UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Ghosts of Crook County: An Oil Fortune, a Phantom Child, and the Fight for Indigenous Land. By Russell Cobb.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jn5203g

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 49(2)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Parker, Angela

Publication Date
2026-07-30

DOI
10.17953/A3.66601

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

10.17953/A3.66601

Ghosts of Crook County: An Oil Fortune, a Phantom Child, and the Fight for Indigenous Land. By Russell Cobb. Boston: Beacon Press, 2024. 304 pages. $32.95 cloth; $21.95 paper; $16.99 e-book.

The Mvskoke (Creek) Nation at the turn of the twentieth century weathered a deluge of deep social, political, and economic change. Russell Cobb's *Ghosts of Crook County* follows one episode within this maelstrom: the protracted legal battles over the oil rights to land allotted to Thomas Atkins, an alleged Creek citizen, and later claimed by his purported mother, the enrolled tribal citizen Minnie Atkins. Cobb, an associate professor of modern languages and cultural studies at the University of Alberta, is well positioned to follow this story. His work bridges academic history and investigative journalism, and his own family's ties to Oklahoma's early oil industry have led him to reckon with what later generations experienced as an oil curse. The resulting contribution to Oklahoma oil history painstakingly reconstructs a complicated case that, even after Cobb's careful investigation, yields few definitive legal answers. More significantly, Cobb situates the legal dispute within the broader histories of Creek citizenship, Oklahoma oil, and settler capitalism, providing readers with the historical context necessary to navigate an exceptionally tangled archival and legal record.

Cobb weaves together several narrative strands: Minnie Atkins' life and the complications of Mvskoke citizenship; political transformation of the Creek nation; the rise of Charles Page and Oklahoma oil capitalism; and the succession of lawsuits surrounding the Thomas Atkins allotment. In his epilogue, Cobb writes, "At first it was a vague story of land theft, oil money, and difficult-to-pronounce Indigenous names. Those names started to acquire vitality and detail. After a while, these were not dead Indians but people who had lived complicated lives during a period in which a modern industrialized society implanted itself in a land only recently dominated by tribal law and customs" (248). While this dichotomy between "tribal law and customs" and "modern industrialized society" risks reproducing an evolutionary framework long challenged by Indigenous historians, Cobb's detailed reconstruction ultimately equips readers to understand the far more complex political and economic transformations at work.

I particularly appreciate the time that Cobb spends to allow us to understand Minnie Atkins as a person. This is something that the federal archives on their own does not allow. Cobb's painstaking reconstruction of her life and experiences brings her into sharp human focus. A Mvskoke woman who lived on the edge of survival for much of her life, Minnie Atkins was particularly vulnerable to judgmental coverage in the press as well as by the federal bureaucrats whose structure had largely failed her nation by opening their entire citizenry up for graft, abuse, and violence. Particularly given the legal and economic abuse she endured during her lifetime, Cobb's diligent labor to follow the swells and ebbs of her journey through a complicated history is important.

Cobb also supplies necessary historical context for readers to understand both individual agency and the weight of large economic and political forces that required both Native and white actors to make unenviable choices in pursuit of survival, opportunity, or power—often in ways that shredded their humanizing loyalties and affections. The accessibility of Cobb's prose is of note given the complexity of the story he tells. He explains aspects of federal Indian law and policy, Mvskoke history and culture, Oklahoma history, the history of the oil industry, and the exploitative logics of petrocapitalism in ways that make an exceptionally complicated legal dispute intelligible to readers without specialized knowledge. Cobb's discussion of the successive trials involving Minnie Atkins are very helpful in the way they combine press coverage with government archives and court records, and I especially appreciate how he did not shy away from the racial dynamics at play in the shift away from Mvskoke enslavement of African Americans.

Some of Cobb's choices can also work against his history. Relatively short chapters at times create a staccato rhythm, particularly when readers must leave one narrative thread to begin another. The book's organizational structure occasionally diffuses momentum, and because Cobb repeatedly leaves one storyline to develop another, readers may struggle to maintain a clear sense of causal development, particularly during the complicated litigation. Cobb occasionally grants too much interpretive generosity to some of the more notorious figures in the histories of wealth extraction, such as when he refers to Anna Laura Lowe, the white woman who married Mvskoke citizen Jackson Barnett in another state while he was drunk and then proceeded to drain him of his wealth, as "an adventuress" (7).

In the end, though, Cobb produced a real contribution to the history of oil and land tenure in Oklahoma. This book is well positioned in relation to other monographs that deal with the secondary extraction that accompanied oil booms in Indian country like David Grann's *Killers of the Flower Moon*, Dennis McAuliffe Jr.'s *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton*, or Tanis Thorne's *The World's Richest Indian*. Unlike many of these works, Cobb devotes sustained attention to the complicated genealogical and racial dimensions of the Atkins case. And Cobb's decision to use more contemporary moments—such as the labor abuses committed by an oil parts manufacturer in Tulsa during the early 2000s at the beginning of his fifth chapter—as a touchstone for his historical narrative does important work to remind readers that none of these pasts are even past. I also recommend reading Cobb alongside viewing Sterlin Harjo's 2025 television series *The Lowdown*, whose atmosphere and attention to contemporary Tulsa resonates surprisingly well with the histories Cobb has reconstructed.

While narrative momentum in *Ghosts of Crook County* occasionally slackens, Cobb's thorough reconstruction of one of Oklahoma's most convoluted allotment disputes makes a significant contribution to the histories of Indigenous land tenure, oil, and the legal afterlives of allotment in the crucible of oil extraction.

Angela Parker
University of New Mexico