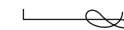


The COLLECTIONS



*Nearly a century ago, a **SERIES OF MURDERS** decimated the Osage Nation—a genocide that included the deaths of many women who were killed for their mineral rights. In this essay and portfolio, Osage photographer Ryan RedCorn explores the lasting impact of the killings while working with present-day **OSAGE WOMEN** on portraits that show them as they choose to be represented: powerful, graceful, resilient, and in control of their own destinies.*



ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN REDCORN



The prints of **OSAGE WOMEN** outnumbered those of men by a margin of three to one.

The implication: These women were **BEING HUNTED**.

IN 2016, MY dad, Raymond W. RedCorn III, dropped into my office carrying a giant Rubbermaid tub. He placed it on a table that seemed to debate whether it would support the weight of its contents.

I knew what was in that tub. I spent my entire youth, adolescence, and young adulthood with my dad stopping at every roadside antique mall, flea market, or old attic trunk he heard about. He sold vinyl siding, windows, and kitchen remodels, but on the weekends, he had a side hustle dealing antiques—primarily old photographs, postcards, glassware, and crockpots. My brothers and I were woken up so many times before the sun to move these tubs to the flea market that I continued to rise before dawn for years to come.

Long after my dad had left the antiques world and this preoccupation behind, this one tub remained. It contained hundreds of old photographs, letters, and documents on Osage Indians from 1850 to 1940. My dad, now assistant principal chief of the Osage Nation, was donating this trove to the Osage Nation Museum but wanted me to scan the contents first.

The bulk of the collection consists of photos taken between 1915 and 1935, a period that saw a huge influx of wealth from the royalties of oil and gas reserves found on the Osage reservation. During this time, Osages founded the Hominy Indians, a professional football team that defeated the NFL champion New York Giants in 1927. They boasted an Oxford graduate and renowned author, John Joseph Mathews. Maria Tallchief became the first Native American prima ballerina, and an Osage woman, Rosa Hoots, owned the horse that won the 1924 Kentucky Derby. Adjusted for inflation, oil payments had grown to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year per person during the 1920s, painting a target on the head of every Osage in the minds of unscrupulous whites.

A quick glance at the photos laid out chronologically shows how wealth influenced Osage life. Looking at the

collection as a photographer, I can point to a shift in the relationship between photographer and subject. The images transition from a voyeuristic aesthetic to portraits obviously commissioned by Osage people themselves. My dad, on the other hand, had noticed something very peculiar. The prints of Osage women outnumbered those of men by a margin of three to one.

“Why?” I asked.

He said “Because they were after them.”

The implication: These women were being hunted.

I knew exactly what he meant. My dad was referring to the murders.

Among this collection are several images of my dad’s grandfather, Raymond RedCorn Sr. One of those images, taken around 1925, is of Raymond Sr., his father Wyaglanka, and his friend Orlando Kenworthy. Raymond and Orlando both hold Kodak 3A folding cameras. But no pictures survive from that camera. According to family history, Raymond RedCorn Sr. was poisoned by his second wife in 1931. I had heard about the murders from my grandmother Waltena and my grandpa Raymond Jr. My grandpa had been told by his dad, “Don’t eat the food at this house.”

These tiny fragments of stories felt like their own poisonous crumbs. These are the things people don’t discuss openly. Talking about them—or even worse, trying to do something about them—got people killed. Many of the architects of these killings were known to Osages as guardians, individuals the United States government had placed over every Osage to manage their immense wealth. But a system that claimed to help did nothing but divert wealth away from Osages and shorten their lives.

So how does my grandpa, Raymond RedCorn Jr., born in 1911, not only live through this time period but adapt, survive, and thrive to the age of ninety-four? How does



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“. . . the photos that follow . . . were made in **COLLABORATION** with the women they depict.

THEY HELPED select the images and decided how they want the **WORLD** to see them.”

he lay the foundation for a family when he's surrounded by so much murder and corruption?

Part of the answer lay in another amazing part of the photo collection: a thirty-six-inch black and white panoramic that must have a thousand people in it. The framed photo documents a dance that took place about 1923 in the Pawhuska Indian Village. Towards the center right of the photo, hidden among a thousand faces, behind an incredible row of women in the most beautiful ribbon work blankets you have ever seen, is the thirteen-year-old face of my grandfather. His eyes are so keyed into the camera that it makes it easy to find him every time.

Towards the center left of the photo is an older, tall white man in a hunting cap and a giant sloppy white mustache. This man is Robinson Crusoe Myers, the Kentucky-born former U.S. Indian marshal for the Osages and Raymond's future father-in-law. According to family history, Myers was known as a direct and honest man, and within a few years of this photo, he would find himself sitting on a jury composed of twelve white men. The case he is rumored to have sat on was the trial of William Hale.

Hale is in the original photograph on the far left at the very end, but in this print, he has been cut out. My Aunt Kathryn calls him “the devil.” He was convicted and sentenced to Leavenworth for orchestrating the murder and attempted murder of entire families. Many of the Osage victims he was directly linked to were women.

During this time, Osages actively participated in how they were viewed by the public at large. They were not ignorant to the side effects of bad press or illegitimate ideas about them. Osages were never passive in the evil they faced down. The photographers who took their pictures, however, had other designs. They printed three times more photos of women than men for one purpose: When unscrupulous white men came to the Osage reservation, they sought to marry and bury Osage women.

They would systematically kill heirs to create an inheritance funnel to their new spouses, kill the spouses, and acquire the money and land. They purchased these prints at a high rate and used them as photographic identification to locate these women in the community. Nearly all the merchants in Pawhuska were guardians, which meant they were privy to when and how much each Osage received.

The official FBI death count sits at twenty-four. But ask any Osage family, and estimates might be as high as two or three hundred. It is difficult to find an Osage family that was not affected. My great grandfather is among those not on the FBI's official list.

The photographs that accompany this essay are a testament to Osage adaptation and survival. These stories would not exist if our people had not survived this time. And we would not have survived this time without each other. Much has been written about Osage murders. I want people to know about Osage survival. I would not be here if it were not for my grandfather's ability to navigate and survive this time period. The same goes for everyone in the photos that follow, which were made in collaboration with the women they depict. They helped select the images and decided how they want the world to see them. That's a hero story. ■

GET THERE

OSAGE NATION MUSEUM
819 Grandview Avenue in Pawhuska
(918) 287-5441 or osagenation-nsn.gov/museum.

OSAGE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM
700 Lynn Avenue in Pawhuska
(918) 287-9119 or visittheosage.com.



Brittany Cunningham



Pehan and Signy RedCorn



Vanessa Moore



Addie Hudgins



Moira RedCorn



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