

JAMES BIGHEART

1835 - 1908

PRINCIPAL CHIEF OF THE OSAGE TRIBE 1875 - 1906

James Bigheart was born in 1835 at St. Paul, Kansas then called Osage Village. His father was Nun-tsa-tum-kah and his mother was Wah-hiu-shah, both were full blooded Osages, who named him Pun-kah-wi-tah-An-kah.

He was a Catholic convert, educated at the Old Osage Mission in Kansas, established among the Osage in 1847 by Father Schoenmakers. He learned to speak many languages fluently - Osage, Ponca, Creek, Sioux, Cherokee, French, English and Latin.

Served in the Civil War, Company I, 9th Kansas Cavalry. Bigheart entered the service in 1862 at Iola, Kansas. At the end of the war he was mustered out on March 22, 1865 at DeVall's Bluff, Arkansas.

Jim Bigheart had a vision and foresight for his people, serving his people in many capacities, Agency Clerk, Interpreter, Councilman, Delegate, Chief and Principal Chief.

Old Chief Pawhuska, appointed Beaver to take his place as Principal Chief. Upon Beaver's death, his sons being too young, the Band appointed James Bigheart as Principal Chief in 1875.

The 1881 Constitution which is attributed to Bigheart, united the Great and Little Osage. The Chief was no longer appointed, but elected by the people. There were two political parties, basically the full bloods which Bigheart represented, and the mixed bloods.

Bigheart, was the first chief to sanction appropriations for schools and championed education.

James Bigheart was the first to recognize the possibilities for grazing and fattening stock on the lush bluestem grass found on the Reservation. He purchased Texas cattle and brought them up to the Osage Reservation.

Bigheart fought the Quakers who wanted to remove Osage children from the local Catholic Schools and send them to the government schools.

In 1875, in his first year as Chief, he signed the first blanket oil lease with Edwin Foster, on behalf of the Osage people, for the exploration of oil and gas. Because of the leadership of James Bigheart retaining the mineral estate, thus resulting in the Osage people becoming the wealthiest Tribe in America during the 1920's.

Even though many honors were bestowed on Chief Bigheart, he showed no tendency toward pompous display of wealth or power. Bigheart wore modest white men's clothing and spent his life in the interest of matters concerning the Osage Tribe.

James Bigheart was the only Indian at the time granted a license to bring whiskey into the reservation. This privilege was granted to him by the Secretary of Interior Hitchcock. Prior to that, he was said to have been arrested for serving alcohol to Washington officials in his home.

Chief Bigheart at one time had more influence in the Interior Department than any other Indian. This was stated in a newspaper article on Bigheart.

Married several times, but he lost the wives and children to diseases over the years. In 1884 Bigheart married Alice Grass McIntosh a Cherokee. They had four girls, Mary Jane, Rose, Sarah Lillian and Belle who survived to adulthood.

Bigheart is credited with delaying the Osage Allotment Bill, while he conducted an investigation of the Osage citizenship rolls. Chief Bigheart bitterly opposed the allotment of the Osage lands, and many say that he delayed that event for at least ten years. Bigheart's biggest argument was, the white men would come in and take the land. Around 1904, when a final vote was taken on the Allotment Bill, Bigheart failed to show up. They later found him beaten and left for dead. The beating caused a stroke. Bigheart spent the last two years remaining conducting business from his bed.

Bigheart spearheaded the 1906 Act. He made sure the Act said the Osage Tribe owned the mineral rights and that the Shareholders would be the beneficiaries. This was done so, a lawyer could not get a few Shareholders together to break the Trust. Thus the Trust has lasted over 107 years.

He was also known as the "Osage Moses". He took care of many people. Bigheart never turned anyone in need away. He was known for his generosity.

He became a mentor to many, like Fred Lookout. Several newspapers quoted Fred Lookout, who said "James Bigheart was the most brilliant politician and leader the Osage has ever known".

The Bigheart home was on top of the a hill overlooking Bird Creek. The house was a two story, frame house built, in a L shape with a breezeway on the lower porch. There were many visitors and there were two dining rooms. The house burned down in the early 1920s.

Bigheart spent his life working for his people. He accomplished his life-long dream of security for his Tribe and their children. He died just before the first payment was received by the Osage Shareholders resulting from the 1906 Act. He was truly one of the first champions of sovereignty.