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OSAGE VERSION OF BATTLE OF CLAREMORE MOUND

Mr. J. Chalmers Byers of Claremore, Oklahoma, known among the Osage people as E-huh-Suit-Sa, has written the following letter, together with the Osage version of the Battle of Claremore Mound as given by Ho-ne-kah-sea, full-blood Osage, who was a survivor of that massacre.

April 17, '37

Mr. Grant Foreman
Muskogee

Dear Sir:

Just made copy of notes I have on Battle of Claremore Mounds. Have not time to check over and correct this you will probably find several mistakes.

Remember we came to what is now Osage County, Oklahoma, Oct 2, 1869, and settled on Big Caney River. Went back to Osage Mission (now St. Paul, Kansas) that winter and the next summer, and moved on the farm in September 1870.

They located the 1st Osage Agency at Silver Lake, south of now Bartlesville. After that the Surveyors

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found that the Agency was in the Cherokee Country. So located it at Pawhuska. Named after White Hair, Chief of one of the Bands of Osages. Also he was a Son (or Grand Son) of Clermont a Frenchman who did not have any Indian blood in him but married an Osage woman (one or more). His oldest Son, was also Clermont but the Indians could not pronounce the word and called him Gram-moia. He was the War Chief of the Osages.

Respectfully

J. C. Byers.

BATTLE OF CLAREMORE MOUND

Much has been written of the memorable clash of the Cherokees and Osages at Claremore Hill. The existing accounts have an unmistakable Cherokee flavor. I know of no Osage version that has been published but there is a generous body of legendary rumors that have grown up around Clermont, the Frenchman who lived so long with the Osages and who, unfortunately died in that battle.

For years, I have persisted in relating to those interested in early Oklahoma History, the account which I

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received, as a young man, from an aged Osage. He was He-ne-kah-sea (Pretty Nearly Drowned). I do not remember when I first came to know him. Like the rocks and trees of the Osage country, I came unconsciously to know him and to regard him as an integral and inseparable part of all that Osage meant to me.

If I remember correctly, it was about 1890 that the conversation took place which I am about to describe to you. He-ne-kah-sea was at that time a very old man, probably about eighty-one or eighty-two years old. He was a very interesting old fellow and I used often to talk to him. Although he knew a little English, he would never speak it, or at least not more than a word or two at a time. So we would sit, with He-ne-kah-sea talking in his native dialect about the Osages and their experiences through the long course of legendary history. For the most part I listened, but occasionally I would ply him with a question, in Osage, to elicit further information about some interesting point that he was making. There are few garrulous Osages, and certainly He-ne-kah-sea would not be classified as such. He was not even a

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ready talker and he bore a reputation for honesty and integrity. Otherwise, I would not put such store in what he told me of the battle of Clermont Mound.

I had read some place, I don't remember where something of that battle, it was the Cherokee interpretation and so I got him started on his tale by relating to him the principal claims of the story that I had read. And the Osages were not painted in too favorable colors in that story. The best of them were classified some place between a cut-throat and a horse thief. His disgust for the things which I told him was plainly revealed as he related to me the very experience which he had in the battle.

My mother's camp, began Ho-ne-kah-sea, was in the eastern side of the Verdigris River not far from the river itself. Other Indians were camped in the near vicinity. At the time of the battle, or massacre, the Osage men were out hunting buffalo on the plains to the west. Only a few old men remained with the women and children. Even the larger of the Indian boys had gone with their fathers on the hunt. The camp was, therefore,

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utterly unprotected from marauding Cherokees. It was in the late springtime and the grass on the prairies was tall enough to hide a little rabbit. The Osage hunted buffalo twice each year - once in the spring and once in the fall. The latter was, of course, the more important hunt, for the buffalo was fatter at that season.

This was in the Spring of 1818. Ho-ne-kah-sea (except that was not his name then) was then only ten or twelve years old. It was just about sunrise on a bright day that the Cherokees rushed into the Osage camp. Coming before the Osages were fully awake, one can easily imagine the consternation among the helpless people. The attackers, said Ho-ne-kah-sea, began immediately to kill Osages without regard to age or sex.

Ho-ne-kah-sea said that he looked out through the trees and that he saw the Cherokee raiders pick up little children by the heels and dash their brains out against the ground. His mother came running to him, exclaiming that the Cherokees were going to kill everyone in the camp. Go to the river, she told him, and get a chunk or log and cross to the other side. Ho-ne-kah-sea did as he was told. He

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pulled a small tree trunk to the river. It must not have been very large, or he could not have managed it. The river was bank full. After pushing the buoy into the water, he jumped in after it, and held on to it for hours. The swift current took him far down stream before he was able to reach the opposite bank. Ho-ne-kah-sea thought that he must have been carried down stream about ten miles, but that part of the story is really immaterial. He was found by Osages hours later in a very fatigued condition. He related to them what had happened and received from them then and there the name of Ho-ne-kah-sea, which means "Pretty Nearly Drowned."

Ho-ne-kah-sea was the only Osage who survived the massacre except a few little girls who were too young to remember that horrible experience. His mother and all of the other adults were either killed or drowned in the river as they sought escape from the vengeance of the raiders. Old Gram-moia (Clermont), for whom Claremore was named, tried to rally the old men and the boys and they made a stand on a nearby hill of peculiar shape. It still bears the name of Claremore Mound. The

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Osages were armed with only bows and arrows and a few old guns; the better guns had been taken by the buffalo hunters. The feeble defense stood off the Cherokees only a short time and the Osages fell to a man. From the beginning it was an uneven struggle. It ended in complete annihilation.

When the Osage men returned from their ill-fated hunt, they immediately decided to make war upon the Cherokees. And there is no doubt, thought Ho-ne-kah-sea, that war would have followed except for the intercession of Colonel Choteau, a French trader with a post in the Verdigris River. He had enough influence with the Osages to prevent war.

Besides Ho-ne-kah-sea, there were a few very young Osage girl babies who survived the massacre. Presumably, these were spared only because they were too young to remember at that time. The number of these spared babies has never been determined. There is no way of finding the facts. They grew up as Cherokee girls. However, I have known two women who were supposed to be of this captive group. John and Alex Pappin were sons of one of

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these women, and they later proved up their rights as members of the Osage tribe upon the presumption that their mother was stolen by the Cherokees at the Battle of Claremore Mound. Judge Pettit and Mrs. Johnson, brother and sister, were children of another of these Osage girl captives. Both proved up their Osage standing. There are now many descendants of Judge Pettit, children and grandchildren of his four sons.

Another of these Osage survivors married a Cherokee by the name of Rogers, and Lewis Rogers was her son. The elder Rogers had four wives simultaneously, which was an extraordinary fact because the Cherokees did not practice polygamy. Rogers was reputedly a Mormon, and it was always said that his house was headquarters for the Mormon missionaries who came to convince the sinners of the section of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

The Cherokees always maintained that the attack upon the Osages resulted from horse stealing by the latter. But even so, the raid was very severe punishment. Why should they have massacred the women and children, if they were merely seeking to stop the practice. The Cherokees

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claimed to have lost several horses. They charged the Osages with having stolen them. One of their reasons for this indictment was that the theft had been committed by Indians, for the dogs of the Cherokee village never barked when the horses were taken. If white persons had sought to steal the horses, said the Cherokees, the dogs would have raised such a furor that the sleepers would have awakened.

When I told Ho-ne-kah-sea of these accusations by the Cherokees, he had ready rebuttal immediately. In the first place, he said, the Osages were not thieves. They already had enough horses. There were hundreds of them running on the plains about the Osage camps. In the second place, the dogs would, said Ho-ne-kah-sea, have barked as much at Osages as at white men. Dogs hated strangers, and they made no distinction between white and red skins. They would charge a strange Indian as furiously as a strange white man. And I believe that Ho-ne-kah-sea was correct in this statement, allowing, of course, for the peculiar traits of each individual dog.

The packs of dogs that one inevitably found around

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Indian camps and villages were savage beasts. And they existed there as numerous, almost, as the flies in summer. Most were ill-fed, hungry and mangy creatures and all were more or less mixed with the wild wolves that crept up close to the camps at night. When a stranger came to an Osage camp, the Osages had a merry time beating off the dogs. I've seen many whiskey peddlers who were afraid to dismount from their horses until the dogs had fled ahead of the barrage of stones cast at them. One can scarcely conceive of a strange Osage stealing into a Cherokee village at night and making away with horses without having aroused these jealous guardians.

If the horses were stolen by persons whom the dogs recognized, continued Ho-ne-kah-sea, the thieves were Cherokees. And more than likely that was what happened, if indeed, there were horses stolen. The old Osages always maintained that the Cherokee reason was a mere excuse. There were, outside this camp, between four and five hundred head of horses. These, he said, were the object of the raid. Moreover, he was firm in his conviction that the marauding party was made up of half-breeds and mean Indians and not by the respectable Cherokees.

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If that were the case, these lawless persons killed the Osages so that there would be none left to tell the story "A dead man tells no tales." The whole episode, said Pretty Nearly Drowned, was a plain case of murder and robbery and there is no way in which it can be excused by indicting the Osages as being horse thieves.

From my knowledge of the Osages, extending over a period of sixty-six years. I cannot believe that they were guilty of having stolen horses from the Cherokees. They were never night-hawks. When the dark came they were to be found in their tepees or around the campfires. Moreover they were peaceful Indians, living in union with the other tribes. The Pawnees and the Comanches were the horse thieves of the plains. To the former has also been applied the reputation of being the Ishmaelites of the Southwestern Indians.

The Pawnees were very clever in their depredations. Since white men first came in contact with them to the north and west of Independence, Missouri, they have been living by their wits. Those who pushed their slow way up the Oregon Trail discovered the necessity for posting

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a guard at night not to repel organized Indian attack, but to drive off prowlers. The Pawnees were the princes of prowling. They would enter a wagon where a pioneer and his family were sleeping, in order to steal the most worthless bauble in the world; they would stampede the cattle, in the hope that one might be lost to the owner and the Indians would have fresh beef after the caravan had given up hope of finding the lost cow-brute. But of all their thieving operations, they loved horse stealing best of all. They developed a technique that was well nigh perfect. They could walk up to grazing horses many times without frightening them. Ah! They were expert horse-men.

When the Pawnees decided to raid an Osage village for horses, the raiding party was always small - never exceeding four or five in number. They would always travel on foot on the way out, but they seldom failed to ride back. They did not take horses with them, because there was always the chance that the horses which they sought to steal would scent the approach of strange horses and would begin to nicker and call to them. That

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would have been a dead give-away and would have put the Osage on guard. So, they would approach the village in the dead of night, carefully sort out the horses which they believed themselves able to handle on a fast retreat, and make a get-away as silently as the flight of an owl. Once out of hearing they would strike up a steady gait; and before the sun rose, they would be many miles from the site of their depredations. Sometimes, with greater bravado, they would cut the hobbles from the horses, select those which they wanted to steal and stampede the remainder of the herd so that Osage pursuit was rendered impossible until after mounts were caught from the Plains. Horse stealing was a game with the Pawnees. They played it because they loved it. They were not stealing, as the white man who believes so thoroughly in private property, defines the term. The Pawnees always stole horses from Osages, even though they knew that death would be the penalty if they were caught. They seemed to get a particular pleasure out of escaping that penalty.

After stealing the horses, they rarely stopped for long on the Pawnee Reservation. Generally they

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hurried on to the Comanche country where they traded their loot for Comanche ponies. The Comanches always split the ears of their horses. When the Pawnees traded for them, they would cut off the ears as far down as they were split. As a boy, I remember seeing whole herds of bobbed-eared horses in the Pawnee country. I was told that they were formerly Comanche stock and had been bobbed to distinguish them for their new owners. The Comanche split usually ran about half the length of the ear. If one would examine those bobbed ears, he would discover, in many cases, the lowest part of the old Comanche split.

Withal, it seems improbable that the Osage had committed the alleged thefts of Cherokee ponies. The explanation of Ho-ne-kah-sea seems reasonable to me, even though the battle has passed into the limbo of historical myths. However, I feel obligated to comment upon it and to put in permanent form the Osage version of that unfortunate affair. I realize, of course, that the story is uncorroborated and is not verifiable now. It will have to be taken upon faith, upon its reasonableness, and upon the fact that Ho-ne-kah-sea had no personal

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axe to grind by telling the story. The Osages have long since overcome their natural reaction to the Cherokee claims, for a hundred years can heal wounds that once appeared malignant.