

25 The Lost Manuscript

In June 2015, visiting the Osage Nation at Kathryn Red Corn's insistence, I observed a sprawling windmill farm across the prairie west of Pawhuska, Oklahoma. Dominated by towering wind turbines, this new energy installation spanned over eight thousand acres, intended to power tens of thousands of homes but stirring controversy among the Osage. Over a century after the discovery of oil beneath their land, the Osage faced another challenge to their sovereignty. The federal government, on behalf of the Osage, sued Enel, the Italian firm behind the wind farm, for violating their rights under the 1906 Allotment Act by not obtaining permission for excavation work essential for the turbines' foundations. Despite a court ruling favoring Enel—on grounds that it wasn't engaging in mineral extraction and thus didn't infringe on Osage mineral rights—tensions remained, highlighting ongoing disputes over underground reservations.

Simultaneously, stringent 2014 environmental regulations imposed on oil drilling significantly diminished new explorations in Osage County, marking a historic low in drilling activities and impacting the local economy.

Amid these contemporary issues, my research into historical Osage murders led to a significant discovery at the Pawhuska public library: a manuscript detailing the 1918 murder of Mary Lewis by Thomas Middleton, a betrayal for financial gain rooted in Osage headrights. This account, assembled by Anna Marie Jefferson, Lewis's descendant, revived a forgotten story of deceit, murder, and injustice, where Lewis, a prosperous Osage, was lured to Texas and killed by Middleton and an accomplice, aiming to cash in on her wealth through a gruesome scheme involving impersonation and deceit. Despite a confession leading to Middleton's conviction, his death sentence was commuted, and he was released early on, a decision that deeply angered Lewis's family.

This revelation broadened the historical context of the Osage murders, suggesting that such atrocities predated the widely recognized Reign of Terror initiated by William Hale in 1921 and persisted longer than previously documented. This chilling narrative underscored the broader and more systemic exploitation and murder of the Osage people for their valuable headrights, extending beyond Hale's infamous conspiracies.