

Phil Kennamer

This 1934 high society murder turned Tulsa upside down & grabbed national headlines.

Chapter 01 - 1:38

Introduction

Announcer: In 1935, the American Justice system was on trial as much as Phil Kennamer, who was the son of a prominent federal judge in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Despite having a high-powered former state attorney general leading his defense, and prominent psychiatrists testifying that he was insane at the time of the murder, Phil Kennamer was convicted of manslaughter in the killing of his friend, John Gorrell Jr, shortly after Thanksgiving Day 1934. He was 19 when sentenced to 25 years in prison. Kennamer claimed to have killed in self-defense and to protect the wealthy debutante Virginia Wilcox—the object of his affection. Virginia was the daughter of Tulsa oil man H.F. Wilcox. The murder took place in the Forest Hills residential area, the wealthiest part of the Oil Capital of the World, Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Ford sedan of John Gorrell Jr., the son of prominent physician John Gorrell Sr., came to rest at the triangular median of Victor Avenue and Forest Boulevard. When a key witness in the murder was found dead in his car under similar circumstances, it turned Tulsa upside down and became a national sensational story.

Our storyteller, Jim Freese, is the grandson of Virginia Wilcox Snedden Hagar. Jim was staying with his grandmother in Tulsa one weekend, when in a closet he noticed a small cardboard box filled with newspaper articles from 1935. His curiosity led to researching the story for the book *Murder in the Name of Love: The Phil Kennamer Trial* which is available in our “for further reading” section.

Kennamer was 29 when he died August 15, 1944. By listening to Jim Freese tell the story, you will be surprised to hear how Phil Kennamer died...heard only on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 3:25**Freese Family**

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is August 18, 2018. This oral history discussion will deal with a murder in Tulsa in 1934. It was known as the Phil Kennamer trial.

Joining me is Jim Freese, who is the grandson of one of the key figures in this story, Virginia Wilcox Snedden Hager, and is the author of the book *Murder in the Name of Love: The Phil Kennamer Trial*.

So, Jim, for the record, would you state your full name, please?

Jim Freese: Well, my full name, my legal name, is James King Freese Jr., I go by Jim.

JE: Your date of birth?

JF: December 22, 1960.

JE: And where were you born?

JF: Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Which hospital?

JF: St. John's Hospital.

JE: Your father's name?

JF: My father's name was James King Freese.

JE: Let's talk about your father a little bit, what did he do?

JF: He owned Freese and Company Insurance Company in Tulsa, since the early '60s or so. And then sold it back in the mid-1980s.

JE: How would you describe him? Personality?

JF: Oh, boy. I don't know how to—he drank a lot, he was an alcoholic, so that was pretty much the side I saw of him mostly.

JE: Well, you're not the first one who's talked about his parents being alcoholic or drinking a lot.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

JE: And that's probably hard for you to say that.

JF: It is, it's hard to admit that I think a lot of his decisions were made due to alcohol. And I think he made a lot of poor decisions that led to his bankruptcy.

JE: How old was he when he died?

JF: He was seventy, just seventy years old.

JE: What did he die of?

JF: I say alcoholism.

JE: So then your mother's name?

JF: Beverly Virginia Snedden. She went by the name of Jill.

JE: And how did Jill come out of those names?

JF: I think because her older brother's name was Jack.

JE: Oh?

JF: Jack Snedden, and so they just nicknamed her Jill.

JE: She was the daughter then of Virginia Wilcox Snedden?

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And her brother?

JF: Jack Robin Snedden, um, Jr., I guess.

JE: Right. Describe your mother's personality, what she was like.

JF: She was kind of crazy, in a way, that she had this funny sense of humor, that some things she thought were really funny and they weren't, and she always seemed to be on. She never really worked. My dad provided for all of us so there wasn't any need for her to work. So she just stayed home and took care of us three boys. She would do some wild and crazy things. I think she thought she was funny. I think she thought she was just a funny gal.

JE: They were obviously considered wealthy at that time.

JF: Yeah, at that time, I mean, my dad started his insurance business. My mom helped him out and then they hired help to come in and help raise us kids.

JE: Your grandfather, his name was what?

JF: Jack Snedden.

JE: You wouldn't have met him?

JF: No, he died in 1946.

JE: And then your grandmother—

JF: Virginia.

JE: You, of course, knew her?

JF: Oh, yeah.

JE: And close to her?

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You grew up in Tulsa?

JF: Yes.

JE: Where did you go to school?

JF: The high school, I went to Cascia Hall.

JE: And grade school?

JF: Grade school? I went to Paul Reverie Elementary School, which is at 1st and Lewis. But they had torn that down and built a bank, right by the freeway.

JE: You graduated from Cascia Hall in what year?

JF: Nineteen seventy-nine.

JE: The book is *Murder in the Name of Love: The Phil Kennamer Trial*. Before the book is written, how did this story come to your attention?

JF: Ha-ha [laughs].

Chapter 03 - 8:25**A Discovery**

Jim Freese: In the spring of 2001, my wife and daughter had driven to Tulsa. We had a doctor's appointment for my wife. Grandmother had a ranch-style house right off of 41st and Utica. So we stayed there with her at the other end of the house. She had a guestroom and our own private bath. So we stayed there. She said, "You stay with me."

I said, "Okay, that'd be great." We were unpacking, I was hanging the clothes up in the closet and I was going to put our suitcases in that closet, just to get them out of the way. And on the floor, I saw a cardboard box with some old newspaper clipping in there. And I'm fascinated by old news.

So I took it out and on the front page of the *Tulsa World*, I see a picture of my grandmother walking down the courthouse steps in Ponca, Oklahoma. And it said, "Murder Trial" across the headline. And I thought, *What the—*

I had no idea, and I never knew that she was involved in a murder trial. So now I begin to ask myself, *Did she know the person that was killed? Was she there when this person was killed? What does she know about any of this?* And, boy, did I want to ask her. But we didn't have a chance to really go through the articles. It was obvious that she clipped them out and she stored them away. And I found them by pure accident.

We had to leave for the doctor's appointment, with the intent that when we got back to my grandmother's home that we would, you know, close the door and snoop and go through the newspaper articles. They were gone. She removed them from the closet and I did not ask her about them.

John Erling: Why didn't you ask her about them?

JF: Because, knowing my grandmother, that was just something that you did not discuss. And I saw how young she was. She was eighteen when this was going on and I figured that might have been kind of traumatic for her.

So I was not interested in bringing up, maybe, some memories that would be very emotional for her.

JE: Did you feel close to her?

JF: Not exactly, no, and that was the other reason why. My mom and her had a very contentious relationship and because of that we weren't close to our grandmother.

JE: Yet you came to stay with her and visit her and she welcomed you to her home.

JF: She did, she was very gracious and I appreciate that.

JE: All right, so this story is set in 1934, 1935, the Great Depression era.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Which the story of the Depression did not affect these people at all.

JF: Not really, no.

JE: No? It's a story of wealth, of maybe having time on their hands, but we'll get into this.

Let's talk about the players. Obviously, your grandmother, Virginia Wilcox Snedden Hager. Phil Kennamer, talk to us about him because he is central to this. What can you tell us about his personality? What kind of person was he?

JF: In my research, I believe Phil was a rather troubled child. I think he was lost. I don't think he knew really what he really wanted to do in life. I think he was a troublemaker. I think he was somebody who had a lot of time on his hands and he didn't know what to do with it. I know he wanted to make a difference, but those differences I think would have been not in a direction that his father would want him. He wanted to run away from home. He wanted to join the French Foreign Legion.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen. So he was just a very, very troubled young man. I think his family was very frustrated with him as well because they didn't know what to do with him. I mean, his dad desperately tried to get him involved in different things, getting him jobs.

But Phil just would lose interest and quit those jobs.

JE: Tell us who his father was.

JF: Franklin Kennamer, and he was a federal court judge for all of northern Oklahoma, at that time.

JE: I see Phil was born in Medill in 1915.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative), which is where the family lived. Judge Kennamer was just getting his start.

JE: By moving to Tulsa and becoming a federal judge?

JF: Yeah, yeah.

JE: This places Phil at what age? How old is he at the time of the crime?

JF: Phil, I'm going to say he's about nineteen years old.

JE: Drinking?

JF: Oh, he was an alcoholic.

JE: Strung out?

JF: No.

JE: But if he had any purpose in life or mission, it was for the love of your grandmother?

JF: Yes.

JE: Talk to us about that—he was desperately in love with her.

JF: He was very "in love" with my grandmother. She and him dated when she was fifteen years old. They went out a few times, but then I think my grandmother was maturing and realized the kind of person that Phil was and she didn't want a romantic relationship with him at all. She just wanted to be friends.

He didn't want to hear about it. He would do anything to woo her, to impress her, to make her fall in love with him.

JE: John Gorrell, let's bring him into the story now. Tell us who John Gorrell was.

JF: John Gorrell was a resident of Tulsa. He was already graduated; he was twenty-three at the time of his demise. He was a dental student up in Kansas City. In my research, I believe he was a thug. You know, I think during that era, during that time, it was the Depression, as you said earlier, John, that these kids, they were looking for money. Even though I don't think they needed to work, they wanted to work, but the mentality back then was just to find something and do something illegal to make money.

JE: So then Phil is introduced to John by another person by the name of Preston Cochran.

JF: Yes. They worked together at the Freight's Insurance Company in Tulsa. And Pres, as he was known as, introduced the two together, John Gorrell and Phil Kennamer. They became acquaintances; I don't think they were close friends. But I think that they were of similar mindset. I think they were both troubled youths. I think that they were looking for ways of making money. And I think something about that meeting clicked.

JE: There was that club known as the Hy Hat Club.

JF: Yes.

JE: Tell us about that.

JF: Hy Hat Club was basically a club that was set up—it was a boys' club, basically. And a lot of these wealthy boys, teenage boys, got together to raise money to help people that were probably not as fortunate as they are during this time. They were using their allowance and putting money—I think it was like twenty-five cents a meeting—and the meetings were usually held in one of the other members' homes. So they rotated.

JE: Oh.

JF: Sometimes it'd be held over at my grandfather's home, which is now the Tulsa Rose Garden. Sometimes it would be held over at Phil's place, other members' places. I really don't know or understand what they actually did in that. I think that it was another club where, at that time, a lot of the girls would submit their names so they could get a date. They would spend their times like, "Ew, I want to dance with her." Getting their dance card, I guess.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JF: I'm not familiar with how that worked back in that era.

JE: Let's go back. The Tulsa Rose Garden—

JF: Tulsa Rose Garden.

JE: That mansion that sits there was where your grandfather, again, his name was?

JF: Jack Snedden, and he lived there with his older brother, George, and his sister, Geraldine. They were the children of George and Geraldine Snedden.

- JE:** The Hy Hat Club, the areas where they hung out was like at 21st and Utica.
- JF:** Yeah.
- JE:** Nineteenth and Utica. It's still a ways from downtown, I guess, but it's in that wealthy area of town.
- JF:** It is.
- JE:** Also not far from Philbrook.
- JF:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** So John wants to meet Phil, and where do they meet?
- JF:** They met in the Jellybean District back then, and it was at the Brown Derby.
- JE:** The Jewetts Brown Derby Café?
- JF:** Yes.
- JE:** On South Main Street. Why was it called Jellybean?
- JF:** That I don't know, I've been trying to find the answer to that, I don't know. Maybe that was a sweet spot or something of town where they would hang out.
- JE:** All right.
- JF:** That's the only thing that I can think of.
- JE:** Then we have another name—Ted Bath.
- JF:** Ted Bath, I think he worked for an oil company in Longview, Texas. His parents lived there in Tulsa and he also came back for Thanksgiving, to visit there too.
- JE:** So then your grandfather, Jack Snedden, is part of the gang that hangs together?
- JF:** Yeah. My grandfather, Jack, Phil, they were pretty much buds. Their homes were just a block away from each other, relatively.
- John Gorrell was not part of that gang, as far as I know. He was already graduated, he was already up in Missouri, going to college. So these kids were probably juniors, seniors in high school.
- John Gorrell's family lived in Tulsa. His father was a prominent physician, a doctor.

Chapter 04 - 7:57

Kidnap Plan

- John Erling:** So what they wanted to do was to try to make some money.
- Jim Freese:** Absolutely.
- JE:** Maybe rob a store. But then they had another idea about having a party.
- JF:** They wanted to have a party and invite some of these high society gals, these young teenage girls, and take topless or nude pictures of them. Well, because they're high society

girls, they get them drunk, they take their pictures, and then later on, extort money from them, saying, "If you don't fork over some money to us, we're going to get these published."

They were going to pick on one girl, who was a friend, but they said, "No, no, no, no, no, uh-huh (negative), she's off limits."

And then my grandmother's name came up. And they were going to get her drunk to take these pictures to extort money from her dad, Homer Wilcox.

This is where I think Phil was, again, trying to win my grandmother's heart. He would get this guy to take their pictures, Phil would get the pictures back, maybe pay the guy for them, and say, "Virginia, my love, look what I've done. I've stopped this guy from taking these pictures of you. I should bring your knight in shining armor. Fall in love with me."

And that didn't pan out.

JE: So you think the pictures were taken?

JF: I don't think they were, no. I don't think that ever happened.

JE: Okay, that was, that was his plan, right?

JF: That was the plan, yeah.

JE: But there was a plan to kidnap.

JF: There was a plan that Phil found out later from John Gorrell. John Gorrell had a gang of guys up at his school in the hotel that he was staying at. And—

JE: Was that in Kansas City?

JF: Yes. And he worked part-time as the board operator at the hotel, once in a while. So that's how he made his money, part-time. But he too was an alcoholic.

Phil found out that there was a plot to kidnap Virginia. Thought, *Here's another way that I could maybe thwart this and stop this from happening and win her love.*

JE: But didn't Phil actually suggest that they kidnap Virginia? Did that idea come from Phil or did it come from John?

JF: I think it came from John, I think it came from John. They were looking for somebody that had a lot of money. Virginia's name had come up before, the daughter of a wealthy oil millionaire, and I think that John thought, you know, *That might be a good target right there. She's pretty, she's probably pretty popular. Let's kidnap her. I'll get my gang of guys in here and involved in it.* And it was quite the elaborate thing they were going to do to kidnap her.

JE: But then this is when Phil decides, *I will kill John Gorrell to show my love for Virginia.*

JF: Phil drove up to Kansas City to meet with John Gorrell again. John had written Phil a letter, saying, "Hey, I've got this plan and I think you might be interested in this to get some money."

Apparently Phil was out and Phil's dad found the letter in Phil's room and just kind of misplaced it somewhere. Judge Kennamer thinks he might have put it in his office, but the letter, as far as I know, was never found. The only thing we go by is what Phil tells us in his

testimony at the trial, that he got a letter from John Gorrell saying that he had a plot and he wanted to see if he would be interested in it.

So Phil actually drove up there with an elaborate plan to not worry his parents. Because at this time, he had already been running away. He went to New Mexico Military Institute near Roswell, New Mexico, and he ran away right before Christmas.

His dad went and looked for him, found him, brought him back.

Phil ran away again. Hopped the train, went to New York twice, trying to get two negro gangs together and have him be the ringleader. And he didn't want his parents to worry about him.

So he devised an elaborate plan with my grandfather to drive him to the airport, where he would take a plane and fly to Kansas City.

Phil, because he would be gone, would tell his parents that he had gone fishing with some friends and that he would let them know when he got back. He was planning to come back the next day.

He did get to Kansas City.

John Gorrell introduced him as another name to keep Phil private, not to get him to stick out like a sore thumb.

So the two of them went upstairs and started talking. John Gorrell is a little intimidated by Phil. They go upstairs to John's room and he pulls out his pistol and he puts it on the table. Just to show that, you know, "I'm a tough guy here, don't mess with me or you might get it." From there he explained to Phil his plot of kidnapping Virginia.

Again, Phil wanted to get involved with this because I don't think he ever wanted Virginia to be kidnapped or killed or harmed in any way because he loved her too much. But he wanted to get involved so he could again take this and say, "Look, Virginia, my love, I saved you. Again, I'm your knight in shining armor, fall in love with me."

JE: Right. Isn't there a letter that John Gorrell wrote that this was part of the plot?

JF: He did. The two of them got drunk that night and they went to Phil's room to crash for the night. And they started writing the ransom note but they were too drunk. So the next morning, the two of them got up and John Gorrell wrote the ransom note, which is in the book. He originally wanted \$100,000, he wanted \$100,000.

Phil talked him down to twenty. I don't know why, maybe that just didn't seem as much, I guess, but that was a great deal of money back in the 1930s, \$100,000.

So John wrote the note. He was going to mail it.

Phil says, "No, give it to me, I'll mail it from Tulsa. Because if you mail it and they find out that I'm up here, they might think that I have something to do with us. So I'll mail it from Tulsa. I'm flying back this afternoon. So give it to me and I'll mail it."

He never left. What happened was the weather got bad and it was socked in. Phil needed to get back to Tulsa so his parents wouldn't worry. His plan actually was to kill John Gorrell there in Kansas City. Because John Gorrell was a pilot himself. Phil was going to encourage him to rent a plane, the two of them take a ride up in the sky, and then what Phil was going to do is put on a parachute, knock John Gorrell out, and then parachute out of the plane, where the plane would crash to the ground. "Oh, my, a tragedy has struck. Poor John Gorrell."

That was the only way that Phil could see him stopping this plot to kidnap Virginia. But that didn't work because the planes were socked in. Phil needed to get back, so he hitched a ride with Floyd Huff, who John Gorrell kind of knew, they knew each other. And they decided to drive back to Tulsa instead.

They had stopped off at a liquor store and they both shared a bottle of booze. And Phil got drunk and told Mr. Huff, airplane mechanic, that his plan was to kill John Gorrell over the love of Virginia. He didn't want anything to happen to her.

He finally gave him a ride back, where apparently my grandfather, Jack Snedden, picked him up and brought him home.

JE: Phil is real open about telling people that he's going to kill John Gorrell.

JF: Well, when you're liquored up I guess you get loose lips.

JE: Right.

JF: And I think that's what happened to him.

JE: Now do you think these people actually felt he was going to do that?

JF: I think as unsteady mentally that Phil was that they actually probably thought he might.

Because he had already threatened not only grandfather but other gentlemen callers, if you will, to my grandmother that if he heard these boyfriends talking any ill will about my grandmother or did anything bad to her that he would, in fact, kill them.

JE: Yeah.

JF: He threatened these guys.

JE: Again, this extortion note didn't get mailed like John wanted it to be mailed.

JF: That's right.

JE: Phil keeps it for himself.

JF: He does.

JE: So he can control the scene.

JF: Exactly.

Chapter 05 - 11:00**The Murder**

John Erling: Phil and Floyd Huff drive back to Tulsa.

Jim Freese: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: They get to Tulsa, and where does Phil want to be dropped off?

JF: He wants to be dropped off at the Philtower building because his buddy, Lant, I forget his first name, they were going to go on a trip together. I think he just wanted to be dropped off and be picked up by his buddy. And then have his buddy drive him home to show that, "Oh, yeah, we were out camping together. We were out fishing. That's why we were gone." So his parents wouldn't worry.

JE: Okay, and let's remember the dates here. This is November 28th, a Wednesday, and this is in 1934.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: I am talking to Jim Freese, who is the grandson of Virginia Wilcox that we're talking about. So the wealth in the family comes from your grandmother's father.

JF: Father, Homer Wilcox.

JE: Homer Wilcox. What did he do as a profession?

JF: He was an oil driller. He drilled oil and struck oil and made millions.

JE: Okay. We have all this wealth. So we come to Thanksgiving, November 29th, what kind of a day, weather-wise?

JF: It was cold, it was drizzly, probably some light rain mixed with snow, wet, cold. Phil has learned about this plot to kidnap Virginia. He's already made phone calls to John Gorrell's house, looking for John. John is at a football game at Tulsa University. And his mom has said, "No, he hasn't come home yet."

Phil talks to his dad about G. "Dad, if you knew of a plot to kidnap somebody, wouldn't you want to stop it?"

His dad said, "No, you don't take that into your own hands. You need to contact the authorities. You don't need to get involved in something like that. You're not a police officer, that's dangerous, you shouldn't be doing that. You're not there to enforce the law; you need to let law enforcement take care of that."

So Phil needed a ride to the Crawford Drug Store.

JE: John Gorrell and Phil—

JF: Phil, yeah.

JE: ...meet at the Crawford Drug Store?

JF: Yes, that night.

JE: At 19th and Utica?

JF: Which is basically across the street from St. John's Hospital. His dad said, "You know, I'll drop you off. Here's fifty cents, go get me a couple of cigars."

Phil comes back out with the cigars, doesn't get in the car, and said, "Dad, I'm going to meet with some friends. You go on home, I'll see you later."

They meet. John Gorrell comes in. I think this is shortly before seven o'clock. He's coming in there to pick up his dates. John Gorrell and another gentleman are going to do a double date that night.

JE: According to your book, Charles Bard.

JF: That's it.

JE: Eunice Word, Hazel Williams, and then John Gorrell make up the double date.

JF: Exactly.

JE: So they go on a double date. The two girls were waiting for them at the drugstore, but they got tired of waiting so they decided to go back across the street to the hospital.

Phil goes in there to wait for John. John shows up, thinking the girls are there, and Phil says, "No, your dates went across the street. But, hey, we need to meet."

John is like, "No, I got my date. I'll meet you at eleven o'clock after I finish my date."
"Fine."

The only thing Phil had with him was a knife. He goes downtown to meet with my grandfather, B. B. Morton and my grandfather Jack Snedden were buddies. Phil goes and tells them that, "I'm going to go kill John Gorrell tonight."

"Well, how are you going to do that?"

"Well, I got my knife here."

So there was a few attempts, according to Phil, that they tried to disarm him. They would take his knife out of his coat. Phil would find it and put it back in his coat. You know, there are a couple of different versions of this story, but eventually they got the knife away from Phil, just to make sure. So now he's defenseless.

JE: But he does continue to say that he's terribly in love with your grandmother, Virginia. And he says that John Gorrell is going to kidnap her. "And this is the only thing I can do about it."

JF: And what's interesting and we haven't mentioned yet is that Virginia Wilcox and Jack Snedden are dating during this time.

JE: Yes.

JF: Jack, being that he's dating Virginia doesn't want anything to happen to her as well. Now I'm being to think, *Is this guy serious? I mean, he's got a knife with him but he does have guns. So why didn't he just take a gun?*"

Anyway, they disarmed him. And he's like, "Oh, so you're going to leave me defenseless, poor little old me."

JE: B. B. Morton has taken the knife from Phil and he thinks that he has stopped the murder, right? But?

JF: But that's not exactly the case. Phil walks off, basically.

JE: Let's just say something here. On the double dating, one of the girls notices John was putting a pistol in the driver's side of the door.

JF: Yes, he did put a pistol in his side of the door. Why he carried a pistol with him, I don't know. Maybe because he knew he was going to be meeting later with Phil Kennamer and used that as protection. Because he felt a little intimidated, I believe, by, by Phil.

JE: Apparently John carries guns with him because you said he took the gun out up in Kansas City and laid it on the table to show Phil that I'm a dude.

JF: Yeah.

JE: So carrying a gun, for John Gorrell, was not foreign.

JF: No, not at all.

JE: To him. So he had a gun and he put it in the driver's side of the door and this Eunice notices. So now we know where the gun is.

JF: Yes.

JE: Then later, John and Eunice drive to Cook's Court, a tourist camp on 11th Street between Yale and Sheridan. A tourist camp, is that just a place like an RV park, I guess maybe?

JF: It was kind of an RV park. They had cabins there and I think that, well, they'd go there for a little—

JE: Okay.

JF: Rendezvous, if you will, wink, wink.

JE: Right, right. Then John drops Eunice off at the hospital.

JF: John Gorrell drops her off. Phil, in the meantime, a little sub-story is, Phil needs to get a ride since his dad drove him to the drugstore. He now needs to get a ride to the hospital to meet. And he sees Sidney Born, his friend.

Sidney just finished ice skating, he's wet, he's worn out, he's have a Coke, coffee, whatever it is to dry out. And Phil comes up to him and says, "Hey, I need a ride over to the hospital."

Sidney is like, "Here, here are the keys."

Phil says, "No, I need you to drive me. I need you to drive me over there."

"Oh, okay. Give me a minute here, let me dry out, I'll drive you over there." And he does, he drives him over to the hospital.

JE: At 21st and Utica?

JF: Right.

JE: And that's where they wait then for John Gorrell?

JF: Do you want my version of what I think happened?

JE: Well, of course.

JF: Okay.

JE: And I'm taking most of this right out of your book, so yes, we do want to hear your version.

JF: Well, I can tell you John's version. I can tell you my version. Quickly, John's version was that he lied in wait for John. They saw the car. Phil gets out of Sidney's car and walks over to John and they take off down Utica Avenue to talk about what was going on. Did he deliver the note? Did he mail it like he was supposed to?

Phil says, "No, I didn't mail it. I love Virginia, I want nothing to happen to her, her brother, her family."

Apparently John Gorrell, according to Phil, reaches over and pulls the gun out and there's a struggle for the gun. Phil gets the gun while John is driving the automobile and fires a shot into John's head.

About a minute later, he fires another shot into John's head. Phil wipes off the prints on the gun and puts it in the holster. He now walks away and he walks downtown past the hospital to some places.

What I think happened was that Sidney and him got to the hospital early. They got there just as John Gorrell was walking his date to the hospital doors, where she was a nurse. I believe John Gorrell left his car door open, where Sidney and Phil saw the gun in the side pocket of the driver's door. I think that Phil went over there, took the gun, and got into the passenger seat to wait for John to come back. That's where they drove off. I don't believe there was ever a struggle for the gun.

JE: Okay. And the car came to rest, where?

JF: At Victor and Forest, that center triangular median.

JE: And because of this interview, I went there, and it is there today.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: It's a very nice neighborhood.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: All that area is nice. But that's where the car ended up. Then who spotted Gorrell's car?

JF: Wesley Cunningham spotted the car there right around midnight. He was on his way home, I think it was from a movie. He drove by and happened to notice the car, which was partly up on the center median and partly up on the street. He thought that was a little unusual. So he pulls up and used his spotlight to look to see what was going on and saw what he thought was somebody drunk passed out.

But then he saw all the blood coming down from his head and went right back to his home, which was nearby, and told his stepfather.

JE: Let me just enter this: that Virginia's brother, Homer Wilcox Jr.—

JF: Yes.

JE: ...seventeen, for entertainment, they're shooting out streetlights.

JF: Yes. They were shooting out the glass domes on these streetlights, for fun. He was out on a double date. I believe it was one of the Vandever girls.

JE: We had two cousins, cousins Eleanor Vandever and Betty Lou Vandever of Vandever Department Store fame—

JF: Exactly.

JE: ...where with him.

JF: Yes. So I guess these guys are showing off, like, "Ew, look at my shooting abilities," and they were shooting out streetlights in that neighborhood. Even they gave the gun to the girls to see if they could shoot out streetlights. The streetlight they shot out happened to be at that center median there that night.

JE: Really?

JF: So it was a little dark, I think. Actually, Homer got in trouble later with the law, being mischievous as he was and he was fined for shooting out those streetlights.

JE: What does Phil do then after shooting John Gorrell?

JF: I think Phil is probably in some shock and disbelief. I think he sits there in the car wondering, *What just happened?* It's cold, it's wet, it's rainy, and he gets out of the car and he just walks. And he walks back to one of their hangouts and asks for a ride home.

JE: And he did admit to somebody that he had killed. He admitted to Robert Tommy Thomas.

JF: He did, he admitted to Tommy and I don't think Tommy really believed him. Because he said, "Why don't you just take me out there and show me?"

And Phil is like, "No, no, no, no, I don't, no, just take me home."

JE: Who was Robert Tommy Thomas? We haven't talked about him.

JF: I don't know, I don't know who he was exactly. It's a name that has come up. I don't know if he went to Cascia, I don't know if he went to Central High School, which a lot of the students went to school there. I just don't know, it was just one of his friends that he knew.

JE: So John Gorrell's parents, obviously, were notified.

JF: That night, Abe Duran, the stepfather of Wesley Cunningham, called the police. They came out and saw what had happened. They called Detective Maddeaux, I think it's how you pronounce his name. He took some pictures, the picture of John's body slumped over in the driver's seat, which is in my book, that picture. And they went and called the Gorrell's.

Needless to say, they were pretty shook up. Here it is, Thanksgiving night, they get the phone call that their son has been found shot in the head, not to far probably from their home.

Chapter 06 - 7:04**Suicide**

John Erling: Then Floyd Huff, who gave Phil a ride home from Kansas City, read about the killing the Kansas City newspaper.

Jim Freese: He did, so he went and told the chief there that he knew the guy who shot him, because “He actually told me he was going to shoot him.”

The cops didn’t really believe him until they called to confirm the story, and, yes, in fact, he was telling the truth. But he didn’t like Phil Kennamer either because he thought that if Phil had found out that he was ratted on, then his life may be in danger.

JE: The Kennamers had a farm in Chelsea.

JF: They did, yeah, they had a family farm in Chelsea. Phil got home late that night and really couldn’t sleep. His dad and him went off to Chelsea to their family farm.

JE: You mean on Thanksgiving evening?

JF: No, that would be the day after—

JE: Okay.

JF: ...the day after John Gorrell was shot. Friday.

JE: And Phil has not said anything to his father yet?

JF: No, hadn’t said anything to him yet.

JE: All right.

JF: Because he’s afraid of what his father will say.

JE: Right. So they go to the family farm.

JF: They go to the family farm. Phil is a little distraught. I think Phil has a lot of guilt, a lot of remorse of what he did. And he felt like he needed to turn himself in. So Phil tells his dad, at the Chelsea farm where they’re at now, that he needs to go back to Tulsa. Dad gives him some money.

He gets on the train and he goes back to Tulsa with the intent of seeking out their family friend, Flint Moss, to admit to the murder, because he knows he’s going to need help. He knows he’s going to need legal help.

JE: Didn’t he also take this ransom note to a father there at Cascia Hall?

JF: Father Lannan, he did. Even if Phil wasn’t there at Cascia very long, he did strike up a personal relationship with Father Lannan. He took the note to Father Lannan and didn’t tell him what he had done. He didn’t tell him that he had shot and killed John Gorrell, but just said, “Here, hold the note.”

The reason why Phil did that, because he felt like if he had been caught by any of John Gorrell’s gang members with that note that his life could be in danger.

JE: So now we have Phil talking to Flint Moss, the attorney. Then what happens?

JF: They drive to the Chelsea farm to tell Phil's dad, Franklin Kennamer, "I shot and killed John Gorrell."

JE: Can you imagine?

JF: Since Judge Kennamer and Flint Moss are good friends they're going to work together and try to save Phil. Because that could be potentially the death penalty for him, I would think.

JE: What would these two guys do to try to save Phil?

JF: You're talking about prominent judges. Judge Kennamer is a prominent federal court judge in northern Oklahoma. He's thinking maybe he's got some ties, maybe he's got some pull to get Phil off. "Look, I'll take care of him, you know, his mom is ill," and his mom was ill.

I think Judge Kennamer had a lot on his plate. Not only did he have his ill wife to worry about, but now he's got a son who's kind of gone rogue. And he's doing what he can to kind of reel him in and keep him under control.

JE: Then obviously, Frank probably said, "You're got to go to the authorities with this"?

JF: Yes.

JE: And who went?

JF: Moss had made a phone call to the Tulsa Police Department and said that he was bringing in Phil Kennamer. So they brought in Phil.

And Phil said, in a pretty nondescript, monotone voice, "Yes, I did kill John Gorrell."

JE: This brings us to December 4th, that's when Phil is arraigned for the murder of John Gorrell on November 29, 1934.

Then we jump ahead. This is a key date: Sunday, December 9th. You've already talked about Sidney Born. Sidney is fearful for his life. Tell us why he would be fearful.

JF: He actually drove Phil to meet up with John Gorrell, and now he reads in the paper the next day that John Gorrell is dead. And he knows Phil did it.

Sidney, to me, his personality, I think he's a very good kid. I think he really means well. I think he might be kind of mousy, in a way. He's very upset; he feels like his life is in danger because actually drove Phil to murder John Gorrell, unknowingly, he didn't know that was going to happen. Or if Phil did tell him he wasn't believing him because Phil was kind of a loose cannon anyway.

Sidney is at home, Mom and Dad had taken off to go, like a Sunday drive, that kind of thing. And he's got a few errands to run himself. He goes to a drugstore off of Brookside to call and talk to Phil, who is in jail.

Now Phil is in the matron's quarters. For people who don't know, if females were arrested for a crime, there was usually a female officer to kind of keep an eye on the ladies. So to keep Phil out of the general population of these thugs and other criminals, they put him in a place where, you know, they had a nice bed and it wasn't the cold gray cell that most criminals would have been put into.

JE: Because this is where his father's influence began to show.

JF: Yes. So Sidney needs to talk to Phil. Sidney drives to the pharmacy on Brookside. A couple of witnesses saw him contacting Phil and the jailer wouldn't let Phil come to the phone. Sidney says, "Oh, hell," hung up, and he took off.

Now he was driving his dad's car and apparently went over to Travis Park, riddled with guilt, frustrated that he couldn't talk to Phil, knowing that his life is probably in danger because John Gorrell is related to a gang. The gang may come back to Tulsa. "So you drove Phil Kennamer to the shooting? Well, we're going to shoot you."

He takes out his dad's .22 caliber and shoots himself in the head. The bullet goes through his head, out through the driver's window.

Some people in that neighborhood hear it, they see it, and they call the police. Ten days after the murder of John Gorrell.

JE: That's the 2900 block of South Detroit Avenue near Travis Park.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: I understand this death sends shockwaves through Tulsa.

JF: The whole city is in a panic now because now they think all this is gang related. Here you've got teenage boys with guns; they're packing them, they're carrying them with them all the time, which in our culture today that would be a little unheard of. But they're walking around with guns, they're vengeful, they want to seek revenge, that's what gangs do. And everybody is in a panic. They think, *I'm next*.

I believe my great grandfather, Homer Wilcox, Virginia's father, is in New York at the time. Olga, my grandmother, or Oddie, as they called her, took the kids to, I believe, Toledo, Ohio, to do some shopping, wink, wink, if you get my drift, to get the kids away from what could be a nightmare.

And, again, I don't think that anybody knows yet that Virginia is actually the love interest of Phil and why he did that. All they know is it's Phil, he's in jail, he killed somebody. Everybody who knows Phil, including my grandmother, decide, *You know what? It might be best if we just kind of head out of the city for a while and let things just kind of calm down.* And it sent the whole city into a panic.

Chapter 07 - 3:25

Community on Edge

John Erling: Then of course, Phil thinks that Sidney was murdered.

Jim Freese: Phil thinks that Sidney was, in fact, murdered by John Gorrell's gang. Of course, that rumor was picked up and fueled and was another reason why people were

panicked, because two prominent kids had been shot: A twenty-three-year-old and now a seventeen-year-old has been shot. And they think it's gang related. Phil thinks that *Sidney wasn't shot by himself, he wouldn't do something like that. John Gorrell's gang did it to get back. And I'm protected, I'm in jail, they can't get to me here, so they take it out on Sidney.*

That's not the case. Sidney's dad actually felt like, "Sidney would never do anything like that." And he hired a private detective to find who did this. When actually the police department had already pretty much ruled that Sidney did shoot himself.

JE: You even have the mayor of Tulsa speaking publicly about all this. And what does he say?

JF: Mayor Penny says that "Even these kids of these wealthy parents need something to do. If it wasn't for these parents, these kids would have a job, they would be occupied and not worried about shooting each other. So he gets involved in it.

JE: Right. That was Mayor T. A. Penny. Then you have Homer Wilcox Jr., seventeen, and again the brother of your grandmother, Virginia.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And we have Jack Snedden, seventeen.

JF: Dating Virginia.

JE: And eventually they marry.

JF: Marry.

JE: And you have Pres Cochran who is twenty-one and they went missing.

JF: I don't know what happened. I think they also ran off.

JE: And guards were ordered for them.

JF: Yes, they felt like their lives might be in danger as well. So they stayed hid and they had protection, from what I understood.

JE: And then there's Charles Bard. He double dated with Gorrell. He withdrew from Oklahoma A&M and he asked for protection.

JF: He did, he thought part of Gorrell's gang might come looking for him as well. Again, he was very frightened.

I can't imagine the thoughts that were going through these kids' heads. Here you have crimes of young kids creating crimes upon other young kids, and not just adults, but just kids their own age. And everybody knows everybody. It's a small town, at that point, back in the 1930s. So it's a small town, they know everybody, and now they're all panicked. They're panic-stricken and they want protection, they want to get out of town, they're in fear for their lives.

JE: And prosecutor said, "The Tulsa of gang of rich kids had been running narcotics between Tulsa and Kansas City." Do you know if that was actually fact or if that was just hyperbole?

JF: I could not find any evidence of the fact. Marijuana was pretty popular back then too. A lot of people may think that it started in the '60s, it started way before that. That was an

eye-opener for me in doing my research for this book. But marijuana, pot, that was all probably, the harder drugs probably did come later, but I never found any evidence that it was drug-fueled.

JE: At this point, this story is gaining a lot of attention, not just in Tulsa and Kansas City, but beyond.

JF: Oh, around the United States. I was amazed at how many newspaper articles I found just talking about this murder. If it was just a blurb or if it was just a complete article about a millionaire's daughter being threatened with death and kidnapping and how this guy, Phil Kennamer, stopped it. The trial was going to be going on. And this trial was a big deal, a very big deal.

Chapter 08 - 5:00

Trial Moved to Pawnee

John Erling: Monday, December 17th, preparations for the trial begin. And Phil plans to write these coded notes.

Jim Freese: [laughs] Now that his phone privileges have been cut off, Phil needs to communicate with Pres Cochran. He does that by doing notes. So the newspaper reporter and a friend of Phil's visits him in jail.

JE: That was Lee Krupnick, the *Tulsa World* photographer.

JF: Yes. Phil takes a pen and writes a coded note that he gives to Lee—

JE: Yes.

JF: ...to give to Pres. He gave that coded note to Lee to deliver to Pres. Pres went and told the authorities and decoded that message and went ahead and gave it to Preston. They thought that Phil may have had some gang members of his own. That possibly he didn't act alone, that there were others involved. And by using and deciphering and intercepting these coded notes, they might find out who these other members of Phil Kennamer's gang would be. In fact, there wasn't any other members, it was just Phil himself.

JE: We're into 1935 now and Friday, January 4th, Phil is formally charged, along with fifty-nine other defendants.

And by the way, the material I used in research is the book that Jim wrote, *Murder in the Name of Love: The Phil Kennamer Trial*, which will be in our further reading section. It's also available on Amazon.

We bring ourselves to Wednesday, January 9th, and a new sheriff, Garland Mars, changed jail rules.

JF: Phil was not allowed any contact. The only people who could see him in jail were no longer his friends. It would be either his family or his attorney. Yep, there was a new sheriff in town and the sheriff had new rules. And now Phil was going to be even more isolated. Matter of fact, I think they took a lot of the niceties, things out of his cell, and let him with basically a bed and a bureau and that was it. It was time that if he was a criminal he should be treated like one.

JE: The county attorney, Ollie Anderson—

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...says the state's witnesses are being tampered with. That adds more intrigue.

JF: There's a lot more intrigue. Because of the prominence of this murder trial and involving kids in this exclusive neighborhood of wealthy people, they don't feel that Phil can get a fair trial. So they decide to move the trial to Pawnee, Oklahoma, which is about an hour just west of Tulsa. They go through jurymen—now women weren't allowed to serve on the jury back then, it was just men only. So what they would do is call these people up and talk to them about becoming a juror for this murder trial. And now they think that some of these people may have been tampered with. In other words, somebody's going to them, trying to influence them to see that Phil can get off. That Phil would be not guilty in this crime.

JE: Sunday, February 10th, in Pawnee, hundreds of people are showing up because they hope to see the defendant because he's coming from Tulsa. Is that it?

JF: They're bringing Phil from the Tulsa county jail over to Pawnee, and get him ready to go for trial that next morning. And it is a media circus. People are there to sell their wares. People from all, I mean, old, young, Boy Scout troops, whatever, they're all there. And people are there trying to sell their wares to make money because now here's some prominent wealthy people, probably, coming in from Tulsa, the oil capital of the world at that time, and they want to capitalize on trying to make a little extra money in that, I'm sure.

JE: Hotels are sold out. Hundreds of people arriving in buses, trains, and cars. Private homes are renting out rooms. Courthouse makes accommodations for sixty-two reporters. And I think also from some foreign countries, as a matter of fact.

JF: There were so many different reporters the courthouse had to be remodeled, so to speak, to accommodate all these reporters coming from all over the United States. It was amazing. They had a special room just for the reporters. There were so many reporters that it was filling up the courtroom and they had to leave seats open for people who were going to testify or for family members. It was truly a media circus.

JE: Along about three o'clock in the afternoon, Phil arrives at the Pawnee County Courthouse, and they get to see Phil. Some of them do, at least, I suppose.

JF: Yeah.

JE: They try to take pictures. Lee Krupnick of the *Tulsa World* tried to take pictures. Phil curses at him.

JF: Because Phil found out that Lee was intercepting these coded messages and felt like he had been deceived. That here is a friend of his that he could trust that actually deceived him and now he's mad.

JE: Yeah.

JF: And Lee wants to get a photograph of Phil but Phil won't turn, Phil won't let him. He won't face the camera for Lee to take a picture of him. What pictures he does get, Lee sets the camera on the table next to Phil and Phil is trying to move over a little bit to maybe knock the camera off, to expose the film, and really mess with Lee.

Chapter 09 - 6:12

Trial Begins

John Erling: Day one of the trial, obviously, is jury selection. And as you pointed out, women were not allowed to serve until 1952.

Jim Freese: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Maybe William Maben [time :08] was tampering with the jurors.

JF: They think that he might have been tampering with the jurors. He has kind of shady history himself. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, he was disbarred for some unethical behavior. So now they think that maybe former Judge Maben has been involved with tampering with these witnesses.

So there's a meeting with the judge and the attorneys from both sides and Judge Maben happens to be sitting in the courtroom. They call him back. I believe it's a thirty-minute conversation. Judge Maben comes out, and leaves, and they never see him again. Did he get caught? Did the judge give him a stern warning?

The reporters tried to find out and got nothing from him. He basically fled the scene and was never seen again.

JE: So more mystery, isn't it?

JF: More mystery. Exactly.

JE: Day two, opening remarks. Then we have day three, Dr. Gorrell takes the stand. I don't know if these things trigger your mind or not.

JF: I know that Dr. Gorrell was grieving and he was, I believe, crying on the stand when they were asking him about his son. I don't believe he was too much help but I think they were just establishing the type of son that he had.

JE: Defense attorney Flint Moss is trying to position Phil as being insane at the time of the murder.

JF: Exactly.

JE: All right, so that goes on. Talk to us about that.

JF: Well, as I said earlier, Phil has a shady history. He's run away from home. He's got friends like Claude Wright testifying for the defense that when he was a kid, Phil actually wrapped the cord to the blinds at a window and jumped out a window with that around his neck. He didn't kill himself but he jerked the blinds off the wall. Just crazy things. Him trying to get together with two negro gangs in New York, trying to get them together and him being the ringleader. That's just not something a sane person would do.

One of the other things they testified that Phil might have been a little crazy was at the Mayo Hotel during, I think, it was 1932 or '33. They had a big Christmas dance. Phil apparently got drunk and was walking outside on a two-foot wide concrete ledge and running around halfway around that building.

Now Jack Snedden, my grandfather, would reach for Phil through an open window to try to pull him back through. That was used as testimony in the trial to prove that Phil was not all there. I don't think that really succeeded, I think it might have been just something a drunk person would have done.

Again, we're talking about teenagers. Teenagers do crazy stuff, they think that they're immortal, *Nothing will happen to me*.

JE: Right, and Allen Mayo was on the stand, who was nineteen, and then, of course, of the Mayo family.

JF: Exactly. And also dated my grandmother.

JE: Okay. And then we have Claude Wright, who is nineteen, took the stand. He's the son of the president of Sunray Oil Company of Tulsa.

JF: Yes.

JE: Which lends to this whole aura.

JF: Yes.

JE: And Judge Kennamer takes the stand. What can you tell us about that?

JF: Oh, Judge Kennamer, you know he's going to say things to get his son off. That he means well and, "I've done so many things for Phil, I've tried to find him jobs." He shipped him to New York. That didn't work out. He shipped him to California to find a job; that didn't work out. Phil may be a little mentally unbalanced and so he didn't know what he was doing that fateful night, that Thanksgiving night, in Tulsa.

JE: We should say then, day five of the trial, before court resumed, this is how he was treated. Phil is across the street from the courthouse getting a shave.

JF: Yes.

JE: And his friends were there?

JF: His friends were there. My grandfather's there too. Phil's getting a shave and he's talking about the rats and about Lee and some other things that were going on. He seems to be pretty cocky and pretty confident.

JE: He's pretty sarcastic, he says about the defense trying to portray him as insane.

JF: Yeah.

JE: Because he knew he wasn't insane.

JF: Yeah, he knew he wasn't. I believe he said something like, "Oh, look at me, I'm crazy." He knew he wasn't.

JE: Right.

JF: But, of course, the defense will say anything to get him off.

JE: Some of his friends there were Robert Thomas, Allen Mayo, as we referred to, and Claude Wright, standing, laughing with him as he's getting a shave, which, really, he should have been in jail, but they let him out to do that.

Now your grandmother, Virginia, she was on the stand.

JF: She was on the stand and she was dressed to the nines. I mean, with a hat, some very nice complimenting descriptions of my grandmother coming up on the stand to testify and talked about their first date with her and Phil. How she really didn't want to be romantic with him, she just wanted to be friends, keep him at arm's length. She was a love interest in this. She didn't know John Gorrell. She didn't know anything about him.

She had been told by her brother, Homer, who was told by Phil, that her life might be in danger. But they dismissed it because of Phil, I mean, look at the source, look at where this coming from. Here's some kid that is kind of a little unbalanced anyway, so why should we believe anything he tells us?

JE: Phil's sister, Juanita Hays, was on the stand as well. But they're trying to position him as being insane. Charles Mason, former Oklahoma Chief Justice, says that he was the on the sixteenth floor the Petroleum building and visiting with Phil. And Phil said, "This would be a good place to commit suicide."

JF: Yeah. Phil was thinking about maybe jumping out the window. But again, that's just more fodder for proving the fact for the defense that Phil's insane.

JE: And then Phil wanted a beer distributorship. It was Mason who got Phil a job at the Oklahoma newspaper and Times newspapers. He got him a job there.

JF: Yeah.

JE: And he stayed there three weeks and moved on.

JF: He wasn't there very long at all. Again, this is where Judge Kennamer was trying to pull some strings to get Phil a job. Hopefully to find something that he would like so he could become a productive citizen. And nothing was working, nothing. Matter of fact, even Judge Kennamer said, "Look, hire the kid, I'll pay you to pay him. So it makes it looks like he's actually earning a living."

Chapter 10 - 4:30**Phil Testifies**

John Erling: Day seven of the trial, the place is mobbed because Phil Kennamer's testimony is going to take place. Another hundred move to the second floor. Court administrators and media would take their chair with them when they had to leave the courtroom. Some people would pose as reporters. Seating capacity four hundred. But on that day, day seven, no less than five hundred. That's the way it was.

Jim Freese: The courtroom was absolutely packed. People were scrambling to get in. When they opened up the courthouse, it was a mob. People were scrambling to get to the courtroom to find a good seat. And everybody wanted to sit up front. Seats were limited, which is why a lot of these reporters were taking seats so at least they'd have something to sit down on and they wouldn't have to stand the whole time. This place was a madhouse.

JE: Dr. Menninger of Topeka, Kansas, is called to the stand. He says that Phil is unable to distinguish right from wrong. They brought in Dr. Werner, says Phil could determine right from wrong. Judge Hurst clears the courtroom, people were trying to occupy seats and sell them for one dollar.

So finally, Phil Kennamer is on the stand.

JF: Phil explains the story of what happened that night. He explains how there was a struggle for the gun, that it was all self-defense. That he'd shot John Gorrell because he pulled the gun on Phil and Phil was in that mode of survival. So he shot him.

But then the question comes up: Why did you shoot him twice in the head? And about a minute after the first shot? So was it really self-defense? I don't believe it was. I believe that Phil found a way to kill him and he did so that night. The gun was there, John wasn't around, it was perfect. The perfect crime.

JE: And then the defense rests. Mossy Holmes tells the School Board of Education, "Phil was fourteen, tested as an eighteen-year-old." They were trying to show how smart he was.

Gertrude Hart, secretary at Cascia Hall, Phil had scored a 117+ compared to the normal of 100. Moss tries to prove the test is too simple, to no avail.

So we have both sides going here. We want to show how smart Phil was.

JF: I believe Phil was very smart. I believe that he was just bored and needed something really challenging to do. And that made him look bad in other people's eyes because he just couldn't hold a job. I believe that that job was too simple; he wanted something a little more complicated. He wanted something more challenging. And I don't think he was challenged.

So now the prosecution comes in and says, "No, Phil's pretty smart." They pretty much show all his test scores and how smart a guy he is, which, really, puts holes in the defense team's story.

JE: Right, and then I pick up these names from your book: C. C. Jelks, the director of Sand Springs Vocational Education, testifies Phil attended the school for five years, vocation education. I didn't realize that.

JF: Yeah, that was before they moved to Tulsa, I believe, and I think Phil was pretty young when he went to school there, as I recall.

JE: He said that Phil knew the difference between right and wrong. And that Dr. G. W. Robinson of Kansas City, superintendent of the state hospital for the insane of Missouri—

JF: They brought him in.

JE: ...as we recall that.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And felt Phil was sane on the night of the murder based on testimony of the court. Dr. B. W. Griffin, the medical superintendent for the Norman Insane Hospital, also felt Phil was sane at the time of the murder. And Dr. Felix N. Adam, superintendent of the Anita State Insane Hospital.

JF: [laughs]

JE: I emphasize that, that's the way they referred to those hospitals. Also feels that Phil is sane.

Then we have testimony, Dr. C.C. Knoblock, a chemist from Tulsa, talks about the two bullet holes in the head of John Gorrell. That's when you alluded to, if it was self-defense, why did it take another minute for Phil to fire the second shot?

JF: They were looking at the coagulation of the blood from John Gorrell's head and there was some nonsense that because of the two bullet holes that it made the letter K, for Kennamer, and that Phil had something to do with that. Which was just simply nonsense, but I think it was just more fodder for speculation and just adding to the circus media of this trial.

But they said that if it was really self-defense, the blood had already coagulated by a minute or so, why was there a second shot? I mean, the guy was probably dead, so really, if it was just one shot it would be self-defense, but two shots? Um, we question that.

Chapter 11 - 5:30

The Verdict

John Erling: Both state and defense rest their case and the instructions to the jury were, "Murder with life imprisonment or a death penalty."

Jim Freese: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Manslaughter in the first degree with confinement of not less than four years. "Acquittal on the grounds of insanity," or here, "acquittal of the plea of self-defense."

JF: They had a lot of choices to choose from and there was a lot of information from this trial now that the jury had to go through and sort out and see if he was insane, or if he was very smart and he knew exactly what he was doing, which is what the prosecution was demonstrating.

JE: Court recessed Wednesday, February 20, 1935, 5:33 in the afternoon. Then there are reports that Jack Snedden and Randal Morton are under technical arrest in a hotel in connection with Sidney Born's death.

JF: They think that maybe they had something to do with it, but they didn't, they didn't have anything to do with that. I think that was just again—this was a very high profile case. The murder was still fresh, it happened Thanksgiving, and here we are having a trial two months later? In today's world, that's unheard of. It takes months, if not years, before someone goes to trial. So this is still fresh in everybody's mind. Maybe Jack Snedden had something to do with it, maybe B. B. had something to do with it.

They did nothing but try to stop this nonsense.

JE: Then at 12:40, on Thursday, February 21st, the jury is locked in the jury room. Dr. Gorrell suffers a nervous breakdown in the Pawnee Hotel. So there's another story that's being written about.

JF: Yep, yep.

JE: And then the waiting game begins. And the jurors come back at 9:05 in the evening. So it really didn't take them all that long, did it?

JF: No, it didn't.

JE: From 12:40 in the afternoon till 9:00 that night. "Have you reached your verdict?"

And they say—

JF: "Guilty."

JE: "Guilty of manslaughter in the first degree. And unable to agree on the punishment." They wanted to leave the penalty to be assessed by the court.

JF: By the judge, essentially.

JE: By the judge, right.

JF: Yeah, by Judge Hurst.

JE: And Phil says, "It's just one of those things."

JF: He's pretty nonchalant about the whole thing. He did it, he admitted he did, but now it's just a matter of "What's your punishment going to be?" The jury can't decide on that, so now they leave it to the judge.

JE: And we should say, the basis again of your book is newspaper stories that you researched. I suppose many newspapers, but *Tulsa World*—

JF: The *Tulsa World* and the *Tulsa Tribune* is where I got most, if not all, of my information about the trial, what was said, and the testimony. When you bring witnesses up to the stand, it's a different time, different place. When I got all this information I decided when

writing the book, to put it in chronological order, starting with Phil. Trying to get an idea of what kind of person Phil was. And in putting everything in a chronological order so that the readers could follow it and make it simpler for them to understand.

JE: It was rumored that the jury was not convinced at the time that Phil was insane. They did agree that Phil was guilty of murder, but not on the length of his prison term.

JF: Now they're leaving that up to the judge. The judge decides, "All right, twenty-five years." That's what happens. They sentence him to twenty-five years, and Pawnee Bill—I didn't know anything about this Pawnee Bill when I first started writing this, but apparently he was a pretty well-known performer.

JE: Well, he was an old friend of Phil's father.

JF: Exactly. So he got involved with helping Phil and he actually drove him to the prison.

JE: Fifteen minutes after Phil hears his sentence, Phil shakes hands with the *Tulsa Tribune* reporter, lights a cigarette, and sits at a bench. So far as the closing statement of Judge Hurst is concerned, "It was fair," Phil says. "He made every effort to conduct the trial in a fair, rigidly impartial manner. I deeply regret the occurrence of this tragedy, not in its ultimate effect on me, but its effect on the innocent parties involved, my family and that of Gorrell."

JF: Just bases upon that I think he says that, "Yeah, I got a fair trial." You've got to remember, when you've got people tampering with jury, tampering with witnesses, perjury, if you can think of anything that can go wrong at a trial, it had happened in this one. And being a high-profile trial in a case, as it was, I'm surprised it didn't wind up being a mistrial.

JE: Yes. And about Pawnee Bill, he was a showman, he specialized in Wild West shows, was known for his partnership with William Buffalo Bill Cody. And the Buffalo Bill Ranch is still there.

JF: Yeah, it's a tourist attraction, yeah.

JE: Right. So the judge pronounces that Phil serves twenty-five years in McAlester and he leaves jail on March 4th, at 7:10, heads to the state pen. Major Gordon W. I. Lily, Pawnee Bill, an old friend of Phil's father, uses his big car, along with Sheriff Burkdall and Deputy Joe Meyers. It's just amazing, it makes you laugh how things are so different. I mean—

JF: Oh, it's just—

JE: ..."Oh, this guy's got a big car, let's—"

JF: Oh, yeah. Now you transport them in a police vehicle. But is that because he's a son of a federal court judge? I don't know. Did he get preferential treatment? Absolutely he did. And I think this is no different than how he was treated in jail. Just that, "Oh, he's no harm, he pled guilty, he was sentenced, and he's not really a threat that much to society. We'll just take him, top down, and we'll just drive him all the way to the prison and drop him off."

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 12 – 3:20**Phil Joins the Army**

John Erling: Tuesday, May 21st, Phil is released from prison on a \$25,000 appeal bond. Six friends of the Kennamer family put the money together for the bond, including Phil's brother-in-law, Russell Hays. Phil says he plans to rest at the family farm in Chelsea and do some fishing.

Jim Freese: He got out and the family put this money together for him to leave. The other thing too, his mom was sick, and they let him go and visit her.

JE: Yeah. So we're jumping in now to 1936. Phil is given a fifteen-day extension on Friday, March 20th, so that his attorneys have more time to file a rehearing before the Criminal Court of Appeal. Phil is free until April 6th.

JF: Yeah, they just let him go.

JE: But Phil loses his appeal for a new trial and his defense team contends that the closing remarks were inflammatory and prejudicial. People can read more about this in your book.

Nineteen thirty-seven, Oklahoma Governor Ernest Marland receives his resolution protesting clemency for Phil Kennamer from the Delaware County Anti-theft Association. This will not end, because Monday, October 18th, Phil appears before the state sanity board for a routine examination. If the findings of that exam were reported, the results cannot be located as of the writing.

Phil is twenty-two on January 22, 1938, wants to be a man without a country and live in South America. "If I were released, and it were possible under the terms of my release, I would leave the country permanently."

In 1939, Governor Phillips will decide whether Phil should complete his twenty-five-year sentence.

JF: Phil and his dad, particularly his dad, instigated this. He went through three governors of the state of Oklahoma to try to get him paroled, to kind of get him out of prison. Finally, he had a chance.

JE: Yes. We have Robert S. Kerr, who is our famous governor and senator—

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...begins his term as governor of Oklahoma on January 11, 1943. Phil, with his father by his side, is granted parole by the three-man state clemency board. The board, however, does reject the plea for a pardon and Governor Robert Kerr says he will follow the board's recommendation.

Then on May 4th, Oklahoma Governor Robert S. Kerr grants Phil his parole and signs a waiver of sivila custody. Phil would be sent to Ft. Benning, Georgia, for parachute training.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So that's when he goes in the military.

JF: Exactly.

JE: All right.

JF: The other thing too is that a lot of these guys that are in prison, they see a chance for freedom. They also want to try to get out and they can join the war efforts as well. As far as I know, I think Phil was probably one of the first ones allowed to do that. I think it was kind of a test to see how that would pan out. I really don't know if there were more prisoners that were let out to join in the efforts of World War II.

JE: Phil had a premonition, he spoke with the managing editor of the *Tulsa World*, Edward D. Burke, and said, "Something just seems to tell me that I won't come back. I hope that if I die under the flag of my country, those who have condemned me will hold me differently in their memories."

JF: Phil really had a premonition that he was not going to be coming back from this war. There was a lot of death already. This was his chance. I think he really wanted to join the war efforts because, well, he wanted to join the French Foreign Legion, he wanted to fight, I think. This was more mentally challenging for him, physically challenging, and I think he welcomed this opportunity to fight in World War II.

Chapter 13 - 8:45

Phil Is Killed

John Erling: Then it was on Tuesday, August 15th, you write in your book: "During Operation Dragoon in the South of France."

Jim Freese: Um-hmm (affirmative). Phil was in a platoon, they were under fire by German snipers. Phil and Lieutenant Moore decided, "Hey, you guys, stay back here. We're going to sneak up on these Germans and we're going to take them out, allowing us to pass."

You've got to remember that this is the first World War we had paratroopers. This was a new technique where they could parachute behind enemy lines to get them that way. And this was no different. Here they are being fired upon by the Germans.

Phil and Lieutenant Moore move forward. The platoon heard some shots and then nothing. So the platoon moved forward. They saw both Phil and Lieutenant Moore dead. Phil, they said, had about five bullet holes across his chest, laying face down.

Phil was right—his premonition came true that he wasn't going to be coming back.

JE: And he was twenty-eight years old—

JF: Yeah.

JE: ...by the time that happened.

JF: It took a little over, what, a month, six weeks, for Judge Kennamer to get the news that his son had passed, had been shot. His body was brought back and is buried in Tulsa now at Memorial Park Cemetery.

JE: Do you think the judge could draw any honor out of Phil's life because he died in service of our country?

JF: I would hope so, I would hope that he would think that *My son served in the war and he fought and I'm proud of him for that.*

JE: However, we still have the pain of the Gorrell family, that never changed.

JF: That never changed.

JE: And the hurt for the Gorrell family was forever.

JF: They probably thought, *Good riddance to Phil Kennamer.*

JE: You've written here: "The white-haired retired federal and court judge, Franklin Kennamer, Phil's father, dies in Chelsea, Oklahoma. He was eighty-one." Obviously he died there at his ranch.

JF: Yeah, his ranch, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: I got to say, reading the book, the closing arguments of both sides were just outstanding. If people read those closing arguments, you know, this whole story could be a movie, absolutely could be a movie. And the closing arguments of the prosecution and the defense are absolutely amazing. And you captured that in your book.

JF: Thank you.

JE: Flint Moss, one of the prosecuting attorneys, dies at age seventy-seven. Former Oklahoma attorney general and prosecuting attorney, Jay Berry King, dies at Mercy Hospital in Oklahoma City, and he was seventy-four.

JF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You've concluded the book with your personal conclusions about the murder. And you probably have already stated that.

JF: Yeah, I stated that what I really thought happened. Phil is going to make up a story, it may not be real clear to him because of the traumatic events that happened that night, but I really think that Phil got there while John was taking his date back to the hospital. He saw the gun in that driver's door pocket and he took it, he took it. And he was going to use it. He had decided right there and then he was going to end this and protect Virginia.

JE: And again, this was never discussed between you and your grandmother.

JF: We never talked about it. Again—

JE: You wish you'd brought it up?

JF: I wished I had tried. I wished I had tried to see how far I could get with that. I respected my grandmother. I respected the era that she came from where let's let bygones be bygones, but I regret that I did not at least attempt to ask her what happened with that.

Being that she really didn't know what was going on, other than what happened after the fact, that after John Gorrell was shot and killed, she may not have had any idea what Phil was up to. Yes, he was sending her flowers. Yes, he was sending her notes. He was asking even Jack, when they were dating at the time, Jack and Virginia, he wanted Jack to call Virginia, to write notes and to deliver these notes to Virginia. "Please call me, please talk to me."

Virginia didn't want to. My grandmother is pretty strong-willed. When she set up her mind for something, by God, that's what she did. There was really no stopping her. I think that's what made her a successful cattle rancher.

I was told by her younger siblings that that was unheard of in that era, in the '50s and '60s, for a successful woman cattle rancher. That was basically a man's job. And she handled herself and she handled it pretty well.

I've got a picture of her actually wrestling a calf and wrapping it up.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JF: She was just an amazing woman. I wish that I'd gotten to know her better. I wished I had gotten to know what happened and how frightened she was. So frightened that her family took her away with her brother and her siblings to Ohio, to get away from this mess. I just think she was a great woman. She was business-savvy and I admire her for that, I really do.

JE: Yeah. And she was obviously a good-looking woman.

JF: I think she was a very handsome woman. I've got a picture in the last page of our book of my grandmother, myself, and actually that picture was taken just as we were leaving Tulsa to come back to Albuquerque, and we had just found out about this murder. And that's my three-year-old daughter.

Just an amazing woman. Smart, I think she was business-savvy, a very intelligent woman. And I think it's kind of hard to tell in that black and white, but I think even our gray hair—my grandmother and I share the same genetics with regards to our hair. And it was graying. She was ninety-two when she had passed in 2008.

JE: I should say, we've recorded this interview in Santa Fe, New Mexico. You live in Albuquerque, and I'm here to do another interview as well, so you graciously drove down here to tell this story. And I want to thank you very, very much.

JF: Well, thank you for having me. I admire what you're doing in trying to keep an audio history of events in Oklahoma. I wrote the book, not because it's my grandmother, but I found that once I started doing more research, how interesting the story was. And I agree with you, I think that maybe sometime down the road it might be a movie.

JE: Yeah. We should also say that nothing has apparently changed because when you get people of wealth, of influence, of power, they significantly impact the justice system. And in that regard, we can point out that the *Tulsa World* blasted Phil Kennamer's father's relentless efforts to free his son.

In an editorial, and as it was known then the *Tulsa Daily World*, they wrote: “It is doubtful if any more official, legal, social, or political pressure has ever been used in this country to circumvent justice. There has not been a month since the night of the shooting that powerful friends have not been active, at many times, under coercion, in the intercessions for young Kennamer. These consistent efforts were directed toward anyone who in any way might be helpful.”

And then they went on to say, because in their disgust they said, “It was their sincere hope that it will never be necessary to refer to this case again.” But, of course, there were many references to this case.

So Phil Kennamer was sentenced to twenty-five years, and of that he served six years, seven months, and sixteen days in prison. And then was released to join the military.

JF: Judge Kennamer tried his best to get Phil off, going through the parole process. Again, even though he was retired, I know he had a lot of personal issues, not only with his wife, but doing some research, and it’s not in the book, apparently one of his daughters out here in New Mexico, was in a car crash and injured her back pretty bad, out near Gallup, New Mexico, back in the late ’20s, early ’30s. Plus the fact that Phil went to a New Mexico military institute. Being that I live here in New Mexico, I felt kind of a close tie to that, plus being a native Tulsan.

JE: Yeah, you can paint Judge Kennamer in several ways, trying to get his son off. But look at all the things he tried to do to get his son on the straight and narrow. He used his power for some good, to get him a job here, get him a job there, get him a job there, and this boy would not take to any of that.

JF: He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t.

JE: Some could have said, “You know, he got what he deserved and just let him sit in jail.” And maybe that’s what he should have done. But he continued to help his son to the very end.

JF: To the very end. Like I said earlier, I believe that Judge Kennamer was pretty proud of his son for joining—because that was pretty patriotic for people to join the war efforts. I mean, that’s what he wanted to do at that time, so.

JE: Yeah. Well, thank you for writing the book because it spawned us having a conversation here. The book is *Murder in the Name of Love: The Phil Kennamer Trial*, by Jim Freese. You didn’t know you were going to be an author of a book but now you are.

JF: No. I am now.

JE: [laughing] Thank you, Jim, I appreciate it very much.

JF: Thank you for having me.

Chapter 14 - 0:33**Conclusion:**

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