

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: *Killers of the Flower Moon*, written by David Grann, is the story of a series of murders in the early 1920s in the Osage Nation, located in northern Oklahoma.

Voices of Oklahoma interviewed David to give you a background of this story before seeing the film of the same name.

David talks about a “missing panel,” a corrupt system which ignored the crimes, and a funeral director who would cover up bullet wounds. And David will introduce you to the mastermind of these crimes, William “Bill” Hale.

We also encourage you to read the book, even reread it to understand the insidious nature of these crimes.

So now listen to David Grann explain the missing panel which motivated him to write the book on the oral history website and podcast VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 5:50 Missing Panel

John Erling (JE): Hello, David!

David Gann (DG): Hello!

JE: This is John Erling. I want you to know that I have *Killers of the Flower Moon* and your new book, *The Wager*, sitting on my desk as we now speak.

DG: Oh, thank you very much for picking them up.

JE: I must say, I wish all history books could be written in your style, but I guess that wouldn't be possible.

DG: Well, that's nice of you to say. It's probably why I write so few books. They take so long.

JE: Yeah (Chuckling). Osage Chief Standing Bear, when I interviewed him, was very complimentary of your diligent research and writing ability. He could not emphasize that enough, so I'm sure that you visited with him many times yourself.

DG: Well, yes. And, to be honest, that's the highest praise I could receive. And I... In telling this really important part of American history, which was something the Osage were obviously very familiar with, but people like me and outside of the Osage Nation — even in much of Oklahoma, I discovered — were really unaware of it.

And, you know, it was recording these stories and hearing these stories from members of the Osage Nation, like the Chief, and so many Osage elders in the community would share with me their stories and their trust that I could write the book at all. So I am so indebted to them and the book is rooted in that research and those experiences and spending time in the Osage Nation with so many of the members of the community there.

JE: How does this story of these murders and oil and greed in Osage County — also known as the Reign of Terror — come to your attention, and then what motivated you to write about it?

DG: Somebody had mentioned the case and the story, and I did not know that much about all the ins and outs about it. And I decided to make a trip out to the Osage Nation because I was interested. I couldn't find a lot written about it. And, at that time, I wasn't thinking of writing a book. I was wondering if maybe it would be an article. I went out. I actually went out on my own dime. I flew from New York and I visited, you know, into Pawhuska and then the first thing I do is I visit the Osage Nation Museum.

When I was in the museum, I saw this great panoramic photograph on the

wall which showed members of the Osage Nation along with white settlers which was taken, I believe, in 1924? And it looked pretty innocent, you know, when you were just looking at it. But I had noticed a portion of that photograph was missing. And I asked the museum director, Kathryn Red Corn, why part of the photograph has been removed. And she said it contained a figure so frightening that they had to remove it.

And she had pointed to the missing panel and she said, in a low voice, “The devil was standing right there...”

And that just immediately seized me and caught my attention. And then she went down into the basement and she brought up an image from the missing panel and it showed one of the killers of the Osage, one of the ringleaders in one of the plots against the Osage families. And I was just really haunted by that experience because I kept thinking about how members of the Osage Nation not to forget, but because they couldn't forget what had happened. And yet there was so many people — and I include myself among them — who really knew nothing about this history. It had not been taught it. We had, in effect, excised it from our conscience.

JE: We have the Tulsa 1921 Race Massacre that was largely kept on the back burner for so many, many years. Now it's become known to the nation. Do you see a correlation here?

DG: Oh, very much so. I think they're very similar. And not just in the fact that these were really central parts of our history and among the worst racial injustices, and not only that they were left out of so many of the history books. These were the chapters and pages that were effectively torn out and the silences imposed. But they are even closer than that because they happened during the same time period. They happened not far away. I mean, I have it [unintelligible] about 30 miles away, maybe a little more. Maybe someone from Oklahoma would be able to tell me exactly. And, so, they reflected these deep prejudices among settlers. And the crimes and the targets were different, but they are also connected by the fact that they would not have happened had their not been views and attitudes that looked upon certain people as not fully dignified human souls. So in the case of the Osage, the crimes were motivated by greed, but they were carried out because they had dehumanized, in their attitudes, members of

the Osage Nation. And I think something very similar happened on — I'm not an expert on the Tulsa Race Massacre — but I think something similar happened.

There's even other little connections that aren't that well known, but, for example, there was a private eye who investigated the Osage cases who was really, as evidence suggested, was pretty corrupt and he had been on the police force in a disgraced role due to the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Chapter 03 – 4:45

Cover Up Bullet Wounds

John Erling (JE): As you did your research — and making new discoveries, no doubt — were there any of those “How can man go so low” moments? What stands out to you?

David Grann (DG): Oh, all the time. I mean, just all the time. And, to be honest, going back into history — because, there's a lot ... I didn't know anything about Osage history, and I knew very little about Native American history. This was a for-real introduction, other than what I'd been taught in school in broad strokes. I mean, you just learn about — there's just kind of mind-boggling mistreatment of the Osage Nation, who I was researching. They were driven off hundreds of miles of their ancestral lands. Massacres by white settlers when they were in a reservation in Kansas when they came to Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. I remember a quote from an official after one massacre. He said, and I don't remember exactly, but it was something to the effect of: “The question will rise which of these people were the ‘savages.’” And, obviously, I put “savages” in quotes because that was how the Osage were referred to by white settlers in a very derogatory, racist way. But, clearly, the barbarousness was being carried out by the settlers toward them.

And then you get them to Oklahoma and they kind of move to Oklahoma. You know, as the Chief kind of stood up and said, “We should move there because this land is kind of rocky and hilly and infertile, at least for many farmers. And so the white people will leave us alone. And our people will be

happy there.” And, lo and behold, all this oil is discovered under the land. And all of these rapacious predators descend upon that area and find ways to gouge the money, and then culminating in just shocking murder. And you ask me — there were so many influences.

I think the thing that shocked me — maybe it shouldn’t have — but that was the most disturbing was not just the horror of these individual crimes. I mean, they put a bomb in a house to kill the husband, and his Osage wife, and his 18-year-old niece. These crimes were just horrific.

But I think what was most appalling as you dug into this story, and did more research, and spoke to members of the Osage Nation, and combed through the archival records was just how broad this conspiracy was just in the sense that so many people were complicit in these crimes. You had morticians who were covering up bullet wounds. You had doctors who were administering poisons. You had guardians who were appointed by the government to manage Osage fortunes who were complicit because they were getting so rich; they weren’t directly involved in the crimes, but were stealing money. And law enforcement, and prosecutors, and many others who just remain complicit in their silence. I think to understand those crimes — the breadth of them — you’ve really got to get to the root of this level of complicity.

JE: You mentioned guardians — a little bit more about that — how the government actually assigned an overseer to these Osage who were getting wealthy because they didn’t trust them as to how they were going to handle their money?

DG: Yeah. Members of the US Congress would hold these hearings for hours on end saying, “What are we going to do about the Osage and all this money?” Now this is, of course, during the booming 20s and there were white oil barons who were wealthy, and flappers, and all these people who had money, but they targeted the Osage because of prejudice and they went so far as to pass legislation to require Osage to have these white guardians to manage their fortunes. And the system was not abstractly racist, it was quite literally racist. It was based on the quantum of Osage blood. So if you were a full-blooded Osage, you were given one of these guardians. And so here you could be a great Chief leading a nation, or a

scholar, or whatever you were in the community and you suddenly would have this white guardian telling you: “Get this new place, or this new car...” And not only was the system racist, but it also really ushered in one of the largest state-and-federally-sanctioned criminal enterprises, as many of the guardians began to swindle countless millions of dollars from the Osage.

Chapter 04 – 5:50
William “Bill” Hale

John Erling (JE): It’s all insidious; there’s no question about that. One of the more cunning, deceptive people in the book — or in the whole story — must be William “Bill” Hale, who would... Well, you can tell them about him. Campaigned for public officials, like county prosecutor, then asked the prosecutor to do his bidding when it came to investigating. I mean, its just ... I don’t know what other words to use.

David Grann (DG): “Yeah. Yeah. He is a really insidious figure. He was — just referring back to that whole thing, the question where you asked me where I first stumbled upon the story and the museum director pointed to the missing panel. The devil was William K. Hale. That was the figure in that photograph. In researching the figure and trying to figure out who he was, it led me deeper and deeper into each crime. He was somebody who had arrived in Oklahoma around the turn of the early/beginning 1900s. He was just a poor cowboy, kind of dirt poor at the time. But he gradually amassed land and became a cattle baron and he became a deputy sheriff in the community, campaigning for what he called “God-fearing souls.” And by the 20s, he was really the most powerful figure in the region. He was often referred to as “the King of the Osage Hills.”

And he launched one of the more insidious plots, which was targeting members of Mollie Burkhart’s family — an Osage woman and her family and all her siblings — killing them off one by one to steal their headrights, which is what you received as a member of the Osage Nation. It was essentially your share, or your trust, which was worth a fortune at that time. And he is just a double-faced, insidious figure. One of the things that made his plot so uniquely sinister is that they were inheritance schemes.

So the only way you could get a headright was to inherit it. You couldn't purchase it. Unlike land, it was harder to swindle. So what Hale did and what so many others did is that they would have them, themselves, or have someone else marry into the family. In this case, Hale had his nephew marry into this family, marrying Mollie Burkhart. And you're kind of pretending to love these people while you're systematically plotting to kill them.

JE: Yes... We should point out Robert De Niro plays William Hale in the film.

DG: Yes. And Ernest Burkhart... I'm sorry. Leonardo DiCaprio plays Ernest Burkhart, the nephew. And Lily Gladstone, a Native American actress, she plays Mollie Burkhart.

JE: A little bit more about Ernest Burkhart, the nephew of William Hale. I mean, when you just think about this — we'll say it again: He marries Mollie in a setup marriage, and he pretends to marry her, and he attempts to kill her by poisoning her.

DG: That is correct. And Ernest Burkhart, I think, is a really important figure in history to understand. Hale is, in some ways ... he wasn't medically diagnosed, but his behavior is reminiscent of a psychopath, whereas Burkhart was someone who was closer to the rest of us in that you could tell, in reading and studying him, that he has elements of a conscience. And he has actual feelings for Mollie, and yet he goes along with this brutal conspiracy orchestrated by his uncle. I think it really gets to the root of how these crimes take place, how this complicity takes place.

He always reminded me of what are sometimes referred to as “the willing executioners” in Germany during the Holocaust. They weren't necessarily the leaders, but they were the people who went along. And because of that, so many people were killed.

JE: Ernest was convicted of attempted murder and he was sent to the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester and he was released in 1959. What I found surprising is that he received a pardon in 1966 from Governor Henry Bellmon. Did that surprise you?

DG: Completely. And a little bit of it is still inexplicable to me, to be honest. I spent 5 years researching that story and that one I could never really, fully explain. Some authorities were — who had investigated this case — felt, often, support for him in part because he eventually turned on William K. Hale and had given testimony against him that was important in convicting him, but his pardoning is still an inexplicable thing to me.

William K. Hale would also be released early. He did not die in prison. He did go to jail; I think he served two decades, if my memory serves me — my memory's getting dodgy as I get older. But he was released and many people at the time, including many members of the Osage Nation, believed Hale kind of called in his last political favor to get out. He died a free man.

JE: And Hale was really well-dressed and all, and even after he got out and all that, he still was still accepted in parts of the community.

DG: Yeah. He was. He had a lot of support among whites at first. He presented himself one way as kind of as a well-dressed best friend of the Osage. He wore two faces.

Chapter 05 – 8:12

Corrupt System

John Erling (JE): Many of these crimes, perhaps, could have been solved sooner — perhaps saved other lives — but if it were not for the prejudice against the Native Americans, the Osage, plus they didn't have the forensic tools available to us today.

David Grann (DG): Yeah, I mean, I think that's a really important point. I think, obviously, there was some lack of training in law enforcement at that time, but I think the bigger issue was everybody in the community knew who some of the killer were, at least among the whites. And they were allowed to go free because the system was deeply corrupt at the time. It was very easy to pay off somebody in power to look the other way.

But there was also the deep prejudice. I mean, people like Mollie Burkhart and many of the Osage, they really campaigned and crusaded for justice. They weren't these passive victims as sometimes they get depicted as in story. They were, at great risk to their own lives, trying to get the authorities to do something about these crimes; and they're being targeted. And these crimes were looked the other way, often, because, ya know, the authorities didn't do anything because the victims were native Americans.

JE: Yes. And the community was, overall, frightened. Didn't they leave their porch lights on — as much light around their home to avoid some intruder?

DG: They did. They would hang these lights. It was almost light Christmas lights. Actually, I know one descendant of an Osage that told me that they had heard that ... You know, the elders often have to protect their children or the next generation from the horrors that took place. They told them that these lights were kind of hung as celebratory or Christmas lights. But, no, they were hung to illuminate the area because of the terror — the Osage Reign of Terror — and to be able to see an intruder coming in.

JE: Have any of the relatives of all these people in your book that you've written about reached out to you in any form or fashion?

DG: Well, many of the descendants — Osage descendants — descendants of Mollie Burkhart and other descendants of members of the Osage Nation who were murdered, I interviewed for the book. Margie Burkhart, for example, was instrumental in my research. She'd share with me oral histories and photographs, and so many other members of the Osage Nation — Mary Jo Webb, who sadly passed away recently, was somebody who investigated the suspicious deaths in her own family. She had been collecting documents and doing her own research which she shared with me. And I also interviewed some of the descendants of the murderers' families — the Burkhart clan, the Hale clan — to get their stories.

It was always an awkward, uncomfortable process. I did find that, in most cases, the younger generation were open with me and knew about what had happened and were, at least generally speaking, expressed remorse. But it would depend on a case-by-case level about what you would hear

and the loyalties that might still exist.

I also tried to interview the families of the guardians. They, in particular, were often resistant to giving interviews and wanting to kind of reckon with the past.

JE: Did you get any guardian?

DG: I got some descendants of guardians, yeah. I did, I did. But there were some who, I think, I was very suspicious of — the guardians themselves, not the descendants — whose ancestors are popping up and identified in history books or an account, publicly, about the roles they had played and some of those people, I think, wanted to dodge me. (Laughing).

And Mary Jo Webb told me a very interesting story. Mary Jo Webb, an Osage elder, she had been a school teacher and had done some of her own research. At one point, she had written up some of the history she had learned from her own investigations and she put them in the little town library. And not long after, it disappeared, and she was sure it was taken. She thought it had been taken by a descendant of one of the guardians who had been implicated in some of the research; and you still saw this attempt to kind of rub out or whitewash some of the history.

And one of the great tragedies of these crimes was the fact that not only did the murders often eliminate the victim — take their lives — but they also erased their history in many cases because the crimes were not properly investigated and they were covered up.

JE: Margie Burkhart — she's a descendant of whom?

DG: She's the descendant of Mollie Burkhart and Ernest Burkhart. She's the granddaughter. And so, one of the things that's also about these crimes — you asked me if I met with any descendants — sometimes, because these were inheritance schemes and you had people marrying in, the murderers and the victims were often in the same household.

So she showed me a photograph of her father, who's the son of Mollie and Ernest. And the photograph shows her father, who was just a little boy at

the time, and it shows his sister as well, who's also very young at the time, standing next to a man, holding hands. But the photograph of the man — the kid, you can see their body and you see their full profile — but the man, the photograph only rises to his chest and then the head was ripped off. And it was ripped off because it had had their father, and Margie told me that her grandfather — you know, the photograph of Ernest — that Margie's father had ripped it out because of the insidiousness and learning that your own father had plotted to kill you.

JE: I thought that the treatment you gave Margie at the end of the book was beautifully written, the way you treated her. Have you visited with her after the book and after she was able to read it?

DG: Yes. I did. I've tried to keep in touch and I still go back to Osage County. It's been a little while. I was actually just thinking of getting in touch with Margie; it's been a little while. But, yes, I've seen her a few times since the book has come out and communicated with her. You know, for me, one of the great honors and privileges in telling this story was the opportunity to be able to interview these people, and meet them — they're so interesting — and, over time, develop friendships with so many of these people. Margie ... Red Corn, the museum director, who first told me that story about the devil standing right there has become a good friend. And, so, those are some of the rewards.

And I do think, as we've talked about the crimes, I just want to make one very important point that I've gotten from these relationships today and the people that I know today, which is that an Osage warrior who told me that — one day out at the dance, actually, when I was out with Margie and we were out in Grayhorse, and we were out at the camp, and there were lots of people, and I had been interviewing lots of people. I interviewed an Osage warrior and she had told me, she said, "We were victims of these crimes. We don't live as victims."

And I think it's always important in history that we underscore that: that the Osage Nation remains vibrant. It has its own political system to this day. It remains a very strong nation. I always try to make that point as well, that history doesn't just stop in place.

Chapter 06 – 5:55
The Film

John Erling (JE): I'm reading the book for the second time, and I would urge others to do the same, because once you have the story in your head, then when you come back and read it again, you realize even more how the vileness — if I can use that word, insidiousness — of it becomes even more impactful in the second reading.

David Grann (DG): Yes. Well, you can see, when you're on to them, what they are doing.

JE: Right, right.

DG: And that's where I spent most of my time was in proving the conspiracy. I don't have a conspiratorial mind, you know. Most often, when you look at conspiracies, they turn out to be bunk, so this is one of those rare instances where people really were conspiring in these nefarious plots to commit these crimes, so the level and the depths they would take... And these were long cons. They would play out over years; again, because they had to involve people marrying into families, and many of these crimes were never prosecuted.

JE: How long did it take you, from research to writing, to finish the book?

DG: Five years, I would say. Half a decade.

JE: And you had this living in your brain and conscience all those years?
(Laughing)

DG: I did. I had a little office that became kind of an archive, basically a crime archive, filled with documents, and transcripts, and photographs of crimes and things. I remember early on I began to collect photographs from the victims. Initially, I had just a few who I knew about — members of Mollie's family. But, over time, as I would learn about more suspicious deaths, or murders, or poisonings, and whatnot, I would collect a photograph and I

would put it on my wall. And over those 5 years, that wall of photographs just grew longer and longer, but it was also always a reminder of what this book was about and they helped to keep going during those 5 years. I was reminded of all these lives that were lost.

JE: The film. As the film went on, were you consulted? Or how much were you consulted going into the film or while it was being made?

DG: I'm not a filmmaker and I don't think of myself — I don't get involved in writing scripts or trying my hand at that thing. I really am a historian or reporter. I spend most of my time combing archives and writing. So my goal with all of these projects, and especially with Killers of the Flower Moon, was to get the project of filmmakers who really do know what they're doing. And that was certainly the case with Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio and the entire production team and the cast. They're people who really understand how to make a movie.

But, more importantly than that, to me, is that they had — I never expect a film to be the same thing or a replica of the book. They're very different mediums. But we do want to [unintelligible] with racial injustice and it's an important story, but they have a fierce commitment — they share that fierce commitment — to the story, and I think in working with Scorsese, and all the actors, and the production team, that they really did.

And would often call me and consult me for, you know, historical records or documents. Actors called me asking about the real person they were playing and if I could give them any information like how did they talk and do I have any photographs. And so I always tried to be a resource as much as possible.

But, for me, far more than my participation in being a resource is that the movie production involved members of the Osage Nation and, to the best of my knowledge, that really did happen. Osage Chief Standing Bear, early on, he appointed movie representatives to consult for the film project and so many members of the Osage Nation were involved in the film, including, you have descendants of the murder victims who, to the best of my knowledge, are in the film. They used Osage actors. I don't think they were actors before, but they have speaking roles — one of the most

powerful things in a movie to be involved in. The Osage language was used and I know that's been a really big project of Osage leaders like Chief Standing Bear to, over the last few decades, to revive the Osage language and to show its use and it being brought to life again.

So, to me, that participation was the most important and gratifying to me that that took place.

JE: Yeah. Did you say that DiCaprio and De Niro — did they talk to you? Did they ask you questions about this?

DG: DiCaprio would. De Niro did not. But DiCaprio would call me when I was on the set and I would speak with him. The thing that I admired about them all ... Ya know, I'm a nerd. I'm a geek in terms of just research. You know, all of them, including Scorsese, they were like fierce historians, trying to back things up with as much history as possible. So anything I could procure, I would. And I know there were many conversations with members of the Osage Nation over the time they worked on the film. I know Chief Standing Bear and others could speak to that better than I could, but you know, in shaping the story and developing it, they made sure they got it right.

JE: Well, David, I really appreciate this time and you're very, very thoughtful answers. Thank you again, David. I really appreciate it.

DG: Thank you. Thank you for doing this.

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