

Lighting the Path Forward

Why a First Americans Film Commission Could Redefine Oklahoma's Film Future

****By Lisa Lee Martin****

1. Executive Summary

Oklahoma's film economy has built real momentum through the Oklahoma Film + Music Office's incentive strategy, expanding infrastructure, and steady recruitment of major productions.[cite:2][cite:3][cite:5] The state's current incentive system includes a 20 percent base rebate with uplifts that can bring qualifying projects to 30 percent, helping position Oklahoma as a competitive destination for film and television production.[cite:2][cite:4] Tribal-led efforts such as Cherokee Film have shown how Native-owned studios, training programs, and production services can anchor long-term creative and economic growth, including the expansion of Cherokee Film Studios in Owasso and added classroom space for the Cherokee Film Institute.[cite:6][cite:12]

Just as important, Oklahoma already has many First Americans working in film who bring real assets to the table. Across the state, Native filmmakers, producers, crew members, and business owners already possess equipment, production knowledge, creative skill, and community relationships that can strengthen Oklahoma's film economy when they are fully included. A strong commission would not be inventing Native participation from scratch; it would be organizing and elevating talent, equipment, and leadership that already exist.

Yet towns like Fairfax reveal the harder truth beneath the growth story. **Killers of the Flower Moon** drew global attention to Osage County and to the history rooted in Fairfax, but residents expressed disappointment that the production did not leave the town with meaningful improvements or lasting support.[cite:36] In a community where Main Street lacked even basic public features such as benches, trash cans, and a clock, many felt a major film could have left the town better than it found it. That concern points to a larger principle: filmmakers should not be able to take from Oklahoma towns without contributing to bettering the area,

especially when those communities carry the history that gives the project its power.

A First Americans Film Commission representing all 39 tribal nations would directly confront that problem. Working alongside the Oklahoma Film + Music Office and building on the example of Cherokee Film, it could create community benefit standards, stronger workforce pipelines, tribal consultation systems, and infrastructure strategies that move Oklahoma from being a filming location to being a center of Indigenous-led production and economic leverage.[cite:13] [cite:12] By setting a clear expectation that filmmakers must leave towns better than they found them, the commission could help position Oklahoma as a national leader in ethical, Indigenous-centered filmmaking.

Table of Contents / Index

1. ****Executive Summary****

- Oklahoma's film boom
- The Fairfax lesson: impact must be visible
- Why a First Americans Film Commission now

2. ****Oklahoma's Strong Foundation****

- Role of the Oklahoma Film + Music Office
- Cherokee Film and Native-led infrastructure

3. ****The Representation Gap****

- Statewide incentives vs. sovereign tribal interests
- Why existing structures don't fully protect First American communities

4. ****Fairfax: When the Cameras Leave****

- How **Killers of the Flower Moon** used the town as a backdrop
- No benches, no trash cans, no clock: what "no legacy" looks like

- The principle: filmmakers should not take without contributing

5. ****One Commission, 39 Nations****

- Coalition model and governance
- A single gateway for studios, streamers, and independents

6. ****How It Could Work****

- Cultural consultation and story integrity
- Community benefit standards and legacy funds
- Joint incentives with the Oklahoma Film + Music Office
- Centralized First Americans production database

7. ****Changing the Landscape****

- From extraction to partnership
- Raising Oklahoma's bargaining power with major productions

8. ****Ideas for Implementation****

- MOUs, pilot programs, and incentive uplifts
- Education, training, and tribal workforce development
- Soundstage development and regional production hubs

9. ****Closing Perspective****

- A new standard: leave it better than you found it
- How a First Americans Film Commission can turn Fairfax's experience into a turning point

2. Oklahoma's Strong Foundation

The Oklahoma Film + Music Office has helped move the state into a stronger competitive position by promoting incentives, production resources, workforce

growth, and business development within the film and music sectors.[cite:3]
[cite:5] That work deserves praise because it has created the policy foundation on which the next phase of Oklahoma's film economy can be built.[cite:3]

Cherokee Film deserves equal recognition for proving that Native-led infrastructure is both culturally significant and economically practical. The expansion of Cherokee Film Studios in Owasso added a second 10,000-square-foot soundstage, classroom space for the Cherokee Film Institute, offices, storage, audio facilities, and support infrastructure that strengthens the state's production capacity.[cite:12] Cherokee Nation leaders framed that investment as part of a broader commitment to Oklahoma, neighboring tribes, and the future of production in the home state of 39 tribal nations.[cite:12]

3. The Representation Gap

Even with this progress, Oklahoma still lacks a dedicated statewide body whose primary mission is to represent the interests, cultural priorities, and production opportunities of First American nations in the film economy. The Oklahoma Film + Music Office serves the state's broader production sector, and that role remains essential, but it is not the same as a commission built specifically to advocate for tribal nations and Indigenous storytelling.[cite:3][cite:13]

A First Americans Film Commission would fill that gap without replacing existing institutions. Instead, it would create a structure for coordination, negotiation, and protection that aligns the state's film growth with sovereignty, community benefit, and authentic representation.

4. Fairfax: When the Cameras Leave

Fairfax stands as one of the clearest examples of why Oklahoma needs a stronger standard. Reporting after **Killers of the Flower Moon** noted that many downtown buildings in Fairfax remained vacant and dilapidated and that some residents felt disappointed that a major Hollywood production came and left without creating visible change in the town.[cite:36] Joe Conner, a Fairfax newspaper publisher and preservation advocate, said the town saw only about \$150,000 to \$200,000 in total impact, while other filming locations reported much

larger gains, and he wished the production would create an endowment or other meaningful help for the community.[cite:36]

The frustration is not abstract. In a town that did not even have basic Main Street amenities such as benches, trash cans, or a clock, a film of that scale could have left something practical and lasting behind. Instead, many residents felt that Fairfax, despite being central to the history, was left with little to show for the worldwide attention generated by the film.[cite:36] That is the lesson Oklahoma should not ignore.

5. One Commission, 39 Nations

The strongest version of this idea is one commission serving all 39 tribal nations through a coalition model. Each nation could appoint representation to a governing council while a central professional staff handles industry relations, project review, and day-to-day operations.[cite:13] This would create a single point of access for studios and streamers while respecting the sovereignty and distinct identity of each nation.

6. How It Could Work

- **Cultural consultation:** A vetted network of historians, artists, language keepers, and community advisors who guide productions toward respectful representation.
- **Community benefit standards:** A requirement that productions filming in historically significant towns or tribal communities invest in visible improvements such as streetscape amenities, public art, small grants, or other locally chosen legacy projects.
- **Joint incentives:** Collaboration with existing Oklahoma incentives to reward Native hiring, tribal partnerships, and the use of tribally affiliated facilities.[cite:2][cite:4]
- **Centralized First Americans production database:** A secure database of tribal-approved locations, Native-owned vendors, Indigenous crew, and First American-owned equipment resources. This database should acknowledge that many First Americans in film already have cameras, grip and lighting packages, sound gear, edit suites, and production knowledge ready to bring

to the table. The database would not be a symbolic list; it would be a working marketplace of capability and connection.

7. Changing the Landscape

A First Americans Film Commission would change Oklahoma's leverage by shifting the film model from extraction to partnership. Producers would gain organized access to Indigenous talent, consultation, locations, and equipment resources, while communities would gain stronger negotiating power and clearer benefit expectations.

That would also make Oklahoma more attractive to studios looking for authentic Indigenous collaboration, because the state could offer not only incentives and scenery but also a professional, tribally grounded system for production support, cultural integrity, and local accountability.

8. Ideas for Implementation

- Create memorandums of understanding between tribal leaders and the Oklahoma Film + Music Office to define roles and areas of partnership.
- Launch a pilot program for cultural consultation, Native crew directories, and tribal location coordination.
- Publish annual impact reports measuring dollars spent in tribal communities, Native hiring, and legacy projects completed in host towns.
- Develop a ****First Americans Soundstage Network**** that includes flagship tribal soundstage hubs, regional smart stages, and small-town flex spaces created from existing buildings.
- Pair soundstage development with education space, post-production suites, workshops, and long-term community assets so production infrastructure becomes a driver of local development instead of a temporary visitor.

9. Closing Perspective

In the end, the choice facing Oklahoma is simple but consequential: continue allowing outside productions to dictate the terms of engagement, or establish a First Americans Film Commission that insists on respect, reciprocity, and lasting local benefit. By embracing the latter, the state can honor its 39 tribal nations,

protect communities like Fairfax, and prove that a thriving film industry does not have to come at the expense of the people whose stories, locations, talent, and history make those films possible.[cite:13]