

Zitkala-Sa: Native Journalist Who Uncovered Murder, Graft, and Exploitation

It began in the 1830s, when President Andrew Jackson blazed “The Trail of Tears” and deported “the Five Civilized Tribes” (Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole) far out west to what eager white politicians called “Indian Territory.” The plan was simple: stick the whole bunch together out there on open land (it wasn’t) to prosper in their own native ways (pipe dream).

The President assumed the solution to “the Indian problem”—Native people were always getting in the way—was to jam them together in some woebegone corner where they could do whatever the heck it is that Indians do, for as long as rivers run and all of that empty treaty language.

It didn’t stop there. Sticking Indigenous people out of sight-and-mind caught on. Soon enough it was the Osage, who’d been pushed west for almost a century and were already living on territory that would become Kansas.

The thing is, no scallywag had the slightest suspicion that Osage land in Indian Territory floated on an ocean of liquid gold—oil. Once the first gusher—Bartlesville, 1903—sprang from that red and stony ground, the Osage became filthy rich.

Maybe especially here in the U.S. of A., money—great piles of it—draws entrepreneurs in equal volume with vermin. When the reservation got drilled, white men did what had to be done to secure whatever they could get of all that Osage money, including murder, even their own family members.

One of the first investigations into those vile crimes was done by a woman named Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, who co-wrote a study titled “Oklahoma’s Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes—Legalized Robbery.”

Ms. Bonnin did the hardcore stuff in 1924, while the horrors were erupting, and co-wrote a forty-page document that revealed ongoing crimes in Osage County, Oklahoma.

The findings included these:

--That a woman, after being dead four years, was resurrected as a man and able to sign a lease—all attested by witnesses and a notary public.

--That Indian children have been allowed to die for lack of nourishment because of the heartlessness and indifference of their professional guardians, who had ample funds in their possession for the care of the wards.

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin's birth name was Zitkala-Sa, or "Red Bird." She is among the finest writers of those raised in a tipi. People who know Native American literature would be happy to point out that Zitkala-Sa was—and still is—a powerful Native voice. She went to boarding school at Carlyle, then returned to teach there—music, in fact; but began to publish short stories in the most important magazines of her day, stories that brought boarding school horrors to light, stories that rather quickly got her fired.

The thing is, Red Bird was born here. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin is a real Siouxlander, Yankton Sioux. She's one of ours, all of ours.

Just thought I'd mention it. We have reason to be proud.