

TEXT PACKET

Osage Massacres and Gender Roles

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Osage Massacres and Gender Roles

by Emily Weaver

TERRIFIED. Mollie was terrified. She was the only one left. Her sister, Anna, had been found shot to death in a ravine. Her mother had died suspiciously, and Mollie was convinced she had been poisoned. Her cousin, Henry Roan Horse, was found dead in his car. Following the poisonings of several of her other family members, her other sister, Rita, and her husband were killed in a house bombing. Feeling terrified and heart-broken, Mollie went into hiding to avoid being the next victim. The story of Mollie's family is just one example of the horrors of the Osage Massacre. While it was a devastating tragedy to the entire Osage Tribe, the Osage Massacres were especially damaging to women in the Tribe, because they were more vulnerable.

At least sixty members of the Osage Tribe were murdered for their headrights in the 1920s. The land that the Osage was forced onto by the federal government became extremely valuable when oil was discovered under it. Because they maintained the mineral rights to the land, mineral, "lease royalties were paid to the Tribe, who then distributed it equally to each allottee."¹ When an allottee died, their share went to their heir or their closest living relative. Tragically, this would make the Osage targets.

The tragedies that Mollie suffered can all be traced back to William Hale. Despite lacking an education, William Hale would come to be known as the "King of the Osage"; the Federal Bureau of Investigation would come to realize that, "Hale had bribed, intimidated, lied, and stolen his way to wealth and power."² He

convinced his nephew, Ernest Burkhart, to marry Mollie. Shortly after, he began having her family members murdered. With each death, Mollie became entitled to more and more oil money. Hale intended to gain access to this money through his nephew. Eventually, several of Hale's coconspirators would confess; John Ramsey, one of Hale's hired killers, confessed to being paid five thousand dollars for the murder of Henry Roan.³ Due in large part to FBI undercover work, justice was served, and Hale was given a life sentence.

The gender roles of the time made women in the Osage Tribe more vulnerable to this type of scheming. As Tai Edwards points out, American gender roles in the 1920s were very different than traditional Osage gender roles which, "demonstrated gender complementarity."⁴ Men and women worked together as complementary pairs. Neither gender was seen subordinate. This was shocking to missionaries who were sent to "civilize" the Osage. In 1827, Reverend Benton Pixley noted that Osage women did a lot of physical labor, but the men went, "from lodge to lodge to eat, and drink, and smoke."⁵ Over time, the gender roles in the Osage nation changed to better reflect the gender roles in America. In 1920, American women had far fewer rights than men. Many men considered women to be inferior to men. This is reflected in the lack of an adequate investigation into the earlier murders. The transcript of the inquest into Anna Brown's murder reveals the lack of importance local law enforcement seems to be placing on the

case.⁶ Assistant County Attorney Mr. Jeffrey, who was conducting the investigation, is quick to ask about Anna's drinking and seems to suggest it may be her own fault that she was murdered. The lack of serious investigating into the death of a Native American woman is not surprising for that time. Hale selected a family that primarily consisted of Native American women and made sure his nephew was the "head" of one of the households.

Some people do not see the role that gender played in the Osage Massacres. They believe that the victims were selected solely because they were Osage. However, if Mollie had not been a single, vulnerable woman, then Hale would not have been able to gain access to her family's wealth so easily. Had Mollie been born a boy, it is less likely that Hale and Burkhart would have targeted her family.

The tragedy of the Osage Massacres was especially damaging to the women of the Osage Tribe who were more vulnerable.

1. "Did You Know? Osage Murders." Osage Nation, March 2017. <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/news-events/news/did-you-know-osage-murders>.
2. "A Byte Out of History – Murder in the Osage Hills." FBI. FBI, January 26, 2005. https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/stories/2005/january/osage_012605.
3. Ramsey, John. Confession of John Ramsey. Other, November 9, 1926.
4. Edwards, Tai S. "OSAGE GENDER: CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND COLONIZATION, 1720S–1870S", University of Kansas, (2010).
5. "Osages: Their Character, Manners, and Condition". Letters on the Chickasaw and Osage Missions, 107-08; "Home Proceedings: Missionary Establishments," American Missionary Register 6, no. 1 (January 1825): 19.
6. Linder, Doug. "Testimony at the Anna Brown Inquest." Famous Trials, 1921. <https://www.famous-trials.com/osage-home/2391-testimony-at-the-anna-brown-inquest>.

Excerpt from the Statement of Matt N. Williams

made to Mr. T. J. Leahy on March 29, 1926, at the Oklahoma Hotel, Pawhuska, Okla.

PRESENT: Mr. T. J. Leahy
Mr. Matt N. Williams

Examination by Mr. Leahy:

Q: Your name is Matt Williams?

A: Matt N. Williams

Q: And your residence at the present time is where?

A: Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

Q: You have lived in and around Osage County for how many years?

A: 35 years.

Q: You formerly lived at Ralston, Oklahoma?

A: Yes.

Q: You know W. K. Hale?

A: Yes.

Q: How long have you known him?

A: About 35 years.

Q: Since you have known Hale where has he been living?

A: Fairfax, Oklahoma

Q: What has been his occupation?

A: Cattle man, Stock man, farming.

Q: Did you know W. E. Smith?

A: Yes.

Q: And his wife, Rita Smith?

A: Yes.

Q: Were you well acquainted with them?

Q: How long had you known them before their death?

A: I have known Bill Smith for 30 years, and Rita I have known ever since she was born. She was Lizzie Q's girl.

Q: Did you know anything about the controversy between W. K. Gale and Bill Smith over money?

A: Yes. Hale informed me that said William Smith had loaned him \$6000 and gave him a draft on the Nat Cook Bank.

Q: That is in Ralston?

A: No, Fairfax. He said he took that draft from that bank and deposited it in the First National Bank of Fairfax. Bill Smith gave him a check for it.

Q: Bill Smith?

A: Yes. Nat Cook's records show that.

Q: When was it he told you that?

A: Let me see – that was – well, I remember the time. I met him

and Louis in the road. Hale at that time was going to Pawnee and he gave me \$200 and we went down to the Jay & Jay Drug Store.

Q: Where is that?

A: Pawnee, and he cashed a check for W. K. Hale, and Cecil gave me the \$200.

Q: Who is Cecil?

A: Cecil Jay.

Q: What was that \$200 for?

A: Just borrowed.

Q: Now go on and tell anything further you know about the controversy between Hale and Smith over this \$6,000?

A: Then Bill Smith's wife, Rita – Bill Smith had met W. K. Hale at the Spurrier Garage, Fairfax, Oklahoma.

Q: That is Spurgeon, isn't it?

A: Yes, Bill Spurgeon. And Smith demanded this \$6,000. In consideration of the same, W. K. Hale had purported to sell a bunch of cattle in the Creek Country to W. E. Smith.

Q: Was that false or true?

A: That is right.

Q: But did he sell the cattle to Smith?

A: No, he went down and showed Rita the cattle. That was just a frame up between Smith and Hale.

Q: A frame-up to keep Mrs. Smith from knowing he had loaned Hale the \$6,000?

A: No, she knew it, but that was supposed to be in payment.

Q: What time of the day or night was that?

A: Three o'clock in the morning.

Q: Over the First National Bank in what town?

A: Ralston. He called me out. Sleeping with me that night was Everett Goodson. He called me out and says to me, "Matt, I think you made the best witness I ever seen in that Jess Smith case."

Q: That is Hale said that to you?

A: Yes. He said, "I want you, accompanied by John Morris and Louis Oller, to go to Pawhuska tomorrow morning and swear the following: That Bill Smith had told you that I paid him this money in full in cash at different times and places; that he, W. E. Smith, had spent this money for whiskey and on women; that is the only reason he couldn't acknowledge the debt paid in full, because it would bust him up with his wife, Rita." And he solicited my testimony to swear to that, that he received the money in full from W. K. Hale, but the only reason he couldn't acknowledge some was because it would be at the expense of losing his squaw.

Q: Was anyone present when he told you that?

A: No, we was out. Everett was sleeping in the room.

Q: All right, go on.

A: I said, "Bill, this Smith is an uncle of my former wife, and I am just about to get back again with Rose. While I would like to accommodate you, but I don't care to have anything to do with it for the reason stated.

Q: Rose was your former wife?

A: Yes.

Q: Now, was the case tried at that time?

A: A continuance was granted. Hale had the case put off.

Q: Did he talk to you about it afterwards again?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell where and what he said and when;

A: Well, he said afterwards, said they practically settled the case, because Rita was the only one who was crowding him and she was blowed up now and couldn't testify.

Q: Was that before or after the Smith home was blown up?

A: After, about ten days after. Another time, Bill Smith come to my home at Ralston, previous to this time, and said, "If Hale don't settle up with me I am going to inform on him for the murder of Anna Brown. I told Smith at the time, "Bill, you are taking a long shot, because Hale has already asked me about this thing, and you better move off that Creek over there, because he will get you there sure. He at that time told me he was going to move to Fairfax.

Q: Smith did?

A: Yes.

Q: How after that, did you tell Hale what Smith said about informing on him with reference to the Anna Brown killing?

A: Yes.

Q: Just state what he said.

A: I said, "Bill was over here and told me he was going to tell you, Hale, in connection with the killing of Anna Brown." After this murder that morning they come to his house on the Grayhorse Creek and informed him of the act being committed.

Q: Who had done that?

A: Kelsie Morrison and Bryon Burkhart. They went to Bill Smith's house that morning.

Q: Go on and tell what you told Bill Hale.

A: I told Bill Hale, I said, "Bill Smith's been over here and made the assertion, "and I said, "Bill, he is going to inform on you."

He said, "I will put him away, because it ought to have been done years ago." He asked me at that time of some man that would put Bill Smith away, and I told him Blackie Thompson may due that for him. He said he didn't know whether Blackie would do that or not, and wanted me to get in conversation and ask how he could get in touch with Al Spencer. I told him Al Spencer came to see my friend, Ed Snyder could arrange a meeting between him, W. K. Hale and Al Spencer, but if Al wouldn't pull that deal I thought John Ramsey would. I think that was about three months before the Smiths was killed.

Q: Now you say you suggested to him at that time that maybe John Ramsey would do it?

A: Yes.

Q: What did he say with reference to that?

A: He said Ramsey was kind of a shuckle-headed boy and he didn't know whether he could trust him or not.

Q: Did you see Ed Snyder?

A: Yes.

Q: Where?

A: Down at his home on Main Street.

Q: Did you tell him what Bill Hale wanted?

A: He refused to have anything in the world to do with it.

Q: Now between that time and the time the Smith home was blown up did you have any further talk with Hale about it?

A: Before the blowing up?

Q: Did he talk with you about Ramsey any more?

A: No, I don't believe he did.

Q: After the house was blown up did he talk to you about Ramsey?

A: Yes.

Q: State what he said.

A: That was when he told me, "As far as we are concerned, she will never be able to testify any more. She was really the only one I was afraid of."

Q: What did he say about Ramsey blowing the house up?

A: He said the deal was pulled off according to schedule.

Q: Did he say through Ramsey?

A: No, I don't believe he did. That was the time I phoned him and he gave me \$38.00.

Q: Did you have any further talk about it at any other time – about the blowing up of the Smith home or about Ramsey?

A: No, I believe that was the last conversation I had with him.

Q: Where was it you had that?

A: Over at Ralston in the middle of the street between the First National Bank and that little restaurant, about five o'clock one afternoon. I phoned his wife and told her to tell Bill to come to me and he came down to see what I wanted. But he at numerous and other times for the last two years had mentioned about killing Bill Smith, with the equity that he may have his estate. In the first place Bill arranged for me to Marry Mollie, Ernie Burkhart's wife. He said, "You can marry Mollie and change from one to the other and finally wind up with the estate. I had been going with Mollie and they moved a house down there on the creek for Mollie and I to get married in. That is the first proposition Bill and I started out with in this deal.

...

On March 29, 1926, Matt N. Williams made request in writing as follows asking Special Agents of this Bureau for protection prior to testifying against Hale, et al:

*Pawhuska, Oklahoma,
March 29, 1926.*

R. Burger. J. A. Street.

In view of the fact that I do not feel that it would be safe for me to remain in Osage County, and also feeling that any man who willingly testifies in this case is in danger of losing his life if it is known, I would feel grateful to you men if both or either of you could accompany me until after the trial of the case of State versus Hale & Ramsey.

*Yours Truly,
Matt N. Williams.*

Matt N. Williams is now and will be kept under surveillance by Agents.