage. In April 1814, Sibley abandoned the Arrow Rock trading house

due to hostile Indians in the area. The Osage went to St. Louis to trade until Fort Osage reopened in 1816.

In 1822 an early Santa Fe expedition led by the Cooper family has all their horses stolen by the Osage; they walk 300 miles back to Boone's Lick. Mad Buffalo and his band kill several white hunters west of Fort Smith which ignites a fear of war with the Osage. In 1825 the Osage agree to stop harassing the Santa Fe traders and stealing their livestock. The Osage cede the remaining Missouri and Arkansas lands as most village had already been moved to SE Kansas and NE Oklahoma.

Le Soldat Du Chene, An Osage Chief

"The Soldier of the Oak" known also as "Big Soldier" lived at the Little Osage village on the Missouri on the Missouri River in his youth. He negotiated with the U. S. government in 1813 at the Arrow Rock bluff. In 1820, Big Soldier told government agent George C. Sibley what he thought of attempts to change the Osage lifestyle:



"I see and admire your manner of living, your good warm houses, your extensive fields of corn, your gardens, your cows, own workhouses, wagons and a thousand machines that I know not the use of. I see that you are able to clothe yourselves even from weeds and grass. In short, you even do almost what you choose. You whites possess the power of subduing almost every animal to your use. You are surrounded by slaves. Everything about you is in chains, and you are slaves yourselves. I fear if I should exchange my pursuits for yours, I too should become a slave. Talk to my sons, perhaps they may be persuaded to adopt your fashions ... but as for myself I was born free, was raised free and wish to die free"

Osage Culture, Dress, and Interesting Facts

The Osage were split into two groups: the "Upper-Forest Sitters" and the "Down-Below People". Due to a French missionary's misinterpretation this was thought to be the Big Osage and the Little Osage.

Osage dwelt in villages carefully organized according to clans, with broad avenues separating the clans. The huts were built in circles with the chief's house, which was usually larger than the others, in the center. Their homes were varied from rectangular to circular, were very large, and consisted of a framework covered with buffalo hides or woven rush mats.

Most explores and travelers thought the Osage to be a handsome people. The men were six feet tall or more and very practically hairless; they shaved their heads to a roach, and shaved their eyebrows. The Osage women wore their hair long, loose, and parted in the middle. Women of age painted their parts red to symbolize the sun. They put pumpkin pulp on their faces to aid their complexions, and powdered their bodies with a dark plant substance. Babies were placed on cradleboards to flatten the head.

Men wore loincloths, moccasins and leggings of deerskin or bearskin. Women wore robes,

moccasins, and leggings, and usually a belt of buffalo calf hair. Earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and tattoos were worn by men and women.

The Osage were farmers that grew squash, corn, and beans. They also went on hunting trips, and gathered seasonal wild berries, nuts, and plants.

They hunted with bows and arrow, lances, clubs, knives, and tomahawks. These were also used as weapons.

The Osage did not think the Europeans were very pleasant to be near. To them they smelled such like their dogs and had entirely too much hair sprouting from their bodies. They called them "Heavy Eyebrows", and likened a man with a beard to a hedgehog peering from an overgrown burrow.

The Osage were a deeply religious people. They were devout worshippers to their gods and prayed to the East at the start of each day. They were also very family oriented, and very ceremonial. At the start of each planting season women would paint their faces to symbolize the sun and rain, men would tie on all manner of accoutrement and dances would ensue to ensure a good harvest.

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