

‘A Chance to See  
Indians’: John  
Joseph Mathews’  
*Sundown* (1934)  
and Native  
Americans in early  
automotive culture

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Stories  
from the  
Margins

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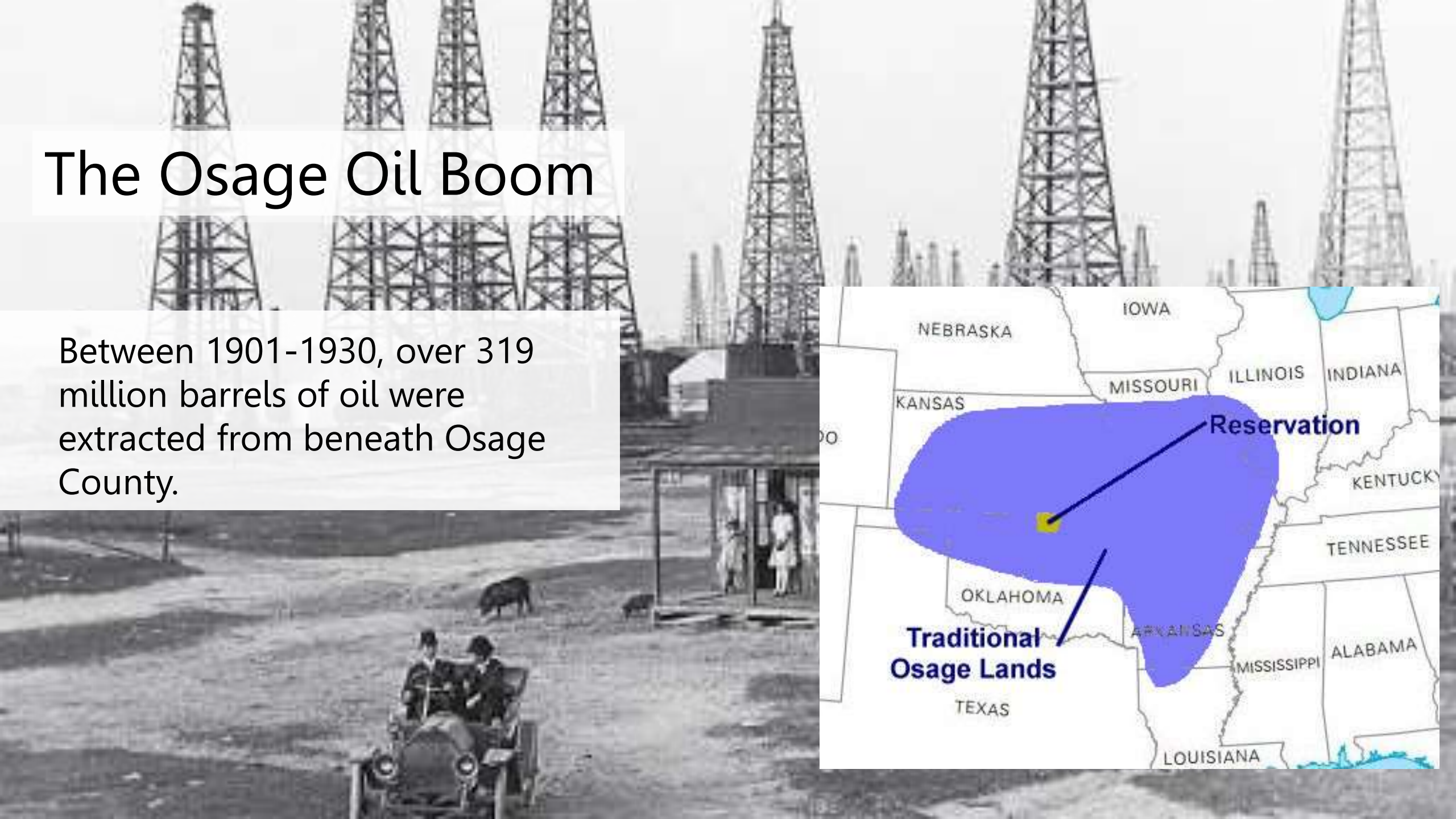
1. Background on the Osage oil boom
2. Representations of Native Americans in automotive periodicals
3. John Joseph Mathews' *Sundown* (1934)

Right: Advertisement for Toledo Automobiles, by Edwin Levick (1906).



# The Osage Oil Boom

Between 1901-1930, over 319 million barrels of oil were extracted from beneath Osage County.



# THE HORSELESS AGE

A MONTHLY JOURNAL

PUBLISHED IN THE INTERESTS OF THE MOTOR VEHICLE INDUSTRY.

VOLUME ONE. NUMBER ONE.

A COMPILATION,

SHOWING THE

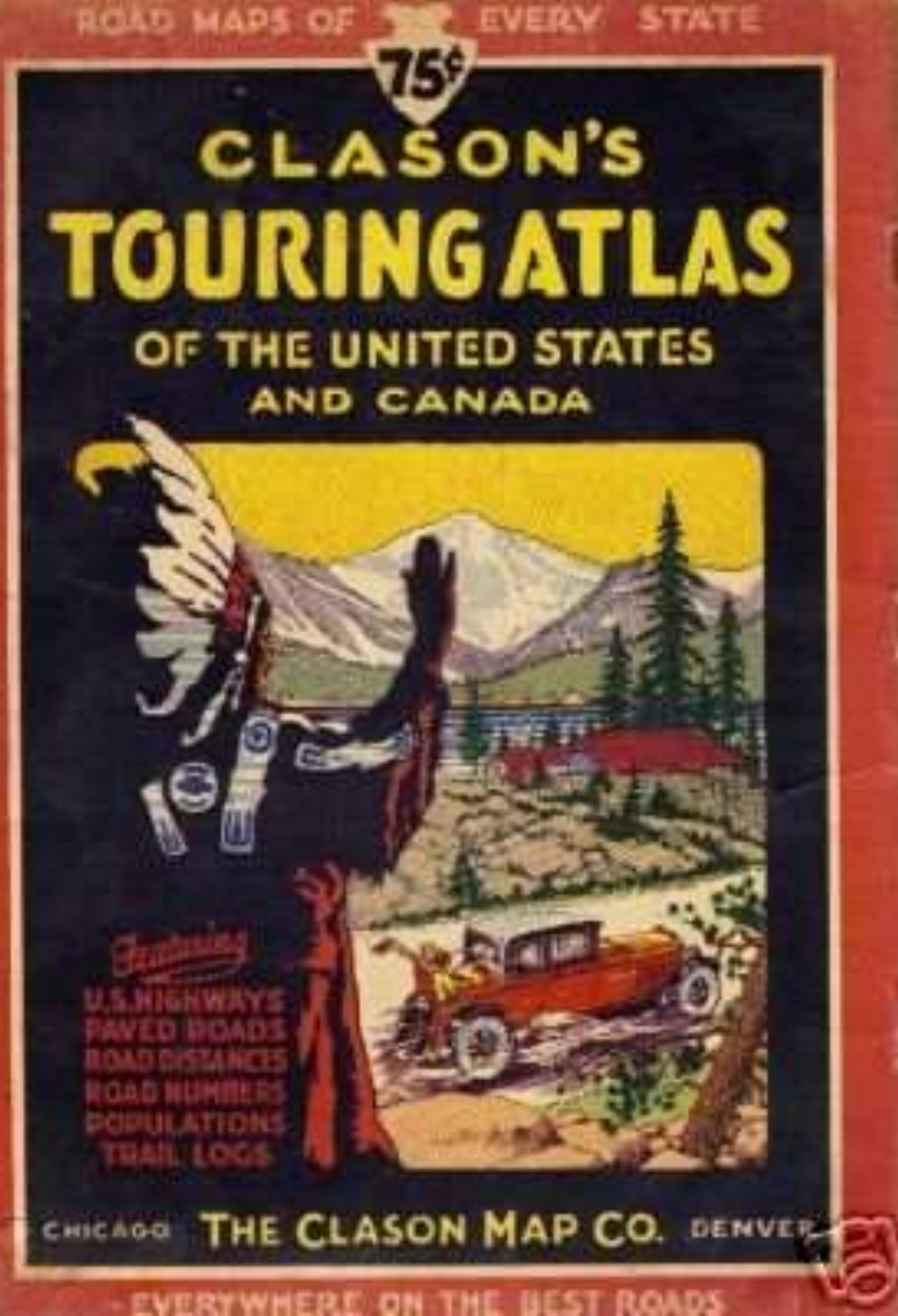
MOTOR VEHICLES, VEHICLE MOTORS AND SYSTEMS OF

PROPELLING AND CONTROLLING VEHICLES

BROUGHT OUT IN THE UNITED STATES

IN

1894 AND 1895.



'[...] a **chance to see Indians** [...] to get a glimpse of the copper-colored individual whose forefathers used to dominate North American affairs.'

C. E. Tranter, 'One-Day Automobile Tour From and To Buffalo', *The Horseless Age*, 27.9 (Mar. 1, 1911), pp. 393-396, 396.

'[...] affording the tourist an opportunity to see the **primitive** method of living of this tribe of Indians.'

'The Trail to Sunset', *The Horseless Age*, 28.9 (Aug. 30, 1911), 328

Left: *Clason's Touring Atlas* [1920]

After looking over many cars, Wah-pah-sha-sah would always turn again to a large automobile hearse. [...] it had **fine curtains on its sides**; it had **ample squatting room** [...] He hired a chauffeur to remain with him for a week to teach him **the mysteries of running a car**. [...] It is needless to say that the strange occupants attracted attention wherever they appeared. [...] when the crowds became denser and **the laughter** louder, it began to dawn on him that something was wrong. [...]

Finally, Wah-pah-sha-sah was convinced that what people told him was true - that the car with the comfortable squatting facilities was intended only for the dead. **He does not yet quite understand why**, but has become resigned.'

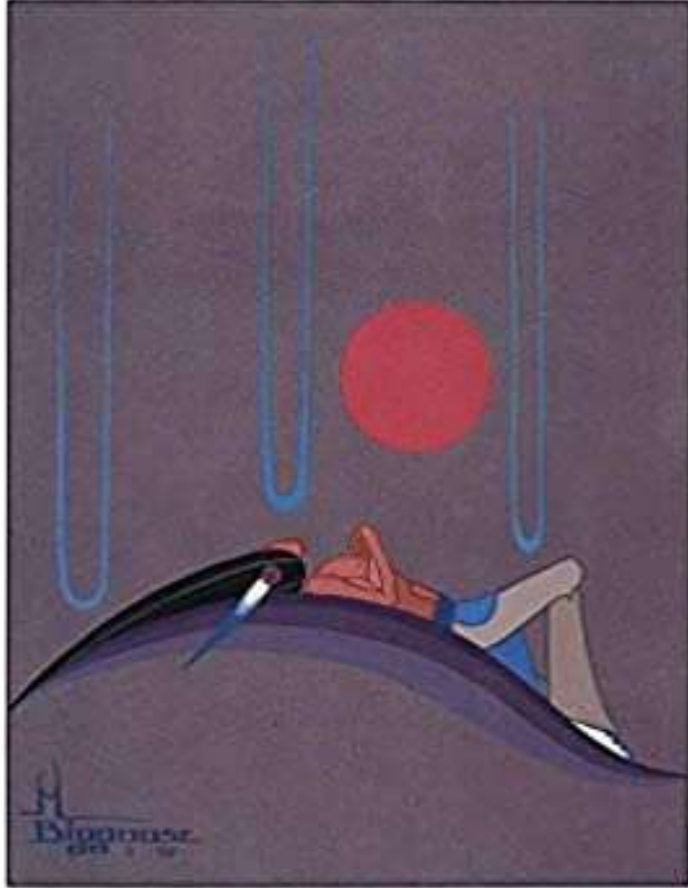
'Rich Indian Picks Hearse Automobile', *The New York Times* (25th Nov. 1917), 87.

## Rich Indian Picks Hearse Automobile

THE Osage Indians look upon Wah-pah-sha-sah as a mighty man, for he has become the richest member of the tribe, more than a millionaire. With Mchet-seh, Chief of the Osages, he lives near Bartlesville, Okla., in a house, having discarded tent life for good. The land which Wah-pah-sha-sah received from the Government, when the Osage tract was divided up individually, proved valuable in oil. Company after company offered the Indian large prices for the land, but he refused all offers until last Summer a Chicago concern succeeded in leasing it for \$1,000,000, for a term of ten years. After receiving the money, Wah-pah-sha-sah went to Kansas to deposit it. While there, the Indian millionaire visited an automobile manufactory to purchase a car, to be the finest, he said, that money could buy.

After looking over many cars, Wah-pah-sha-sah would always turn again to a large automobile hearse. He

# SUNDOWN



By John Joseph Mathews

With an introduction by Virginia H. Mathews

*Sundown* [1934] (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988)

John Joseph Mathews (1894-1979)



Born and raised in Pawhuska, Oklahoma (part of Osage Reservation).

His paternal grandmother was Osage.

Served as a night-flight instructor in U.S. Air Force.

Earned degrees from the Universities of Oklahoma, Oxford, and Geneva.

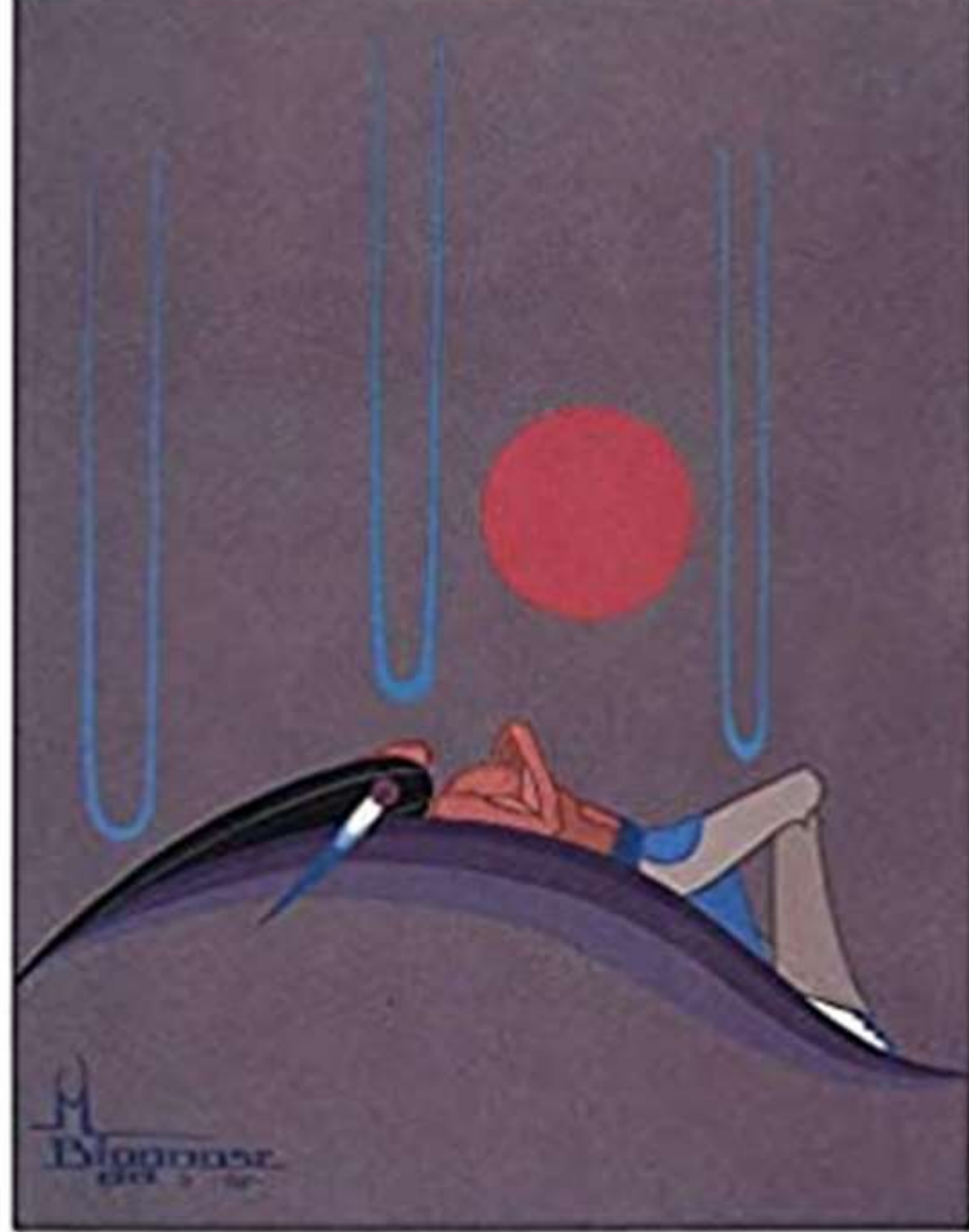
Became member of the Osage Tribal Council.

'to undress and float around in the water, that would be too much—**they'd know he was crazy**, and he was not quite sure they wouldn't be right.' (103)

'felt his face grow hot as he realized that for the last few minutes he had been **imagining himself a coyote**.' (133)

'oblivious to the [blackjack] trees.' (153)

'was **not some animal**.' (153)







Above: 'Members of the Osage Nation,' *Doubleday*

'Cars were the thing now.'  
(162)

'The nighthawks had already begun to settle in the road and **he killed several of them** as they flew up before the rush of his car.' (295)

'A ridge of **blackjacks** appeared, like a solid wall [...] and he was pleased and felt triumphant when **the car roared through them**, and they were left behind like a thwarted and defeated enemy, bowing to **Chal the conqueror**.' (296)

# COURTS END OSAGE INDIAN 'REIGN OF TERROR'

Murder and Sudden Death Have Broken Tribal Peace Since Oil Was Discovered on Oklahoma Reservation—White Men Indicted for Killings



The Osage Oil Murders are a subject deserving of an entire presentation, and rather than give a rushed summary I have omitted them from this talk - but I will be happy to take questions as to their relevance to automotive culture.

'they flew to a more distant tree, but their scolding did not diminish. He felt that they were accusing him of something and he became unreasonably angry. He got up, picked up the empty bottle and threw it into the branches of the tree, and there were many streaks of blue-and-white floating away, each screaming "**murder!**"' (302)

'**sterile brown earth** led down to the creek, where oil and salt water had **killed every blade of grass**. Some of the elms had been cut down, and the surface of the water had an **iridescent scum** on it.' (250)

'You are Indian. [...] You are part of this earth here like trees, like rabbit, like birds.' (274)

'Indians evoked a nostalgic past more authentic and often more desirable than the anxious present. By imagining such a past, projecting it onto the bodies of Indian people, and then devising means to appropriate that (now-Indian) past for themselves, white Americans sought reassurance: they might enjoy modernity while somehow escaping its destructive consequences.'

Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2004), 166.



Thanks for listening!

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