

# Chapter 4: Underground Reservation

The chapter titled "*Underground Reservation*" explores the extraordinary history of the Osage people, detailing their journey from a once-dominant presence across vast regions of the United States to their forced migration and eventual rise to unexpected wealth through the discovery of oil beneath their lands. In the 17th century, the Osage controlled millions of acres, thriving as skilled hunters and stewards of the land, their lives deeply intertwined with the spiritual and communal bonds that defined their society. However, their dominion began to erode following the Louisiana Purchase, when encroaching settlers, fueled by westward expansion, began to claim Osage territories.

By the early 19th century, the Osage faced mounting pressure to cede their lands. Though Thomas Jefferson's 1804 meeting with the Osage started diplomatically, it quickly gave way to treaties forcing the tribe to relinquish large portions of their territory. Eventually, the Osage were relocated to a reservation in southeastern Kansas, where they adapted their traditional lifestyle—centered around buffalo hunting and deep cultural practices—to their new circumstances. However, even this land proved temporary, as settlers, driven by the rising value of Kansas farmland, pushed the Osage off once again, leaving them to search for a permanent homeland amidst increasing displacement and loss.

In a bold and strategic move, the Osage purchased land in what is now northeastern Oklahoma, land considered worthless by settlers due to its rocky terrain and poor agricultural prospects. This decision, though seemingly desperate, would prove fortuitous—the land sat atop vast reserves of oil, hidden beneath the surface. This unforeseen twist turned the Osage's new territory into the first "underground reservation," a term that reflected their ownership of the mineral rights beneath their land. As oil was discovered and extracted, the Osage became immensely wealthy, with the profits transforming their socioeconomic status and drawing the attention of opportunists and criminals alike.

The chapter intricately weaves this transformational period into the life of Mollie Burkhart, who serves as a lens through which the Osage's struggles and triumphs are explored. Mollie's family, like many Osage, navigated the challenges of sudden wealth while grappling with the loss of traditional ways of life. Her father, Ne-kah-e-se-y (later known as Jimmy), embodied the Osage heritage, but the cultural pressures of assimilation into a predominantly white society strained the intergenerational ties that once defined their identity. Mollie's story highlights the cultural shifts, personal sacrifices, and resilience of the Osage, illustrating their fight to maintain their identity amid newfound prosperity.

The chapter also underscores the systematic injustices the Osage endured, from forced land cessions to the implementation of allotment policies designed to assimilate Native Americans into white culture. These policies fractured communal landholdings, assigning individual plots to Osage members and opening opportunities for exploitation by white settlers. Yet, the Osage displayed remarkable foresight by ensuring they retained exclusive mineral rights during the allotment process, inadvertently securing the foundation for their immense oil-driven wealth.

While their newfound affluence brought significant opportunities, it also exposed the Osage to prejudice, greed, and betrayal. Many white Americans resented the idea of a Native American tribe enjoying such wealth, fostering envy and schemes to seize control of their fortunes. The guardianship system, which placed many Osage under the financial oversight of white guardians, epitomized this exploitation, as it allowed unscrupulous individuals to manipulate and steal from the Osage while cloaked in legal authority.

This chapter captures a pivotal era in the Osage's history—a story of resilience amidst profound loss and an unexpected rise to wealth that reshaped their future. It examines themes of colonization, cultural assimilation, and the profound impact of natural resources on indigenous communities, serving as both a cautionary tale and a testament to the Osage people's enduring strength. While oil wealth may have transformed their

fortunes, it also introduced a new era of challenges, placing the Osage at the center of one of the darkest chapters of greed and betrayal in American history.