

The Osage Church: Faith, Murder, and the Presence of History

"What places do I really have to see when I'm here?" I asked her.

"Oh, you have to see our church," she told me from behind the desk at the Osage visitor's center. She was clearly herself at least part Osage. I liked the way she had pushed the church at me, as if it was simply not to be missed-- "*our* church," she said. I knew she meant the tribe's.

"Our church," is Immaculate Conception, Pawhuska, Oklahoma, a red-brick cruciform built in 1910 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

When I got there, all doors were locked up tight. A sign on the office door posted a number I called. A woman with a pleasant voice told me it was closed for the holiday weekend, but she'd meet me anyway. That was nice, and I told her so.

By the time we got inside the church, a half-dozen others had joined us, a family from Colorado on their way to a football game. Thought they'd stop, they said. So, there we stood in the middle of the church's cruciform shape ready to begin.

Our silver-haired, dark-eyed docent introduced herself by saying she was linked to the region by blood, by DNA. She was part Osage herself, she told us, but born and reared in Dallas because her grandma had left Osage County two generations earlier, scared to death of being murdered.

I'd read about it. I knew what she meant.

"You know the story?" she asked the folks in football jerseys.

They shook their heads. She turned to me. I'd met her only five minutes earlier. "*You* tell them," she said. Not a question, a command. She wasn't kidding.

The complicated story of a grisly rash of unsolved murders in the early 1920s, multiple deaths of Osage men and women who had suddenly become unimaginably wealthy when oil gushed from wells drilled into their land. In 1925, Pawhuska, Oklahoma had a Rolls Royce dealership, but it also had dozens of dead Indians. White men murdered a gallery of Osage people for their money. The story she wanted me to tell is awful, a horror story.

When I was done, she thanked me with yet another smile.

Immaculate Conception's pride is a stained-glass portrait of a Dutch-born priest named Father John Shoenmakers as he brings the divine light of Christ to the Osage. The story the docent loved to tell was that the Osage needed the special approval of Rome for that window because it featured native men and women who were still alive and were therefore, by some papal edict, not supposed to be gloriously honored in stained glass. The Osage won that fight; so today, if you visit, your guide will point at the north window with great pride.

The Colorado bunch had to get to the game, they said, so they left. Then she showed me a dedicatory note at the bottom of one of those gorgeous German-made wonders that indicated this window was endowed to honor the memory of a woman named Sybil Bolton. "She was one of them," she told me shyly, one of the murdered Osage women.

Sybil Bolton, I found out later, was a young Osage woman who learned how to play the harp at an exclusive East Coast boarding school. Then back home, at the age of just 21 years old she died mysteriously with her baby at her side and was buried in an ermine coat.

The silver-haired docent said nothing of that, only "She was among those who died."

The continuing horror of the Osage "reign of terror," almost a century ago now, is that the whole community lives with it. Great-grandchildren of killers go to school with the great-grandchildren of victims.

There certainly are times when William Faulkner was right: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."