



Drs. Joe & Carol Conner

Founders of the Fairfax Community Foundation

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: *Killers of the Flower Moon* is the story of serial murders of members of the oil-wealthy Osage Nation, which took place mainly in Fairfax, Oklahoma.

Joe Conner, an Osage, lost a family member to the greed. An aunt, Sybil Bolton, was murdered in Pawhuska in 1925.

Joe and his wife Carol are founding members of the Fairfax Community Foundation, which owns the Tall Chief Theater and manages its fundraising efforts dedicated to creating a memorial for the Osage victims of the Reign of Terror.

In their Voices of Oklahoma interview, they discuss the background of the crimes, how the present-day community is dealing with these crimes, and how the murders changed Fairfax forever.

In their roles as publisher and editor of the Fairfax newspaper, the Conners witnessed some of the filming of *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

As you read the book and see the film, you'll be glad you listened to Joe and Carol on the oral history website and podcast, VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 4:53 Allotment

John Erling (JE): Today's date is June 9th, 2023. So Joe, would you state your full name, please?

Joe Conner (JC): Yes, my name is Dr. Joe Conner.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

JC: Well, I was born May 3rd, 1949. That makes me 74 years old.

JE: All right. Where were you born?

JC: I was born in a little town north of where we're at now, in Shider, Oklahoma, above a drugstore.

JE: And where are we recording this?

JC: We're recording this in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in the offices of the Fairfax Chief Newspaper, the Fairfax Community Foundation, and also the Office of Paradox Research.

JE: And who is this woman sitting to your right?

JC: This is my wife, Dr. Carol Conner.

JE: So Carol, you married Joe. That's why you're here at this table.

Carol Conner (CC): That's exactly why.

JE: Right. And so when did you get married?

CC: Oh my goodness. Decades ago.

JE: OK. All right. Can I have your date of birth?

CC: I never tell people that.

JE: That's fine. That's fine if you don't want to do that.

CC: I'm close to Joe's age. Can we say that?

JE: No, you appear to be 39.

CC: Absolutely. Thank you. You got it. You got it.

JE: So the book, *Killers of the Flower Moon and the Birth of the FBI* by David Grann tells the story of murder, assassinations, fraud, conspiracy, and corruption. And the story takes place here in this very little village called Fairfax. We're going to hear the term allotment. Give me the definition of an allotment.

JC: Allotment was the government's policy of dividing reservations amongst the tribal members that were alive at the time of allotment. So, for instance, for the Osage, there were around 2,300 of us here. And each of us – each of them got that 2,300 each got a share of the former reservation, which is Osage County.

And so that amounted to a little over 600 acres apiece. And then part of that was reserved for what was called homestead, in other words, where you built your house and then the rest of it was called surplus land. So some of those were small parcels that just scattered all through the reservation.

So my fathers and my grandfathers and my uncles and my aunts who were all allotted got land. And my grandfather, being an educated person, a full-blood Osage who spoke the language, was educated nonetheless and figured out, hey he could trade with other Osages their surplus land for his surplus land and cohesed the land into one parcel for him and his children.

So I was raised in the northwest part of the county where he was able to bring most of that allotted land together into one piece. Not all of it, but most of it.

CC: So one of the things about allotment was that when tribes were moved here and given reservations, the land was held in common. That was really hard for individuals to figure out how to get their hands on it, if they wanted land. And so allotment was partly an idea of “We will give each individual Indian their own land. That will help,” quote, “civilize them.”

But it also then made it much easier for people to buy the land or rip off

the land or, because it was smaller parcels. And so allotment was a movement that did not work in the favor of most tribes.

JE: Why?

CC: Because then you could lose your land. So if you didn't, if you had believed that land was held in common, and you had not known the white concept of individual land ownership, and someone came to you and said "Hey, you know, I'd give you a bottle of whiskey for your land," and you didn't know that you owned it, you didn't have that concept, that sounded like a deal. And so it was an easy way for natives to lose their land.

JE: Or to keep it as an allotment. They knew this was their part of the reservation.

CC: If they knew. If they were educated and knew that. Many Osages, for example, never lived on their allotments.

JE: Why?

CC: Because they lived in villages.

JE: Right. And so they lived in... They could be out in the prairie somewhere and why would you wanna live out there?

CC: Right. That's right.

JE: They were village folks. Yet that allotment could produce some oil. Right?

CC: Well, and so the, actually, the way the Osages did it was they held the mineral rights in common. They did not allow that to be allotted.

JC: They were not allotted.

Chapter 03 – 4:20
Sybil Bolton

John Erling (JE): Sybil Bolton.

Joe Conner (JC): Yes.

JE: Talk about her, please.

JC: Sybil Bolton was actually the daughter of William Conner's daughter. So Sybil, her name was Kathleen, so Sybil Bolton was William Conner's granddaughter. Sybil Bolton.

JE: And somehow related to you.

JC: Well, in the sense that William Conner adopted my grandfather and raised for a little while – him along with Kathleen Conner, which was Sybil's mother. So they were raised by the same Kathleen and my grandfather George were raised by the same Osage woman in a big ranch house north of here. And so Sybil and Kathleen were known as aunts by our family. So she was an aunt.

JE: But due to greed she lost her life.

JC: Yeah. You know, she was a mixed blood Osage woman and Kathleen also was a mixed blood. And so they were very well educated and they were prominent citizens of Pawhuska. And Sybil was, you know, classically trained, traveled in Europe before she was – during her teen years. And just before she turned 21 when she could have control of her Osage oil money, she was murdered.

Most likely hired by her guardian, who then, because she was murdered, he retained that money that was coming in. And, you know, by 19, I think 23 or 24 when she was murdered, a headright was worth, you know, around \$10,000 or \$12,000 a year. And that's 1920's money that would have been close to half a million dollars probably.

JE: Right. And so a headright again, tell us, please.

JC: A headright is what most people would consider a share in a company or an oil estate. So a share is a headright.

JE: Which came from the minerals that were held in common by the Osage.

JC: Yes.

JE: Alright. Why was Sybil so wealthy?

JC: Well, she wasn't.

JE: She was until she was murdered but she lived a pretty fancy, privileged life. She did.

JC: Well, you know, she was an original O'Latee. She was born before 1907. As was her mother.

JE: Yeah. There were those who were pro-O'Latee's, I guess I call it, and those who were against it.

JC: Yes.

JE: Can you tell us why some were for and some were against that? How could somebody be against that?

Carol Conner (CC): Well, you know, if your way of life was that you lived in villages and you held land in common. That's your way of life. And white people come in and say, "Well, y'all need to be like us, and you need to split this up, and you need to have individual land ownership." That would not make sense to your way of life.

JC: And a part of the problem with the Federal Allotment Act that created this system was another part of the act was to dissolve all existing tribal governments. So that was one of the reasons many tribes, most tribes, resisted it. Some people who didn't think tribal governments were worth saving and that they saw more possibility of making money by getting

hold of private ownership of land were for it.

Even if they were Osage, they thought, "Well, that's more useful than belonging to a tribal government." But the tribal government at the time, for most tribes, it was a way that they could retain self-control. And they were giving that up by allotment. And they did.

JE: So a book was written, *The Death of Sybil Bolton*. Yes. And didn't David Grann use some of that for his research?

JC: Yes, David did read the book and conferred with the author, Dennis McAuliffe, who was the grandson of Sybil Bolton. And so David, you know, I think, in part, he got some of his inspiration from that book that was published in '94, I believe.

Chapter 04 – 5:00

Sins of the Father

John Erling (JE): So we have names like Bill Hale, Ernest Burkhart, Byron, the brother of Ernest. You're going to hear names like Anna Brown, Henry Roan. They'll be in the film and in the book that hopefully you will be reading. So you have many descendants of some of these people and others that live here in Fairfax. Is that true?

Carol Conner (CC): Actually, most of the descendants do not live in Fairfax, of the people that you just named. Most of those people's descendants don't live right here. There are descendants of other people related to the story that don't live here. That do live here, I said.

JE: Are there descendants of the murderers?

CC: Yes.

Joe Conner (JC): Both.

JE: And there are descendants of the victims?

JC: Yes.

JE: Do they live peacefully? Do they ignore each other?

CC: So I'll tell you the best story because I need to continue to live here. Our friend Mary Jo Webb did original research on this in the 1970s. And actually wrote up a booklet about her research of these murders in the 1970s. At a time when she had to do it on a typewriter and she didn't have a Xerox machine. Those were not invented yet. And so she did this research took the book to our Fairfax Public Library, donated it and within a week it was gone. And she suspected who it was that had made it be gone.

JE: They banned books back then, did they?

CC: By just taking them and burning them, I think. There was only one, so it was an easy job. So there was a family – there is a family here who are descendants of someone who likely murdered Osages. And eventually, Mary Jo was the best Catholic I have ever known in my life. She went to confession all of the time. Mary Jo was deeply spiritual. And so at some point this family's church here closed and they began to attend the Catholic Church.

And so Mary Jo would say “Every week I would go to confession and I would say to the Father, ‘Father I didn't listen to your homily again this week because I was sitting in my pew hating those people next to me because of what their family had done’” And she said, “You must forgive me and I know they did not do it. They are not responsible for the sins of their father but it's very difficult for me to listen to your homily because I'm so busy hating on them.” And the Father eventually said “Mary Jo, you don't need to say that every week I understand.”

JE: Yeah. Wow. That's powerful isn't it?

CC: It is.

JE: Were there any families on both sides that ever forgave and actually became friends and back and forth or are those divisions still pretty ripe?

CC: So there are families where murderers' descendants have married Osages, not particularly Osages who were descendants of victims. And I don't I can't think of a case where there's really been active forgiveness.

JE: Was there pushback among some of these people, these descendants to the very book that we're talking about?

CC: Yes, the funniest story is that – I think I was telling you the story of when I was in physical therapy and I invited someone to come to David Grann's book signing and the person said, “No I'm busy.” And I said, “Oh my goodness, well I can get you a signed copy.” “No, no, no, no.

You don't need to do that.” And so I told my friend Mary Jo Webb, “You know this person was very odd with me.” and Mary Jo said, “Oh my god Carol I wish I could have been there.” “Why is that?”

Well this is the daughter of someone who likely murdered Osages. And I had invited her to the book signing. And eventually this woman's sister said to me I was going to a family reunion of theirs to take pictures for the newspaper. And this woman said, “Carol, don't you know that author David Grann?” And I said, “Yes he's a lovely man.” And she said, “Well you know next time he's in town I think you should say to him that that would have been such a much better book if he would have only interviewed white people.” And I said “Well I don't think he's going to rewrite the book.” Isn't that incredible?

Chapter 05 – 7:23

Book Signing

John Erling (JE): The two of you worked closely with David I know and didn't you introduce members of the Osage to him to make them feel at ease about the book that he was about to write? Wasn't that your role at the beginning?

Carol Conner (CC): Mostly Mary Jo.

Joe Conner (JC): Yeah, Mary Jo was initially reticent to talk to David. And eventually her son and daughter-in-law convinced her that it was okay. She actually did an interview with David at our house here in Fairfax along with several others. I interviewed with David as well. But anyway, it was one of the things that she came to terms with.

Mary Jo eventually got comfortable with David. But David knew, interesting enough, David knew a little bit about the reticence about this. Partly because he had talked to Dennis McAuliffe whose book came out earlier in '94, like I said. And his book was banned in the Osage County Historical Society because Dennis McAuliffe talked about some of the White Guardians who were from Pawhuska and who were known at that time by the members of the Historical Society in Pawhuska.

And they thought he travished – he slandered them in his book. He didn't.

JE: And then title of that book again?

JC: The Death of Sybil Bolton. So anyway, David talked to Dennis about his reception what it would be like amongst the Osage people in Pawhuska or Fairfax. Dennis said, well he didn't know. But he came and agreed to have this book signing in the little space down where we have in the theater, the foundation does. And he signed, I don't know, several hundred books that day, maybe three or four hundred books.

Ran out of books, actually. We had people lined up in the street trying to get into it. And mostly all Osages and out of towners not too many local white folks. But anyway, David was still talking to us about, well I wonder how really Osages are going to take this. And some Osages did somewhat object.

CC: But that night – not that night. So we had a banquet for David out at the Grey Horse Community building. And David and his publicist were coming and they said, "Well, let us get a soda or something." I don't think they had any idea of what this was. So we go out to Grey Horse and the way Grey Horse people do that is if you're being honored, they sit around the edges of the building until you arrive.

And so David and his publicist walk in late and we have a table at the front and David said, "Well just find me a place." "No David, this is for you." And so he came to the front and Osages spoke movingly about how thrilled they were that he had told this story. Mary Jo spoke. People talked about how grateful they were that he was telling this story and that the world would know it. David was deeply moved.

JE: I bet tears were flowing.

JC: David said that was the most significant thing in all of his book tours was this traditional meal held by the Grey Horse people.

JE: Grey Horse is where? How far from here?

JC: About 44 miles east of here.

CC: It's the traditional community.

JE: You know in his book I think maybe – does he say 20, 25, were murdered but the number gets much bigger than that isn't it?

JC: Well you know various – including Oklahoma Historical Society looked into this some time ago estimated probably over 100 and if you go out to the cemetery in Fairfax not the one in Grey Horse, where these particular victims in the book are buried but all of the Osages who were buried in Fairfax Cemetery – and you look at the dates of their deaths all in the early 20's –1920's.

And there are just bunches of them all over the place and some of them were young people not very old – they didn't die of old age obviously they died of something else no one says but there are a bunch of them in the cemetery here in Fairfax Mary Jo's grandfather was one of them.

CC: And so, because of the newspaper business, I am often researching things from the past on newspapers.com and one of the things that I've learned is that just like now I print when people haven't paid their taxes and so back in that era that was printed as well and so there would be the tax bill for

different people and so there would be the name of a white guardian and then four or five Osage names below that because those are the people they are supposed to be taking care of and how much taxes they owe.

And then you look at the next year and for some of those guardians all of those people are no longer living and so if I were to do more research I would learn how old they were and why they had killed them for their money. And so David Grann said to me one time "You know Carol, if you want to live in this community you might not want to do deep research on this." and I think he's right.

JE: Really?

CC: Really.

JE: Have either one of you been threatened?

CC: No, no, not threatened it wouldn't be that, it would be more – it would be more... it would be so disturbing to know.. It could cut you out socially all of the things that happened.

JE: Right.

JC: Like I said, the interesting thing along with this that question is, you know, the Fairfax Foundation we created this exhibit that you saw down in the theater about a memorial and also about why these murders happened and so on. And as far as we know very few members of the white community have visited that exhibit most of the exhibit visitors have been from out of state or out of the city – from Tulsa, Oklahoma City, other places all over the country of course international visitors but very few local people go to that exhibit.

CC: And it's actually part of our feeling that like so many of us, we don't want to be blamed for things and it's easy for people to be afraid that they will be blamed for things they didn't do. And so I think a lot of people would rather just ignore the whole topic than have the feeling that they might be blamed.

JE: Some of this is kind of like the history of blacks and what we're hearing about and whites don't want to be blamed. I guess I'm on my own thinking, "I know those things were bad but it wasn't me, it wasn't my family, it wasn't us who did it." And so you would think whites could say "Yeah, there are bad characters in any group."

CC: We would wish that our education system would teach you that kind of concept, but I'm not sure that we're teaching that.

JE: I've interviewed David and I didn't get a chance to ask him this question. Where did this ever come from? When did it come into his thought process?

JC: You know, I don't know that for sure. I think perhaps reading this book of Dennis McAuliffe's and then he followed the trail a little bit more and found poems by Elise Passion, who was the daughter of Maria Tallchief from Fairfax also, which was about these murderers. And there were other things written about the murderers that he could find which one of them was called The Reign of Terror and also a book called Osage Murderers that had been published by a former FBI. So David – and I think David is an excellent researcher.

His books are well researched. I think it was not too far for him to start digging around and say, boy, this is a story here.

JE: So he went deeper than these other books that have been written. We probably have THE book now.

JC: I think he said he spent almost seven years in research.

Chapter 06 – 5:48

Standing on Main Street

John Erling (JE): Yeah alright, I was in your memorial there and in the Tall Chief Theater. Can we talk more about that? Carol, you gave me a very emotional feeling so let's pretend that we're standing outside your

memorial right now and you pointed across the street. Tell me what you were pointing at.

Carol Conner (CC): And so directly across from the Tall Chief Theater is a building that would have been the Bank of William Hale. So it's directly across the street from the Tall Chief Theater so it would have been a one story bank with a marble or faux marble facade which would have glittered and glowed and been very impressive and that's where William Hale's Bank was.

JE: Okay, then as we look to the right, that building on the corner.

CC: If you look to the right, the bank on the corner was the bank where the offices of the Schoen brothers were upstairs in that bank building and so that actually was where they had their offices. And the Schoen brothers were good friends and colleagues of William Hale, doctors, and so if William Hale wanted Lizzy Q poisoned it would be an easy less than a block – it's half a block to walk down to the end of the street, walk up the stairs to the Schoen brothers' offices and say, “Hey boys why don't you poison Lizzy Q?”

If you look to the other end of the street, less than a block – half a block there's a place where it says Hale Hall and above that was a Billiards Hall. And so Bill Hale could saunter down the street as the king of the Osage and walk up there and find a cowboy and say, “Hey, you want to knock off Henry Roan?” and make that deal. So that's within one block in downtown Fairfax where this conspiracy was hatched.

JE: Right, but then across the street on the same side that we're standing is an open lot and what was there?

CC: The open lot was the old Big Hill furniture store and mortuary and the man who owned and ran that was a friend of William Hale. And so there was more than one mortuary but if someone was murdered, Bill Hale would make sure that they got to that mortuary so that the body could be mutilated so no one would know what had happened.

JE: And that family became very wealthy.

CC: Yes.

JE: What was their name again, Mathis?

CC: Scott Mathis.

JE: Was that man – not the Mathis brothers in Tulsa?

CC: No, no, no.

Joe Conner (JC): I'm showing you that vacant lot was filled with this –

CC: That was the Big Hill. That's how big that was.

JC: It was a huge, half a block.

JE: Who made this?

CC: He did.

JC: I did.

JE: Wow, that's wonderful. Oh my.

CC: One of his hobbies.

JE: Okay. So that part I'm going to have to –

CC: Yeah. So It gives you chills to stand there.

JE: The Mathis family became very wealthy. Yes, so to inject myself a little bit here, when I stood there, Carol, and I said to both of you “It just gives you an awful feeling in your gut and in your mouth to realize da, da, da that's how easy it was to set up this murder... Murders.”

And you know what I've read the book, I'm reading it again but I never felt the impact until I stood right there at that spot.

CC: It's deeply moving to realize that in a town where so many good things could have happened, there was wealth. So many good things could have happened, but we had people actively working to murder their friends and neighbors.

JE: Alright, I interviewed a lady who was a survivor of the Holocaust.

CC: Oh wow.

JE: And she called the murderers there the business of murder that same idea applies, this was a business of murder, it could have been the name of a book. "The Business of Murder".

CC: It could. Because really, many of the people who were part of the conspiracies were businessmen and they were looking out for their business interests and did not perceive Osages as fully human and as people who were as valid in the world as they are and it was like the Holocaust in the way of "We do not perceive you as being as good a human as we are."

JC: I think the roots of this are common to all of us as human beings, you know, the minute we start villainizing someone else, another group – we start calling them names, we're on the slippery slope to dehumanizing them. And once you get there, then killing them or doing whatever you want to with them, it's just business, it's impersonal, it's just something you do, it's not a human enterprise. It's just, you know, something that has to be done or should be done.

JE: The Mafia also had that kind of concept. I remember one of them I talked to and they said it wasn't personal, it was just business, and they probably thought that, but they were also thinking of the Osage. I think I commented in your memorial there probably thought of them as the same as a dog – killing a dog. They just didn't value them at all they knew they were human, but they–

CC: And you know, it's my understanding that we have eras where we decide that it is okay to think that other people are not fully human. And we all

start talking badly about different kinds of people, and we all start saying "They're not quite as human as we are," we start calling them names and we get to the point where we believe what we've said, and we get to the point where we think "It is just fine to get rid of those people."

And I didn't live in the '20s, but I can imagine that people just thought "Eh, it's no big thing it's what we do."

JE: Well there was that stereotype of Indians, a drunk lazy Indian.

JC: You know, well, unfortunately that still is a residual of that in many people's view, and I'll tell you the residual is that many people believe it's just a genetic predisposition that Indians have for alcoholism – which we know in our research, we mentioned we've done health research for tribes the last 30 years we've debunked that a number of different times in our studies, as well as other researchers who've looked at this question but the myth still persists amongst even, you know, fairly well informed people that there's just some kind of genetic thing there and there really isn't.

But you know, that's part of this probably grew out of this stereotype that they were just drunks.

JE: Okay, why was a stereotype there? What supported that stereotype?

JE: Well, you know, all you have to do is think a little bit about history, and understand what it would be like if you introduced an intoxicant to a group of people who were not used to it. And it suddenly made you, you know, feel powerful and funny and giddy, and you know, it's a very seductive thing to do and of course that was the state of many American Indian tribes at the time of European discovery.

Most – some who did have intoxicants were very limited and very ceremonial, and there weren't very many of those so just drinking alcohol recreationally was something that they had no experience with at all and what you find out in our own research, and others who've done this kind of work, is that you track the time of exposure to American Indians with Europeans over time, what you discover is: the earlier that there was contact, there was this initial problem of alcohol – abandoned drinking

and problems you know, because no one could figure out how to control it.

But the longer things went on, tribes got a hold of that and began to control it. So what you find out is, for instance, the Cherokees who had contact with the Europeans probably in the early 1800s, certainly you know, had that problem to start with. But as time evolved, they become one of the most sober populations in the country.

In fact our own research, when we were doing it with Willem van Kieler, documented that they actually in surveys in the community in New Orleans, drink more than – less – than their white neighbors.

JE: Blacks?

JC: White neighbors, the Cherokees.

JE: Cherokees drink less than their white neighbors?

JC: Indians drink more than their white neighbors and then you move further west when European contact was more recent, you find problems tend to grow, they're still lingering on and so you know, there were several policies – several things like that, and also federal policies that exacerbated the perception that Indians were alcoholics and I can talk some more about that, but nonetheless...

JE: I'm fascinated; I don't know why I should be. When Bill Hale went to the cowboys and said "I want you to murder somebody," what kind of money do we know? How did he pay them?

CC: I've forgotten, but it wasn't much.

JE: Probably a bottle of whiskey.

CC: I've forgotten – it wasn't much, I'd have to look it up. It wasn't much. And I don't know –

JC: If he made good on it, he made good on them, too.

CC: You know, he probably was not, I mean – when you're doing that kind of thing, who's going to hold you to account?

Chapter 07 – 4:42

Gray Horse Cemetery

John Erling (JE): Many of these people were interviewed in your home so you sat in on those interviews, more than likely?

Carol Conner (CC): Oh, yeah.

Joe Conner (JC): Yeah.

JE: Let us also say about David, his personality that probably helped make this thing work. I interviewed him, now you tell me about it he had a very sweet pleasant, easygoing, easy to talk to kind of personality

JC: He does, he's very open and friendly, lets people speak without interrupting them he's very socially adroit. I think that's part of why people, Osages who were initially reluctant to talk to him, eventually came around to talking to him because of his style.

JE: But you had to reach out to some of these people you were the finder.

JC: Well some, but others he was able to persuade on his own without my –

JE: How would he even know who they are?

JC: He had met other people who told him who he should be interviewing so it wasn't just me there were other people he had talked with and was given leads on.

JE: Right. You know, you spoke of the cemetery which is a short drive away from Fairfax and when I came in here today, I said “Do you think we have time to drive down to the cemetery? I'd like to take a picture of those uprights,” and you told me what?

JC: Well I said, you know, that's really not something that I would recommend you do because many of the local Osages here in Greyhorse have taken a public stance against having people visit that cemetery who are not Osage.

JE: is it because of the harm or the disrespect we would have?

CC: Well, and so in the past so I've been to that cemetery many times and the first time that Joe took me there, back in the day people had little ceramic pictures of themselves on their gravestones. And at the time I first went there, you drive through the Grey Horse Cemetery and here's this beautiful ceramic picture of an Osage murdered in the '20s and someone has shot out the ceramic picture.

And so that kind of disrespect, that always sends chills through me that not only did we murder you but we're shooting out your image and lately someone has taken it upon themselves to try to restore all of those ceramic images, but there's a grave concern that people might be disrespectful.

I must say from the people I know who have visited, I've not seen that disrespect but I can understand and sympathize with that feeling.

JE: Right.

JC: You know, amazing that we talked about the memorial and since we established it a little over a year ago we've had probably over 6,000 visitors to that little space down there which is about 12 x 14 little space that tells them about our history and so on.

When we have actually been there and interrupted somebody visiting the memorial and had a chance to chat with them you know, all of them – none of them that we ever talked to came here with the idea of, “Tell us about the murders, gruesome aspects of the murders or where they happened?” or anything like that.

They came with the question of “How come I never heard of this?” and

“Why could this have happened?” and they were you know, seeking solace, I think, because they read the book and they came and they were very respectful and some of them at that time had gone out to the grave and sites in Grey Horse.

And they were very you know, solemn and very respectful and I think probably most of the visitors that we know would be. But there's still fear amongst the Grey Horse people that there will be, when this movie comes out you know there will be a different audience than the book readers. Book readers, they think, and there might be some truth to this are different than movie viewers.

And so it may be that that would be something that would vandalize the cemetery so they're very reluctant to have people be encouraged to go out there.

Chapter 08 – 8:15

Reproductions for Film

John Erling (JE): Okay, then that brings us to the film itself. You drove me around the little village here and I'm going to – and then you would point out places like... First of all, you pointed out how the film people painted the houses colors of the 20s and that was interesting.

Carol Conner (CC): Yeah, so Jack Fisk was very, very concerned about getting everything precisely right and so there were houses on blocks where they were going to be filming that they painted every house a color of the 1920s. My favorite story of that is the house across the street where they did a great deal of filming is painted a gold color and the film crews could paint a house in a day, which I've never been able to get done. So they paint – Jack Fisk picked out a paint color and they painted the house in a day and he came back the next day and said, “Wrong yellow” and so they repainted it the next day a different color.

Joe Conner (JC): Okay, the name Jack Fisk, how does he come into this and was he been very helpful to Scorsese or?

JC: Yeah, Jack came to this production a little bit late. He was what I think we call a production director. Really was the guy in charge of making sure this was historically completely accurate and so on. So Jack really took Yeoman's responsibility for making sure things were like they should have been in the '20s so he was really in charge of that for many years or during the filming but initially it wasn't him.

The first production director was an older man from Italy who came and visited us here at the newspaper office, he and some advanced production people and they wanted to tour the town to see where things had happened and so we showed them around and the Italian fellow couldn't speak very good English so he had a translator and once in a while he would talk, they'd chatter and the translator said – I forget the fellow's name, he said he's not very interested in Fairfax, it doesn't seem like the place for filming.

And I said, "Well that's not good." but anyway, this is about the time COVID hit, he went back to Italy and he decided not to come back to America because of the COVID scare. So Jack Fisk was brought in as the new production director, and Jack actually lives in Virginia and has worked on all kinds of films all across the country.

JE: Isn't he married to Sissy Spacek?

CC: He is.

JE: The actress.

CC: And so what we really admired about Jack was that he came here, he looked at old pictures he looked at old books we brought some people in who had old pictures Jack was totally detail oriented. And so my favorite Jack Fisk story is that we showed him a maybe one inch picture of the Catholic Church in Fairfax in the 1920s, and he had that building reproduced down to the details of little wooden crosses above the windows so that at least at the level of the detail, I'm sure the movie is accurate.

I don't know if the story is, but I know at that level it is.

JC: One thing related to the Fairfax Chief newspaper is that Jack asked us if we had any pictures of the old Fairfax Chief during this period of time. We didn't, but I had seen something years ago and I couldn't lay my hands on it. I had a rough idea of what it looked like so Jack asked me if I could sketch it out. So I sketched out a picture or a drawing of what I thought the old Fairfax Chief newspaper office looked like Jack took it and recreated it at Info Fairfax in Pawhuska, so when you see the movie you'll see the Fairfax Chief in some of the scenes and that's our newspaper office that I gave Jack the rendition of.

JE: Very good Didn't they build a fake railroad in Pawhuska?

CC: They did. They brought in a locomotive and some cars they built two miles of railroad they ran the train down the track and actually on the trailer, which is already out, you see the train coming into the station and that station, too, was recreated from pictures of the old Fairfax train station.

JE: So we recreated both in Pawhuska and in Fairfax?

JC: Mostly in Pawhuska.

JC: And they actually came to Tulsa. They did. They filmed in other locations too out in the country and other things too.

JE: Right. I think we want to point out – first of all, you haven't seen the film?

CC: No.

JE: But Chief Standing Bear, the Osage Nation Chief, has seen it and you visited with him about it.

JC: And some others too.

JE: And he was pleased with it?

CC: He was. Actually everyone that we've talked to has been pleased with it. Now, I have not seen it but I just want you to know that I'm not pleased.

JE: Why?

CC: Because the story that I have been told is that it's a love story between Ernest Burkhardt and Molly. And so I'm sure that that will help sell the movie that it's a love story. But here's my take on it: I've been married to Joe for decades.

If he had tried at any point to poison me, three different times, and if he at any point had taken our children and thought he'd leave them at a house that he knew was going to be blown up and they just accidentally weren't there that day, I wouldn't call that a dang love story. And it makes me crazy if we've had to reconfigure the story to be a love story with someone who, at best, I've ever heard was just kind of a doofus kind of guy.

JE: Ernest tried to poison his wife Molly?

CC: Yes.

JE: And that's what you're referring to. But you know people see movies and ten people will come back with different versions.

CC: They will. They'll be wrong. Everyone will see it a different way.

JE: I think they will see the murder that took place.

CC: I hope they do.

JC: One of the things that Chief Standing Bear and other people who have seen the movie have said is what they appreciate, and I understand why, because the Grey Horse community – we met way before this filming started. We met here, in town, in Fairfax probably 150 of us. We talked about this upcoming movie and our concerns and we decided as a group, that we would send a group collective letter to Martin Scorsese saying “You must meet with us Grey Horse Osages before you film this.” and sent the letter off.

Eventually he consented and agreed to meet with us. And he did, he came with some of his staff and met with us and we put on a traditional meal for him we stood up, and some of us – including myself told him what some of our concerns were about how we would be depicted in this movie and he listened and you know, respectfully, and at the end he kind of stood up and said he's heard us and he will try to honor us as much as – he will do his best.

JE: Is that the same meeting that he had with Chief Standing Bear?

JC: No, Standing Bear was not in the meeting. But he did have a meeting. He met with individual leaders but this was a Grey Horse group not the other Osages. Chief Standing Bear is a Pawhuska village person, so only with Grey Horse people.

JE: Alright, so then do Grey Horse people like Pawhuska Osage people? I mean is there a division there?

CC: It's just separate communities.

JC: There are three traditional villages in the Osage, Pahuska, Hominid Fairfax Grey Horse They just all do things a little different.

JE: Chief Standing Bear said that Scorsese was a real easy guy to talk to, responsive in all and he felt real good about him.

JC: Well most people did and I think you know as far as I know the reason many of those Osages people who have seen the movie and participated were in the movie as extras, felt that he got many aspects of our traditional lifeways and culture correct partly because he hired traditional artisans to make the costumes. And one of the things Chief Standing Bear said to Scorsese, I know he totally said “We don't want to see somebody on screen, even if he's native, talking Lakota or Sioux or Cherokee. They need to be talking Osage.”

And so Scorsese made sure that that happened so when you hear

language you will hear Osage language and so everyone was pleased with that they didn't dub in some other language speaker and pass it as Indian.

JE: I heard that Robert De Niro was taught Osage?

JC: He did learn some words, yes. He learned some words.

CC: I'd have to say it would be hard to be taught that very quickly.

JC: It's not an easy language to pick up. You learn a few words.

JE: Joe, are you able to speak more than a few words?

JC: Not a whole lot, I can speak some.

JE: But the story is about Fairfax.

JC: Yes.

JE: It's not White Cloud, it's not Pawhuska, and in the film I think you're feeling good that it does come off very much that it's a Fairfax story. Am I correct?

CC: Absolutely. As far as we understand.

JC: All of the signage you will see on the movie Fairfax will show up repeatedly on the train station. I think that will come across.

CC: One day when they were filming in Pawhuska at the train station we were over there taking pictures and some woman said, "Hey excuse me are you from here? Do you know why it says Fairfax on that train station?" And I said "Because that's where it happened. We're now in faux Fairfax but this is where it happened."

So I feel good that the signage, particularly, is going to say Fairfax.

JE: Right And so when people come they could come to Pawhuska and say "But where's Fairfax?" They're going to ask for Fairfax.

CC: They are. Yes they are.

JE: We've got the Pioneer Woman there and all that. People may come there and then discover Fairfax as well. So this brings me to the Tall Chief Theatre. There were some ballerinas from Fairfax weren't there? And their names were?

CC: Maria and Marjorie Tall Chief.

JC: Maria was the first America's prima ballerina for instance.

JE: And their father built the theatre opened in 1928.

CC: That's right

JE: See I know some history, too.

CC: Yes, Alex built the theatre.

JE: You have built a community foundation. Tell me about the foundation and its purpose.

JC: Well let me give you some history. The foundation was in existence before we assumed leadership roles in it. It had been working on restoring the theatre back in the 80's and 90's and they were working on it. Back then we had a senator – a state senator from here, and back in the old days, they used to give senators some discretionary money that they could spend in their communities and so happened he made sure that the foundation got some money to work on this theatre.

And so for a while they were actually making pretty good progress because they had a stream of income. Of course, as you might know, being in Oklahoma long enough to figure this out they voted in term limits at some point and our senator was term limited out and the cash flow went to nothing.

The foundation board members at the time began to squabble because they didn't have any money and eventually they dissolved, some of them

passed away some of them were elderly and just gave up. And so, at the last minute, probably 8 years ago or so, we were invited by one of the remaining foundation founders to come and visit with her about how could we be interested in doing something.

She knew we had been active in the community and said "Well ok ,we'll talk to you about it." Long story short, she resigned and handed the foundation over to us in a moment when we didn't have the full clarity, so we agreed to it.

So we've been shepherding the foundation since that time and we've been working on trying to restore this theatre by getting money. We have a website and one of the good things I wanted to point out in this interview about our efforts that I hope will facilitate what we're trying to do here is recently, the Oklahoma legislature passed and the governor signed a trail – civil rights trail legislation for Oklahoma that would start depending on where you start.

It's the Standing Bear memorial in Ponca City come to our reign – the foundation's reign of terror memorial here in Fairfax go on to Greenwood and then also go through some of the historic black towns of Oklahoma and then end up in the Clara Luper memorial in Oklahoma City. And if you started in Clara, you'd reverse trail it but – that legislation passed just recently and apparently, we understand that Oklahoma Historical Society will be administering whatever funds that they went with that legislation.

And that we understand from the senator who sponsored this bill that – that money some of it might be available to these sites including our site maybe to help renovate it. Because, you know, what you need to know is that Ponca City Standing Bear has got an endowment and it's a pretty prosperous foundation. They do alright, of course, Greenwood is on the rise but the places in Clara Luper in Oklahoma City – the places that are struggling are places like us.

CC: And the rural black towns.

JC: And us are in a similar boat. We don't have any endowment we don't have any rich people in our communities, we are poor and hungry, if you will,

and we're hoping that this will give us an opportunity to get a little more money to help bolster our efforts to create a permanent memorial here that we've been working on now for a half a decade or so.

JE: But shouldn't we say the kind of money you need is in the millions?

JC: We have had estimates to do a full state of the art restoration turn the theater into what we would call the Marie and Marjorie Tall Chief Performing Arts Center and also create a permanent memorial and also visitor information and restaurant and things to go amenities to go along with it estimated around 8 million dollars to do that.

JE: I've been through the Greenwood Rising and if a portion of that could be duplicated here that would be so wonderful because it involves somebody to take a group of 20-30 and sit down and listen to somebody like you people and others that you would train to tell the story as equal as the 1921 massacre, this was a massacre as well.

JC: Yes it was.

CC: And so I don't know if we've said this, but the interesting part of the murders here Anna Brown's body, the first body that was found, was found in the same week of the same month of the same year as the Tulsa Race Massacre.

JE: Say that to me again?

CC: Anna Brown's body, the first body that was found.

JE: Right.

CC: Was found in the same week of the same month of the same year as the Tulsa Race Massacre, which says something to me about the mood of the country and how we were perceiving things at that time. That was not good but it was a similar thing that happened, and I don't know if you're aware of this, but one of the stories that always touches me is that some of the victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre found their way into Osage County and Osages took them in.

JE: Anna had two bullet holes, I think, to her head.

JC: Yes.

JE: And she was the sister of Molly and who – Ms. Gladstone plays the part of Molly Burkhardt in the film and they're already talking about Academy Award for her and maybe nominated for the film. I mean the film itself.

CC: I have to tell you that I haven't seen her in action but she's a she's a wonderful human being.

JE: Okay, I was going to ask you about DiCaprio, Gladstone, and De Niro. Have you met them?

JC: We met Lily.

CC: We met Lily and we spoke with De Niro. Lily actually connected with the native community here. There's something called the Osage dances every June and the Grey Horse dances happened last weekend and Lily was there.

JE: Oh really? she came back for it?

JC: She's been here twice now.

CC: She connected with people here and she's just a lovely person ,very sure of herself and very reserved, but just a delightful person. Somebody posted a picture on Facebook of her talking to some little girl and it's just this darling picture.

JE: So does she live in California?

CC: Oh I don't know.

JC: I believe so.

JE: And so she came on her own dime to be part of that even though the production was over with and there was nothing to gain – but because she wanted to be there.

Chapter 09 – 5:30

Watching the Filming

John Erling (JE): You saw filming?

Carol Conner (CC): Oh lots of filming.

JE: I don't know how close they would allow you to it but did they, right across the street –

CC: Right across the street, my office is right over there, if you were on this side of the table you could see the house where they filmed and so we stood on our front porch and filmed day after day day after day.

Joe Conner (JC): With thousands of pictures.

CC: And so they didn't actually want us taking pictures but it's pretty hard to run you off of your own property and so what do you expect?

JE: And a newspaper.

CC: So we had lots of pictures here and when they filmed down the street – a friend of ours owns a property down there – and so we went down there and filmed, so we filmed, I don't know how many days, but many days. So one story I like and would like to share is we have a kid who takes pictures for us for the newspaper.

He started when he's 14 and he just turned 20 and he took pictures over and over and he has a picture of De Niro, Marty, and Leo that was actually on 60 Minutes recently.

JE: Oh really?

CC: Because they were doing something about David Grann's new book *The Wager* and so his picture was actually used on 60 Minutes so we thought that was really cool.

JC: That was filmed in Fairfax and this was filmed right across the street right over here at this house. That's De Niro and DiCaprio.

JE: Somebody autographed that?

JC: You know they signed a book for us.

JE: Who did?

JC: Leo and De Niro, and so we have copies over on our shelf of a book they signed so we just kind of copied their signatures.

JE: Whose signature is this? Bob?

CC: Hard to tell.

JE: Would it be Bob De Niro?

JC: Yeah maybe so.

CC: Yes that's De Niro.

JC: Yeah it is.

JE: I call him Bobby.

CC: You and Bobby

JC: We call him Marty too. And this is part of the downtown Fairfax that they created in the '20s and you can see the reason I took these pictures. That's the newspaper office in the 1920's. That will be in the film. If you like, you can have those.

JE: I do. I'm charging my phone in the car so I should be taking pictures but if I can take that and this pamphlet too, as a matter of fact. Okay, in the film, they'll see a house that was blown up – I think you referenced that. Tell me about how they set that up and that's here in Fairfax and you drove me past the vacant lot now. Tell me about it.

CC: When the location people came here they said “Are there any houses here that look like the house that was blown up?” and I said “Oh yes, there's a house just down the block that's vacant that's really almost an exact duplicate.” Because Osages had to have an architect design their homes, sometimes they share those drawings so this house was a duplicate of the house that was blown up.

And so they got in touch with the woman who owned it and it was in decay. They took the house, painted it to absolute perfection, inside and out, and furnished it. It was beautiful and then they sort of fake blew it up. So they would bring a 'dozer in and tear down part of it and they laid gas lines under it.

And so Jack Fisk I would get sort of tickled because they'd be filming this as if it had exploded.

They'd turn on the gas lines so there'd be a fire, but Jack Fisk – when they would stop would go over and move a board like it wasn't quite right. We had to have the blown up and he was looking at pictures of the house after it had blown up.

So they had that house, they had a car that was blown up during the explosion and so my sister got very concerned that they'd taken a 1920s car and destroyed it. And so the people who had built a fake blown up car actually drove it to her coffee shop to show her that they had built it to be blown up; it wasn't an actual 1920's car. And so they would film something as if it were an explosion and then they'd move some boards around, they painted part of the trees so it looked like they were burning.

JE: And houses nearby.

CC: Yes, houses nearby, because the night that the house exploded huge, huge flames started immediately after. One of the nights that they filmed across the street here, they were filming as if Leo had just heard the explosion – Ernest Burkhart – and so he would walk out of the house as if he had just heard the explosion and they had extras standing behind this house, standing behind every house on the street in 1920's night clothes – which is more clothes than most people wear full time these days.

And so they would “Action!” and all these people would come out because what happened the night of the explosion is that all the townspeople grabbed a bucket and started heading that way because they didn't know what had happened. They just heard an explosion and eventually a fire truck came and laid two little tiny water lines and started putting out the fire from it. But the night of the explosion the whole town was awakened.

JE: So real quick, because I can tell people that watch the movie, but why was the house exploded?

JC: Because the Smiths.. What was their name?

CC: Bill and Rita Smith.

JC: Rita was Molly's sister and married to Bill Smith. And the idea was Rita would be killed and then Molly would inherit her head right –

CC: And Bill Smith had been married to another of Molly's sisters who had died, and married Rita. And he had started saying to people around town, “I think I know who's behind this.” And so he and Rita had been in Arkansas at Hot Springs when they came home and they blew up the house the night they came home. The house was they had bought it from the Schoen Brothers he knew it was going to be blown up.

Bill Smith didn't, but Ernest did. Ernest knew it was going to be blown up and had actually intended to leave their children there that night.

JE: Yeah. See this is where it gets to your gut.

CC: It does.

Chapter 10 – 8:25
Many Osages Moved

John Erling (JE): And Bill Hale, even after he served time and he was released he could still walk around Fairfax and there would be people who would enjoy actually talking to this man.

Carol Conner (CC): We're told that he was released – the word went around town, “Bill Hale is here.” and people gathered as if there was a parade.

JE: How sick can that be?

Joe Conner (JC): Yeah, I know, well.

JE: But who would have been gathering with him? Not Osage? All the whites? Bill Hale himself was what? Did he have Osage?

CC: No, no. He was a cowboy from Texas.

JE: He was a Heinz 57 from Texas.

CC: Yeah, he eventually was released from prison and went and lived with his daughter in Arizona and is buried in Wichita, Kansas.

JE: You know, you talk about Native Americans and all I think the perception has changed a lot over time of Native Americans. But at the time, they were uneducated. But there have been many from this area that moved the same as what happened in the massacre in Tulsa. Families that were well educated moved to Chicago and other places and they went on and very well educated children – the same happened here.

CC: It didn't. It actually – many Osages moved to California at the time – many – and you know if you had the resources and you could get out I can see why you would do that.

JE: But they were educated people. PhD's, and doctors, and lawyers, and all that. And if this didn't happen – I don't know, I suppose they could have been living here and using the money, maybe, and sending their children off to great colleges?

CC: And staying in Osage County and helping build our economy. And what's interesting is that when the Grey Horse dances happened, when the Pawhuska dances happened, when the Hominy dances happened, Osages come back from everywhere. And it is astonishing how many well educated Osages there are.

And it's astonishing how many of them don't know their history because their families left and said “Forget all that.” because it was a horrific time. And those stories were typically not shared.

JE: Marjorie Burkhart, David Grann treats her so beautifully at the end of the book and how she was – is a very reticent person, she is. I actually have her phone number but I don't think that would work for me.

I think somebody would have to approach her and I'm not even going to tr. But Marjorie said, to someone, “You know, you have all these families that are so big, and my family is very small. I don't have the aunts and uncles that you had or the cousins that you had.” Isn't that something? That's how big. And she was the granddaughter of Molly Burkhart and that is something I hadn't even thought about.

CC: And you know, the same is true for Dennis McAuliffe who wrote the book *The Death of Sybil Bolton*. His family is fairly small – we are connected with him and friend-cousins with him but because of that murder, there also wasn't a large family and there are many families here that that's true.

That they are not large families because somebody got murdered. And, you know, it always reminds me of war veterans, you know, when I'm writing stories about war veterans and – okay, that line ended there because that person is gone. And for Osages like Anna Brown's family, it's the whole family. It's the whole family.

JE: Isn't it tough not to have that in your mind? You don't act upon it everyday, I happen to be of Norwegian descent and I read about how Germany invaded Norway and I'm still upset about it.

CC: I understand. My family was Dutch, not German, just so – (laughing) I don't think it was us.

JE: Well, as we begin to wrap this up, is there anything else that you would like to make a point of?

JC: I would like to add that you know we are still trying to create this permanent memorial and restore the theater and so on, and one of the things we've been very fortunate in the last year or so, we've met some people. One of them being an Osage person who was estranged from this community he wasn't raised here, wasn't raised in the Osage community.

He grew up in Oklahoma City – we were introduced to him because he's a filmmaker by another friend of ours that we met and knew him. She said, “You might want to meet this guy. He's Osage and he's a filmmaker – budding filmmaker.” and we said “Sure, we'll talk to him.” and lucky for us, he comes here and he finds out that his family is actually from here.

CC: They live across the street from us.

JC: And he didn't know who they were. And so he's found out since then but he's also gratis – he's paying it for himself – making a film a documentary on Carol and I's efforts to create a memorial that we started – not started with us, but started with Mary Jo Webb in the 1970s to create a memorial to these victims that was sabotaged back then.

And we picked up on that and been working on it – since we've had the reigns – for many years now to create a memorial to the victims that not only would honor what happened but also serve as a venue for healing of tensions that people will feel and the solace that some people come after having read the book.

Maybe after seeing it, they'll come with these questions with an ache in their heart because these films in – the book touched people. And we want

them to have a moment in which they can reflect and say to themselves “You know, none of us had any say over who we were born to or where we were born. But we do have choices now that we can make. We don't have to make the same choices our ancestors made and so there is hope for us to become better people. All of us.”

So we want this memorial and Damon Waters – is the film maker – is trying to create this film about what we're trying to do here. Not just about the murderers that will be plenty of coverage in the movie and so on but what this community – and he's highlighted Carol and I's work – Damon sees us as key to this thing, I suppose we are in some ways. But anyway, with this community's effort a small group of people to keep this thing alive and turn it into something positive and not divisive you know.

Not further dividing this community but bringing us together over this tragedy that could turn into something that is healing and unifying. So we're hoping the film comes out next month–

JE: Documentary.

JC: Documentary about the efforts to save this theatre and we're hoping to raise some more money for this project.

JE: Right. Well, I want to thank both of you for this hospitality, and you're great storytellers, so wonderful. I can hardly wait to see the movie.

CC: (laughing) Good, good.

JE: You said Osages had seen it, were they the ones who went to the Cannes Festival?

CC: Yes.

JE: So was it a big contingency invited to the Cannes Film Festival?

JC: Oh, a dozen or so.

CC: Yeah, not huge. Maybe a dozen, I'm not sure. Not that many.

JE: Well, thank you.

CC: Well, thank you! It was a delight to visit with you.

JE: We need to stay in touch.

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