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PAUPERS TO PRINCES: QUAPAW ROYALTIES FROM THE TRI-STATE MINING AREA
LAND-LEASES AND THEIR EFFECTS OF THE TRIBAL CULTURE

Jordan Adams

History-Theory and Practice 430

5/9/2012

On January 4, 1918, the Miami Record Herald ran a story that had become quite common in the years preceding. The newspaper out of Miami, Oklahoma received a story that the United States Government had declared three members of the Quapaw tribe incompetent to manage their funds and land. The rumor mill declared a bad investment led to Ben Quapaw, Se-Sah Quapaw, and Wah Tah Neh Zah Goodeagle to receive the declaration. In the minds of many, it was just another Indian wasting their mining money. What was happening was a far more troubling situation. Two attorneys who had been working for Benjamin and Se-Sah had discovered that a declaration of incompetence would allow them to become the managers of their clients' funds. After having them both declared incompetent, the two lawyers went on a two-year spending spree that used \$170,000 of the two tribal members' money, a figure that would translate to almost 3 millions of dollars in modern currency.¹ From 1926 to 1929, Bureau of Indian Affairs agent J.L. Suffecool authorized the spending of \$262,000 on vehicles, which would cost approximately \$500 apiece.² The Tri-State mining area was a godsend to many members of the Quapaw tribe, but corruption within the government and strangling restrictions made it difficult for the Quapaw people to function with their tribal identity intact.

The Quapaw tribal business relationship with the United States government developed during the Tri-State mining boom of the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Quapaw tribal members received millions of dollars in royalties from land leases to mining companies during this time. The royalties collected affected the culture that had been chronically poor since they migrated to northern Oklahoma. The government allowed the Quapaw tribal members to receive this money, but they were also overwhelmingly strict on its use after a short time of exorbitant spending by a

¹ David W. Baird, *The Quapaw People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1975), 75.

² *Ibid.* 80.

small number of Quapaw members. This period in Quapaw history was one of many examples on the relationship of Native tribes with the United States government. The government would regulate wills and estates by having government offices review them. Some Native people accepted this new form of governance but by the end of the Tri-State mining boom, many found themselves penniless. Although the restriction of the government had a lasting effect of many Quapaw people, the tribe was able to retain its tribal identity.

The United States government and populace had mixed feelings toward the Quapaw people and the other native tribes. This was a time where many people believed that the population of Native people was on the decline. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs in a 1900 report wrote that "some say the extinction of the Indian is only a matter of time."³ While the believed in the decline, the Commissioner believed the opposite was true. "It can, with a great degree of confidence, be stated that the Indian population of the United States has been very little diminished from the days of Columbus, Coronado, Raleigh, Capt. John Smith, and other early explorers."⁴ As Americans moved further west and came into more contact with native tribes, the United States government saw a growing need for a separate agency to deal with the people groups. While the relationship between the United States government was an important matter, they saw a need that expanded beyond just dealing with the native tribes. On March 11, 1824, the United States established the Bureau of Indian Affairs in order to improve relations with the native tribes of the area. In an ever-expanding country, the government noticed the larger scope required to keep the homeland in order, on March 3, 1849 the Department of the Interior formed

³ U.S. Department of the Interior, Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1900 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*

and drew the Bureau of Indian Affairs into its fold.⁵ While the primary function of these organizations was to administer Native American lands and provide for the welfare of the tribes, the government administrated forcefully by classifying Native Americans as wards of the state.⁶ This allowed the government to set laws to judge whether a tribal member was competent to maintain his or her money or property.⁷ In some cases, Quapaw people were even accepting of the structure set forth by the government. Regardless of the cooperation, the Quapaw tribe received the brunt of the government's declarations of incompetence, by 1921, 68 members out of 336 bore the declaration.⁸ While the United States government was strict, the Quapaw people were long-suffering. In the words of one account, "a more honest, quiet, peaceable people, are not to be found in any section of the Indian Country."⁹ Regardless of government opinion of the tribe, their reputation was for frugality and gentleness.

The mining boom of the Tri-State area of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri had its start in the late 1800s with coal and lead strikes in southeastern parts of Kansas. In the early 1900s zinc and lead veins became more common in the northeastern parts of Oklahoma. Zinc and lead deposits ran through many parts of the Quapaw tribal area. The boom existed as a part of the larger economic gain in the early parts of the 1900s leading up to World War I. Greater industrial expansion led to an increase in demand for products such as lead, zinc, and coal. The Tri-State

⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1924 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), III.

⁶ Samuel Weidman, *Miami-Picher Zinc-Lead District* (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), 92.

⁷ "Whitebird Will to Washington for Approval," Miami Record Herald, January 2, 1920.

⁸ David W. Baird, *The Quapaw People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1975), 76.

⁹ *The Indian Tribes of North America*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1934), s.v. "Quapaw."

area held some of the largest deposits in the United States, which led to some individuals and companies becoming fabulously wealthy. The Quapaw people were central to the development and success of the Tri-State mining area.

The Quapaw people came to be in Oklahoma from the Arkansas River Valley. Quapaw or Ugaxpa translates to "The Downstream People".¹⁰ The Quapaw tribe was once divided into two divisions with 22 clans with each of the two divisions were each headed by a chief. Through years of migration and poverty, the Quapaw tribe had become very small. In the year, 1885 there were only 174 members of the Quapaw tribe.¹¹ In 1891, Abner Abrams and Frank Valliere certified a roll, or tribal member list, through Washington. Originally from the Stockbridge tribe of New York, Abner Abrams was a native businessperson but was not a Quapaw. The roll submitted by Abrams and Valliere included a number of "adopted" members that would add genetic diversity and a boost in population. There was a lengthy debate over whether these non-Quapaw's should be brought into the tribe. Eventually the roll was sent to Washington for approval, the Quapaw tribe included a total of 195 members. Among one of the adopted members was Abner Abrams who was said to have been adopted based on his skills in business and value to the tribe.¹² Frank Valliere, Abrams' partner in organizing the roll, was the relative of Joseph Valliere who had been the chief of the second clan. Joseph worked alongside chief Wartoshe and they became well known for their prowess as farmers. They were said to have

¹⁰ *History*, <http://www.quapawtribe.com/index.aspx?nid=85> (May 2012)

¹¹ *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, rev. ed. (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), s.v. "Quapaw."

¹² David W. Baird, *The Quapaw People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1975), 67.

shared their crops with the less fortunate Quapaw in the tribe.¹³ The Quapaw people were known as a frugal and well managed people and members such as Benjamin Quapaw, John Beaver, Frank Valliere, and Victor Griffin became known for their modest lifestyles and habits of saving.¹⁴ After the submission of the roll in 1891, the Quapaw people decided to do what no Native tribe before them had done. In 1893, the Quapaw people divided the tribal land amongst its people. The land would be divided into 240 separate 200 acre plots, each being allotted to a tribal member.¹⁵ The tribe, as well as the government, considered the move a great success. A few years after the allotments, Mr. Abrams discovered ore on his land, which led to the development of the Sunny Side mine and the town of Lincolnville.¹⁶ Soon, land around the Picher and Quapaw area became popular for companies and independent mine owners alike. Thousands of individuals looking for their fortunes flocked to the northeaster portion of Oklahoma. Mining companies such as Eagle Picher became interested in the mineral rich lands. Along with the individual miners came land speculators. These dirty dealers would lease a piece of land from a tribal member who might not have known its worth, and sublease the land to a company or miner for double or triple the price. In light of these new events, the United States Government stepped in and became the controlling member of the tribal land-lease industry.

With the new restricted tribal land in high demand, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the

¹³ *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, rev. ed. (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), s.v. "Quapaw."

¹⁴ Vern. E. Thompson, *Brief History of the Quapaw People* (Joplin, Mo: Mostly Books, 1994 reprint), 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

United States Geological Survey became the operators of the Native members' leases.¹⁷ When a tribal member was ready to lease land they would turn the land over to the BIA and USGS who would administer a ten year lease for the purpose of mining.¹⁸ The tribal member was then paid yearly royalties based on the value of ore that came from the land. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs wrote in his annual report, "The leases awarded were upon such terms and conditions as it is believed will fully protect the interest of the Indian owners of the restricted land."¹⁹ This new relationship between government and tribe seemed to be benefitting both parties although, with more money coming from royalties, the relationship only became more complex. In the years that followed, production boomed in the Tri-State mining area.

In the 20 years after the turn of the century, the mining production in the Tri-State mining district became a leading producer in Lead and Zinc in the United States.²⁰ The Quapaw tribe joined with other tribes to form the Quapaw Agency territory in the areas in and around Crawford county Oklahoma. In 1923, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported 25 new leases worth

¹⁷ Samuel Weidman, *Miami-Picher Zinc-Lead District* (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 91.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 26.

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1923* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923); U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924); U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1925* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925); U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926).

3,644 acres that had been approved for lead and zinc mining.²¹ In the year 1925, 58 more leases had been approved and 95 producing mines were situated on Quapaw Agency lands. The rich mineral fields owned by the Quapaw tribe accrued vast amounts of money in royalties each year. The area was now producing 20 percent of the nations zinc and 8 percent of the nations lead.²² In the same year, the roughly 260,000 tons of ore extracted from the mines on Quapaw Agency lands sold for over \$15 millions of dollars. The Quapaw Agency earned approximately 8 percent in royalties and landowners collected \$1.2 millions of dollars, which would be approximately \$16.5 millions of dollars today.²³ By 1926 the Quapaw Agency area was producing 25 percent of the national zinc output and 7 percent of the national lead output.

The government reported over 7,000 acres worth of leased land owned by the Quapaw Agency in 1926. These figures show that mine operators were optimistic about the land that was owned by the Quapaw Agency. They were also bolstered by the fact that close to 300,000 tons of material sold for \$17.5 millions of dollars. In this year the Commissioner noted that 43 members of the Quapaw Agency Indians split the \$17 millions of dollars in royalties.²⁴ While the population of the Quapaw tribe in 1926 was 334, there were a total of 1,886 members in the Quapaw agency.²⁵ Even though the number of members in the Quapaw agency was small, there were only about 2 percent of Agency members that received the royalties. Among those 43

²¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1923* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 15.

²² U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1925* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), 29.

²³ "Adjusting for 3% inflation." *Ibid.*

²⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year of 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 42.

members, the average member would receive \$39,065 if the royalties split evenly. That figure would be approximately \$500,000 today.

Quapaw spending habits diverged with the new income from the royalties. Some Quapaw tribal members became incredibly wealthy while a neighbor could be left with nothing.²⁶ This had a dividing effect on the Quapaw tribe. Some members would spend their money on luxury items while many used their newfound wealth to improve the community. Between the years 1926 and 1929 a grand total of \$262,000 was spent on automobiles alone.²⁷ The average automobile price for the era was anywhere between \$500 and \$2,000, meaning tribal members purchased anywhere from 100 to 500 automobiles during this time. This may not have been remarkable if these facts were for the Quapaw Agency, but the money shown above was spent by members of the Quapaw tribe which in 1926 has 334 members. While members of the tribe who spent wildly became known as the "Whistling Wind Band," many other Quapaw members gained the respect of their tribesmen for their upstanding character.²⁸ Quapaw people that were known for their frugal ways and saving were important tribal members such as Frank Valliere who helped form the roll, Benjamin Quapaw, John Beaver, and Victor Griffin. These and others used the money gained from their royalties for donations made to Native and white schools alike.

²⁶ Vern. E. Thompson, *Brief History of the Quapaw People* (Joplin, Mo: Mostly Books, 1994 reprint), 33.

²⁷ David W. Baird, *The Quapaw People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1975), pg.

²⁸ Vern. E. Thompson, *Brief History of the Quapaw People* (Joplin, Mo: Mostly Books, 1994 reprint), 34.; *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, rev. ed. (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), s.v. "Quapaw."

They also gained renown for helping tribal members in need.²⁹ Although these Quapaw tribal members attempted to set an example and be the face of the Quapaw people with their newfound wealth, the United States government took notice of the wild spending that was being exhibited by some members of the tribe and became increasingly constrictive with Quapaw land owners royalties.

The government would administer the funds procured from royalties much more tightly than in the past. By squeezing tighter, some examples emerged of con men slipping through the cracks and spending the money of the tribal members. If a tribal member wished to bequeath an estate to their child or another member of their family, they would need Washington approval. On Friday January 2, 1920 the *Miami Record Harold* a story ran about Harry Whitebird's will. "Whitebird will to Washington for approval," this was required for his daughter to collect his estate when he died. If the will was not approved by Washington, the estate would be sold at public auction.³⁰ This means that if the United States government did not approve the will, Harry Whitebird's daughter would be required to purchase any family heirlooms she wished to keep. One of the lowest points of government intervention took place when Benjamin Quapaw, one Quapaw known for frugality and charity, was declared "incompetent by laws." Benjamin along with Se-Sah Quapaw and Wat Tah Neh Zah Goodeagle were all declared incompetent to manage their estates, the newspaper recorded that they were rumored to have made some bad

²⁹ *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, rev. ed. (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), s.v. "Quapaw."

³⁰ "Whitebird Will to Washington for Approval," *Miami Record Harold*, January 2, 1920.

investments.³¹ In the case of Benjamin and Se-Sah, the lack of oversight allowed the attorneys of the two men to declare them incompetent by federal laws and become the managers of the tribal members' estate. Over the course of the next two years, the attorneys spent over \$170,000 of Benjamin and Se-Sah's money. Incompetency laws were much stricter for tribal members in a time where a father could decide to uproot his family in search of ore. Government administration became a complication in the everyday lives of tribal members.

While the Quapaw experience was unique in the way it acquired its funds, it was not divorced from the Euro-American practice of using vast amounts of money to gain access to Native resources such as land. The American government shared a mixed view on the fate of the tribal people of North America. The Quapaw tribal area housed some of the most productive mining land in the mid-west, producing up to a quarter of the national zinc output. From the 1900's to the 1930's certain Quapaw people accrued vast amounts of money in royalties. As a previously poor and semi nomadic people, some of the tribal members used their newfound wealth to purchase luxury items. Many more used their wealth to improve the Native and non-Native communities around them. Tribal chiefs such as Wartoshe and Joseph Valliere set the example of charity that was followed by a great number of tribal members who earned money from mining royalties. While there were more tribal members who used their money for community improvement and saving, the members who used their money for luxury and excess were the ones that were noticed by the government. Members such as Benjamin Quapaw paid the price by being declared incompetent despite being known for frugality and saving.

While the government seemed to allow autonomy over personal finances, the lack of trust led to numerous restrictions on Native members' funds. The government allowed the members to

³¹ "Three Indians Held Incompetent by Laws," *Miami Record Herald*, January 4, 1918.

collect the funds, but the government would regulate it to death and beyond. The example of the Quapaw tribal involvement and treatment in the Tri-State lead and zinc mining is clear evidence. It shows that time and time again in history there have been meetings between two vastly different cultures there is always one culture that is able to use its resources to change the other culture in certain ways. In the case of the Quapaw people the United States used currency, by injecting a large amount of currency into a culture that was historically poor and in certain cases unprepared for it, the government led to a shift in tribal culture. Amazingly and thankfully, the majority of the Quapaw tribe took to heart the teachings of the past elders and chiefs such as Joseph Valliere and Wartoshe. The majority of Quapaw people shared their wealth with their tribesmen by donating to community improvement. Because of those members, the Quapaw tribe was able to retain its culture and its identity.

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