

White Savagery - "Little House on the Osage Prairie"

by Osage writer Dennis McAuliffe, Jr. EXCERPTS FROM McAuliffe, Dennis, *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton: An American History*. New York: Times Books, 1994.



"Which of these people are savages?" asks U.S. agent Isaac T. Gibson Regarding atrocities committed by settlers against the Osage Indians in Kansas during 1860s-70s

Little Laura Ingalls, her sisters and their beloved Ma and Pa were **illegal squatters on Osage land**. She left that detail out of her 1935 children's book, *Little House on the Prairie*," as well as any mention of ongoing outrages - including killings, burnings, beatings, horse thefts and grave robberies - committed by white settlers...against Osages living in villages not more than a mile or two away from the Ingalls' little house.

After the Civil War, caravans of white settlers started overrunning the Osage reservation, and the Ingalls family joined them in 1869...[As depicted in the book,] the Osages were hungry... [As NOT depicted in the book, this was] because **white men were burning their fields**, forcing them at gunpoint from their homes and threatening them with death if they returned, stealing their food and horses, even robbing their graves - **all to force them to abandon their land**.

The Ingalls moved onto Osage land in 1869, about ten miles southwest of Independence, and only about five miles from the Kansas border with Indian Territory. The Ingalls were not alone. **That year, more than 500 families trespassed on the reservation and "built their cabins near the [main] Indian camps"** - in the Ingalls' case, only a mile or so away. The 1870 U.S. census listed the Little House - and the Ingalls as its occupants - as the "89th residence of Rutland Township," although "a claim was not filed because the **land was part of the Osage...Reserve.**"

Squatters had **"taken possession of [the Osages'] cornfields, and forbidden them cutting firewood on their claims,"** wrote agent G. C. Snow. The Osages "have had, to my certain knowledge, **over 100 of their best horses stolen [in the past month]**. I learn that scarcely a day passes that they do not lose from five to twenty horses...Not one of [the horse thieves has] a yet been brought to justice, or one in a hundred of the Indians' horses returned to them."

"The settlers 'threaten me with Crawford's militia, and they say they will hang me if I interfere with them," the Indian agent complained, referring to the Kansas governor. Samuel J. Crawford was so opposed to Indians in general and Osages in particular that he once told a white constituent, Theodore Reynolds, complaining about problems over filing a claim because of a mixed-blood Osage, Augustus Captain: **"Shoot the half-breed renegade and I will pardon you before the smoke gets away from your gun.'**

U.S. agent Isaac T. Gibson wrote in his annual report for 1870 that settlers had grown bolder, forming vigilante groups:

Pledged to defend each other in the occupation of claims, without regard to the improvements, possession, or rights of the Indians. Many of the latter were **turned out of their homes, and threatened with death if they persisted in claiming them**. Others were made homeless by cunning and fraud.

While absent on their winter hunt, [the Osages'] cribs of corn and other provisions, so hardly earned by their women's toil, **were robbed**. Their principal village was pillaged of a large amount of [casks], and wagon-loads of matting hauled away and used by the settlers in building and finishing houses for themselves. Even new-made graves were plundered with the view of finding treasures, which the Indians often bury with their dead...

The question will suggest itself, **which of these people are the savages?**

[Add'l note: "Describing the **settlers as 'oppressive trespassers,'** Agent Gibson emphasized his inability to effect justice for the Osages, and he predicted that they might soon take matters into their own hands. He observed that the settlers were "evidently desirous of provoking some resistance from the Osages, so that they might claim justification for the **extermination of the tribe**, which they boastfully declare they are able to do."*]

The **outrages of 1870 were a turning point for the Osages...** Agent Gibson noted the weariness of the Osages, quoting "one of the headmen" as complaining, "We are tired of all this." Gibson described the man as having "the look and tone of a man without hope." It was in this spirit that the **Osages agreed to sell** [their eight-million-acre 'diminished reserve.']....the morning after they signed the treaty, "the air was filled with the cries of the old people, especially the women, who lamented over the graves of their children which they were about to leave forever," a Kansas newspaper reported.

Most of the Osages left Kansas in late fall for their annual winter buffalo hunt on the plains and did not return, staying instead in Indian Territory. **Laura Ingalls** - and her readers - did not know it, but she **witnessed a watershed moment in the history of the Osages - their removal from Kansas** - when one morning she looked out the window of the little house and saw a traffic jam of Indians riding past. They came from the creek bottoms to the east and rode west, past the house, on an old Indian trail that later was paved and became U.S. Route 75. The Ingalls family left Kansas a few weeks later...



[But] the Ingalls' neighbors were not through with the Osages yet. Nearly **twenty mixed-blood Osages had decided to remain** on farms they had developed and improved over the years, and to formally enter the white man's world by becoming U.S. citizens. They secured a special treaty with the good citizens of Independence to allow them to stay. But in the weeks after the main body of Osages left Kansas, the **mixed-bloods' farmhouses, one after another, were burned down**.

One night, the white neighbors of Joseph Mosher broke into his house - a mile or two from the Little House on the Prairie - dragged him, his wife and children out of their bed and into the yard, then they beat them and torched the house. They then took the Osage man to the nearby woods, and pistol-whipped him to death...

There is no proof, of course, that Charles Ingalls took a part in any of these crimes...[Nevertheless,] He unabashedly told little Laura, trying to explain why he had moved the family to the Osage reservation, that **because they and other whites were there, the Army would drive the Indians away**.

In the words of the Osages' U. S. agent in 1870, even being "kind and generous to the Indians [does] not relieve these men from the reproach of being **trespassers, intruders, and violators of the nation's law**."

*p. 176 "A Study of Laura Ingalls Wilder "Little House on the Prairie," by Linsenmeyer, Penny T. pp 168-185. *Kansas History* Autumn 2001. https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2001autumn_linsenmayer.pdf. Compiled 2018.