

OLD OSAGE CUSTOMS DIE WITH THE
LAST PAH-HUE-SKAH

By Frank F. Finney

With the death of an old Indian over eighty years of age near the Gray Horse trading post in the Osage reservation, July 27, 1894, the bloodline of the *Pah-hue-skah*, ("White Hair") family faded out. The last White Hair, who could not speak a word of English and had lived in accordance with the Indian customs all his life, left in his death a remarkable example for his people to follow in adapting themselves to the white man's civilization.¹

From the time of the Louisiana Purchase until a short time before the Osage tribe was removed from Kansas to the Indian Territory in 1871, some Indian of the White Hair lineage held the rank and title of Head Chief of the Great Osages and much of this time held the honor for the whole tribe consisting of both the Great and Little Osages.² Also out of the Pah-hue-skah heritage came a great chief of the pale-faces, the late Honorable Charles Curtis, Vice-President of the United States.³ The Osage tribe was divided into bands, each with its chief, and over these bands was the head or principal chief. Upon the chief's death, the title and authority went to his son, and if no son survived him, to his brother or nearest relative.

Little White Hair, the last member of the family to hold the head chieftanship, opposed the plan of the United States Government for the sale of the Osage Kansas lands and the removal of the tribe to the Indian Territory. To supplant and nullify the authority and influence of Little White Hair, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs created a new office for the tribe and recognized Joseph Paw-ne-no-pah-she, commonly

¹ T. M. Finney files and records. The name of the City of Pawhuska in Osage County was given in honor of the last Chief Pah-hue-skah of the Osage Nation, commemorating the history of old "Pah-hue-skah" (White Hair) family.

² Sister Mary Paul Fitzgerald, *Beacon of the Plains*. 1893, p. 20; *Tixier's Travels on the Osage Prairies*, John Francis McDermont, ed. (Norman, 1940), p. 128. There is some confusion regarding the White Hair family. From all records available, this paragraph is substantially correct and is probably entirely true.

³ Statement in letter from the Hon. Charles Curtis to Mr. Frank Phillips, dated Oct. 4, 1930, on exhibit at the Woolaroc Museum: "Great great-great grandfather of White Plume of the Kaws married one of White Hair's daughters. Gonville married one of White Plume's daughters and my grandfather Pappen married Julie Gonville."

known as "Big Hill Joe," as Governor of the Osages. Chief Little White Hair died in 1869, and after much discord among them over the proposition, the Osages accepted the Government's choice, and acknowledged Paw-ne-no-pah-she as their governor and head chief.⁴ Thus, it came about that the surviving member of the White Hair line, who came to the Osage reservation with his tribe and died at Gray Horse, was deprived of his hereditary right to the head chieftaincy of his nation.

The first White Hair, according to a legend, won his name from an incident in an engagement in 1790 with the American troops led by General St. Clair. It is related that the chief wounded an officer, and in making the coup, the hair which he grasped turned out to be a white wig; thereafter, when the chief went into a fight he wore the wig tied to his scalp lock as a "good medicine" talisman.⁵

After the Louisiana Purchase was consummated in 1803, President Jefferson at once took steps to become better acquainted with the country and its inhabitants and to make treaties with them. Chief White Hair, the First, through the influence of Pierre Chouteau of St. Louis, French Indian trader and agent for the Osages, accepted an invitation of the President to visit him and, accompanied by Chouteau and about a dozen Osage chiefs and warriors, made the trip to Washington.

Besides the National Capital, they visited Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. They attracted much attention wherever they went and were entertained and feted. In return they performed their dances for the curious spectators. White Hair or "King" as he was called, was described in a New York newspaper as upward of six feet in stature, proportionably well made with a Roman nose and dignified port, the article stating that "perhaps no one brought up in savage life has ever been known to unite the same ease, politeness and nobleness of manners."⁶

Another paper carried an account of a fete in the Vauxhall Garden in New York attended by the Indians and a description of them:⁷

The King's deportment was majestic and easy; he was dressed in a laced blue coat, and corresponding under vestments, wore a cocked hat, and a handsome sword by his side But it was the singular and savage appearance of the other Indians naked and painted, that excited principle attention. They were eight or nine

⁴ David Parsons in *The Daily Journal-Capital*, Pawhuska, Oklahoma, April 24, 1938.

⁵ *Tixier's Travels on the Osage Prairies*, p. 123; John Joseph Mathews, *Wah-kon-tah*, (Norman, 1932), p. 348.

⁶ *American Citizen*, New York, August 16, 1804.

⁷ *New York Gazette and General Advertiser*, August 16, 1804.

in number. Excepting a piece of cloth fastened around the waist, in which tomahawks were stuck, they were all in a state of nudity The toute ensemble of these men were savage and ferocious.

At Washington, escorted by the President himself, the party was shown the Navy Yard to view the frigates anchored there. As they approached the Navy Yard a band and music and a salute from the guns greeted them. That evening the Indians performed a dance, all participating except the "King," in the presence of the President and a concourse of government officials and their ladies. Undoubtedly Jefferson desired to impress the influential chief and his followers with the power of the United States, and it was also believed that he wanted them as hostages until the safe return of Lewis and Clark, whom he had sent to explore the Missouri River to its source.

A ceremony was also held in which the President presented the Indians an instrument of writing on parchment embellished with a golden chain in token of friendship, and addressed them in a friendly speech in which he said in part:⁸

My children; I sincerely weep with you over the graves of your chiefs and friends, who fell by the hands of their enemies lately defending the Osage River These are my words, carry them to your nation, keep them in your memories, and our friendship in your hearts, and may the Great Spirit look upon us in a mantle of love.

Jefferson's words showed an understanding of the Osages and was a wise approach to cement a compact of friendship with them.

Evidently the Osages did keep Jefferson's words in their memories. With the exception of Chief Black Dog and some of his band who joined with the Confederates,⁹ the Osages remained loyal to the Government and during the Civil War their fidelity was inestimable in protecting the frontier from the incursion of rebel guerillas. To say that the Osages were loyal to the Government does not signify that there were not some instances when members of the white race, as well as members of enemy tribes of their own race, were victims of their mourning scalping parties. It was their belief that the spirit of some recently deceased member of their tribe could not rest until a life was sacrificed and a scalp taken. In obedience of this strange belief, it was the Osage custom, after a dance of three days, for a party of warriors to set forth to obtain a scalp.

Members of no other tribe manifested more grief for their dead. It was customary for the Osages to mourn at daybreak

⁸ *Luke Vincent Lockwood, L. H. D., "The St. Memin Indian Portraits,"* reprint from *Antiquarian Society Quarterly Bulletin*, April, 1928.

with doleful cries and lamentations for months and even years for some departed relative. The method of disposing of their dead was peculiar to the Osages. The body painted and clothed in full regalia was placed in a sitting position in a cairn made of stones to form a dome-like appearance. Sometimes it was lined with buffalo or cow hides and was always located on top of a hill. Treasured belongings of the departed were put in the tomb, and cooking utensils and food was left around the grave as symbols for use of the Indians' spirit on its journey to the "Happy Hunting Grounds." A United States flag, inverted with the stars turned towards the ground, usually flew from a pole over the tomb, and often the favorite pony of the dead was killed and left at his last resting place. As the white men came in increasing numbers, these cairns of rocks, which appeared on many hills of the Osage Reservation in the Indian Territory, became surrounded by pastures and overrun with cattle. White prowlers, looking for relics and treasure, robbed and desecrated the graves. Even bones were removed as trophies and exhibited.

The war dances continued long after the Osages came to the Indian Territory, but the mourning scalping parties were almost entirely discontinued, and if any Indians went out after scalps they were likely to return with only locks of hair clipped off of some obliging person's head¹⁰ for which they sometimes

paid money. There are, however, several bloody instances on record, and there may have been others not brought to light. One such incident occurred soon after the tribe arrived from Kansas, which caused serious trouble and brought a band of Wichita warriors to the Osage Agency, hot for revenge and demanding punishment for the guilty.

A party of Osages which included Bill Conner, a mixed blood who was their leader, met Es-ad-da-na, head chief of the Wichita tribe who had become separated from his companions while hunting buffalo near the Salt Plains. Professing to believe that it was the will of the Great Spirit that the Wichita

⁹ List of officers belonging to the Osage Tribe serving in the First Regiment of the Cherokee Mounted Confederate Indian Brigade: Black Dog, Broke Arm, A Captains and others, in Confederate Memorial Room, Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹⁰ One afternoon, my cousin, Walter Florer and I (the writer) visited a "war" dance in progress at the Salt Creek camp near Gray Horse. While there, Yellow Horse came up to us holding a knife and a string in his hands. He tied the string around a lock of my hair and cut it off with his knife to use in the dance. I was not at all disturbed by this act for it was done in a friendly manner. The Osages were always good friends of our families and we had no reason to have any fear of them. The locks on the doors of our homes were never locked.

chief should provide the sacrifice, they killed him and returned with his scalp and also his head, to the Reservation where the customary dance was held. The delegation of thirty-eight Wichita Indians who appeared at the Osage Agency soon after the affair demanded the heads of the leaders who perpetrated the deed, and were particularly desirous of securing Conner who prudently hid out. After much bitter counseling with the Osage chiefs, the Wichitas accepted as reparation money, ponies, blankets and guns in value to the amount of fifteen hundred dollars.¹¹

The last party returning with a scalp to the Osage reservation of which there is an eye-witness account occurred in the spring of 1880. The scalp dance was held near the Wooster mound a few miles southwest of the Osage Agency, now the town of Pawhuska. The hair was supposed to have been lifted from the head of a Pawnee by a party which transgressed across the Arkansas River into the Pawnee country.¹²

Thereafter, only minor incidents were known to ensue from the old cruel custom such as one which occurred on Gray Horse Creek where three boys of the Millholler family were fishing. Several Indians whooping wildly came after the boys who unable to escape were caught, and their hair cut off by the Osages with knives that they carried in their belts. The father of the boys reported the affair to the agent, Major Miles, who after an investigation learned of the identity of the offenders and stopped their annuity payments for a time as punishment.¹³

At another time, while engaged in a dance some Indians seized a white man by the name of McGill. They cut his hair, smeared paint on his face and let him loose. McGill started a suit in the courts for ten thousand dollars in damages but settled for the sum of three hundred dollars which was awarded to him by the Osage Council out of tribal funds.¹⁴

These occurrences were only mild reminders of the savage custom followed in the prime days of the last old White Hair who had become reconciled to the white man's ways. Although he was never the principle chief of his tribe, he was head of the

¹¹ Isaac T. Gibson, Osage Agent, report in Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1873.

¹² Data from M. F. Stilwell (half-brother to Frank F. Finney) found in "Indian and Pioneer History," Vol. 71, p. 149, Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society. (This account by M. F. Stilwell was published in a Denver newspaper prior to the compilation of "Indian and Pioneer History" under the W. P. A. program.)

¹³ Interview with Lorene Millholler, Oklahoma City, in "Indian and Pioneer History," Vol. 36, p. 368, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Wah-sha-sha* News, Pawhuska, April 27, 1895.

Paw-hue-skah band and his people,¹⁵ like children before a father, laid their troubles and problems before him. He acted as a peacemaker and his councils were obeyed as coming from one in authority. About two weeks before he died, the old patriarch sent word to his old and trusted friend, John Florer, the trader at Gray Horse, to come to his lodge. Florer found the chief, feeble, sick and only a shadow of the fine specimen he remembered of former days. As the trader took his hand White Hair told him that he wanted to be buried like a white man on a hill he had selected about three miles northwest of Gray Horse.

All was arranged by the trader according to the chief's wishes and upon his death, his remains, resting in a coffin like the white people used, was lowered into a vault prepared for it. A little white house, from which flew the stars and stripes, marked the grave, at his death in 1894.

In recognition of the regard in which White Hair was held, the Agent, Major Freeman, his wife and daughter and some other residents of the Agency joined the handful of the white people of Gray Horse and a large number of Indians in the solemn funeral procession. The last request of the old Indian to his people was that no dance be held for him.¹⁶

Interned in the white man's manner did not save White Hair's grave from desecration and vandalism. Eight years after White Hair's burial, this writer rode by the grave on horseback and found the grave house turned over, the coffin uncovered and the skull of the last Pah-hue-skah on the ground. He returned with a kodak and took a snap shot of the scene.

¹⁵ Roll Book of Osage Bands, Osage Agency Office, Pawhuska.

¹⁶ T. M. Finney, files and records.