

## OTTAWA...OKLAHOMA'S INDIAN COUNTY

If the state of Oklahoma can be described as “the land of the red people,” Ottawa County in the far northeastern corner should be described as the “county seat.” Nine or approximately twenty five per cent of the states Indian tribal headquarters are located there even though the county comprises only 485 square miles of the states 70,000. Miami, Modoc, Ottawa, Peoria, Quapaw, Seneca/Cayuga, Eastern Shawnee, Shawnee, and Wyandotte tribes all maintain offices there. Each is governed by a business committee or board and a chief or chair. Add resident Cherokees and the total number of tribes represented reaches ten, Although considerable attention is focused on the history of the Five Civilized Tribes that first comprised Indian Territory, those headquartered in this compact area also have a comparable story and accomplishments that indicate that they have been “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.” But the journey has not been easy.

In 1828, the county yet unnamed was included as part of the northern portion of Indian Territory in a swap for land Western Cherokees had owned in Arkansas. Soon thereafter, in 1831 the federal government reacquired that parcel in order to relocate other tribes, primarily from the northeastern part of the United States. A series of questionable treaties followed, most of which subsequently were broken and, at that time a few tribes were removed to this new land. As white settlers pressed westward in the 1840s and 50s, a number of eastern tribes, thirty seven in all and numbering around 10,000 members, were ousted from their lands and shipped off to Kansas. Each experienced their own version of the Trail of Tears similar to the travails previously suffered by the Five Civilized Tribes. Afterward treaties with tribes, many recognized by the federal government as dependent sovereign nations, became increasingly meaningless. Although the federal government's preoccupation with the Civil War of 1861 – 65 delayed further removal, soon afterward tribes who had resettled in Kansas were again dispossessed, victims of the incursions of white settlers. This time they were relocated to what eventually became Ottawa County. Upon arrival at this newest home, some of the smaller tribes aligned themselves with larger ones, resulting in numerous confederacies. If each had remained a separate entity, Ottawa Counties' current distinction of being the county with the greatest number of tribes and/or tribal offices would sky rocket.

The impact of broken treaties, a mixture of traditions and unbelievable poverty became the plight of the collective tribes who subsisted primarily through agricultural pursuits. However, a treaty signed in 1891, vesting mineral rights to tribes proved to be a bonanza. The discovery of lead and zinc in the region resulted in an economic boom that lasted until mining ceased in 1947. But even that discovery later became a mixed blessing when lead, cadmium and zinc were discovered leaking from the mine shafts into surrounding waterways. It appeared that once more the tribes of Ottawa County would revisit history and the circumstances of poverty would return under the label “Tar Creek.” The mining industry shut down, boom towns became ghost towns and a portion of the Ottawa County countryside resembled a moonscape. For the next three decades, the region relapsed into tough economic times.

**But fate, or perhaps it could be labeled “Indian luck,” would intervene once again, this time with the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988. Essentially, the law provided a basis for operating, regulating and protecting gaming on Indian lands as a means of generating revenue. Beginning with Bingo in California and Florida, the definition of gaming eventually expanded to include card games and finally, casino-type gambling if permitted in a particular state.**

**Currently, there are an estimated 360 Indian gaming establishments in the United States, 113 in Oklahoma and 12 operated by tribes based in Ottawa County. Income from gaming generated nationally, estimated even ten years ago, topped 14 billion dollars. This revenue source has enabled Ottawa County tribes to improve the living circumstances of their members. In addition to providing a variety of social services, collectively the leadership has been good stewards of this latest opportunity to insure future revenue. For example, among others are investments in land, fiber optic services, industrial parks, petroleum product marketing, convenience stores, a theater, and golf course.**

**Undoubtedly, the creators of this compact territory with its cross section of Indian tribes could not foresee and possibly didn’t even care about their future. However, the history, the “roller coaster ride” for survival, speaks for itself. At least for now, the prospects of the tribes located in Ottawa, Oklahoma’s Indian County, appear to be brighter than ever before.**

