

RETROPOLIS

## The enduring family trauma behind 'Killers of the Flower Moon'

The murders of her Osage relatives in the 1920s still affect Margie Burkhart, granddaughter of a central character in the new movie

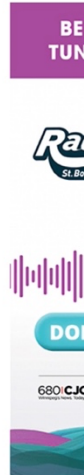


By Sydney Trent

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Margie Burkhart, who lives in Tahlequah, Okla., is the granddaughter of Mollie Burkhart, an Osage Nation member whose siblings and mother were among dozens murdered for their oil wealth during the 1920s. The family tragedy is at the center of the movie "Killers of the Flower Moon." (Michael Noble Jr.)



Margie Burkhart can't remember a time when she didn't know about the murders. As a girl growing up in the 1960s, she would sprawl across her bed and listen to her father talking with her mother and aunt around the kitchen table in their small home in Gray Horse, Okla. Their voices carried; there was no sense of secrecy.

Over time, the full story took shape in Margie's mind:

In 1918, Margie's great-aunt Minnie had wasted away of an apparent poisoning. Then in 1921, Margie's great-aunt Anna had disappeared and was later found fatally shot at the bottom of a ravine. Three months later, her great-grandmother Lizzie had also died of an apparent poisoning. In 1923, a bombing killed Margie's great-aunt Rita and her husband.

By the end of it, Margie's grandmother Mollie Burkhart and her two children — Margie's father, James, and her aunt Liz — were the only survivors in their immediate family.

Margie's relatives were among at least five dozen Osage Native Americans who were murdered, mostly in the early 1920s, for the oil wealth that had made them some of the richest — and most envied — Americans of their time.

Amplifying Margie's family tragedy was the revelation that Margie's grandfather Ernest Burkhart — Mollie's White husband — was in on the plot.

The Burkharts form the narrative center of the 2017 book "Killers of the Flower Moon," in which author David Grann resurfaced the little-known history and chronicled the role of the nascent Federal Bureau of Investigation in solving its first big case. The movie based on the bestseller, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Lily Gladstone, debuts in theaters Friday.

Margie, 61, was a teenager by the time she grasped that the tragedy extended far beyond her family. She was in her 40s before she realized how it has reverberated throughout her life.

"I see other people and they're just so happy. ... I'm like, 'I can't be like that,'" said Burkhart, who now lives in Tahlequah, Okla., a couple of hours' drive southeast from Osage County, Okla., where the murders took place. "I think I grew up in a stressful household. ... I feel stressed a lot. And I feel depression at times, not all the time, but a lot of the time."

"I truly believe it's in our DNA, that generational trauma," she said.

### **Targets of envy**



An Osage camp is seen around 1906. Members of the Osage Nation on the Osage Indian Reservation earned royalties from oil sales through their "headrights," and some became incredibly wealthy in the 1920s. (Library of Congress)

In the 1870s, the Osage, driven off their land in Kansas, purchased 1.5 million acres of rocky and seemingly barren countryside in “Indian Territory,” in what is now Oklahoma. In the 1890s, as the federal government imposed its allotment policy on the territory’s other tribes, ending communal ownership and freeing up parcels for White settlers, the Osage were able to maintain control of their land.

At the turn of the century, with the U.S. government eager to form the new state of Oklahoma, Osage tribal leaders used their leverage to cut a deal. Instead of the 160 acres allotted to members of other tribes, the Osage land was divided into 657-acre parcels to be owned exclusively by the Osage people.

They also managed to include what would turn out to be a very lucrative provision: All oil, coal, gas and minerals beneath the lands would be owned by the tribe. All wealth obtained from the oil would be distributed among the Osage, in equal shares known as “headrights.” A headright could not be bought or sold, only inherited.

Soon, tribal members began leasing plots to White prospectors. In 1917 — 10 years after Oklahoma became a state — one of them struck a big gusher, then another. In 1920, the Burbank field on Osage land became one of the most productive oil fields in the country.

The profits poured into the Osage coffers and from there flowed to the tribal members in quarterly checks. In 1923 alone, Grann writes, the tribe took in more than \$30 million. In today’s dollars, that would be worth more than \$535 million.

Tribal members, some of whom had a flair for fashion and a penchant for fine cars, became the target of White American envy. Journalists wrote often outlandish, racist stories about Osage who “discarded grand pianos on their lawns or replaced old cars with new ones after getting a flat tire,” Grann writes.

Yet the Osage did not have full control of their wealth. The U.S. government had decided that many Native Americans, particularly those of unmixed heritage, were not capable of handling their financial affairs and so appointed guardians — most of them White — to do it for them. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the guardians charged exorbitantly for their services. By 1921, Congress had passed new laws further restricting how much money Osage members with guardians were allowed to spend.

Mollie and her sisters were among those deemed “incompetent,” and local guardians were appointed to oversee and authorize all of their spending, “down to the toothpaste they purchased at the corner store,” Grann writes.

At the time, it seemed Mollie was more fortunate than some. Her husband served as her guardian.

### **‘A really eerie feeling’**



Mollie Burkhart, an Osage Nation member and Margie Burkhart's grandmother. She was married to a White man, Ernest Burkhart, who conspired with his uncle, William K. Hale, to kill Mollie's siblings for their oil wealth. (Bettmann Archive)

Margie Burkhart remembers riding in the car through rural Osage County as a middle-schooler while her father pointed out the old multistory brick houses dotting the fields where wealthy Osage Native Americans had been murdered in what became known as the Reign of Terror. He would point out the fences topped with concertina wire erected by families filled with fear that a loved one would be next.

“I’d be wondering if it’s going to happen again,” she said. “As a child, it was just a really eerie feeling.”

But the echoes of that era were felt most inside the family’s wooden farmhouse in Gray Horse. Margie’s father, James — nicknamed “Cowboy” — was loving toward Margie and her older sister, Doris. Yet he was often angry and sometimes violent with other people, Margie said.

The man who would spoil his children at Christmas and lecture them for hours when they misbehaved — he once shot a friend in the leg during an argument at their home. The friend spent the night in the family well house, and James drove him to the hospital the next morning. He could be kind, yet his temper was fearsome. “He was a complicated man,” Margie said.

James began drinking as a teenager and drank to excess through most of Margie’s childhood. When Margie and her sister were in primary school, he would take them to a bar outside of town, where the girls would play pool and shuffleboard for hours. When their father was ready to go home, he would hand them the keys. The children lurched through the empty pastures, Margie pushing the pedals while her sister steered.

James quit drinking when Margie was 15. By then, she knew from her mother, also named Margie, about the trauma he had been trying to forget.

James was about 9 when his father, Ernest, was tried and convicted of conspiring with Ernest’s uncle, a rich and powerful businessman and landowner named William Hale, to kill many of the Osage, siphoning their wealth into the network of White guardians and other nefarious actors.

Suddenly, Mollie and her two children were ostracized by the Osage, Margie said. Tribal members blamed Mollie for bringing Ernest into their fold.

Osage children teased James and left him out of their games. He turned into a fighter, Margie said, angry at the world, furious at his father.

“I think all of that contributed to why he was such a hard man,” she said. “I guess that was his way of coping.”

Her father was still haunted when Ernest was released from prison in 1959 and later moved in with his brother, Margie's great-uncle Bryan Burkhart, in nearby Cleveland, Okla. Margie was a teenager when her father brought Ernest to the house in Gray Horse and introduced them. She was struck by how harmless Ernest — a man who had helped destroy entire families, including her own — appeared. He was slight, with fluffy white hair and bright blue eyes.

“He looked real shy,” she said, adding, “He looked just like a grandfather. You would see him on the street and you would have no idea what he had done.” Even so, she now grants Ernest a measure of forgiveness, believing he was easily manipulated by the domineering Hale, who was like a surrogate father to him.

Her father, on the other hand, struggled to forgive. “He would go to visit him and come back angry,” she said.

### **A painful history**



The home of William “Bill” Smith in Fairfax, Okla., after it was destroyed by dynamite. Smith was married to Rita Smith, an Osage Native American and Mollie Burkhart’s sister. (Bettmann Archive)

As she listened through the thin walls as a child, Margie heard talk of how James had narrowly avoided being murdered. On the night of the bombing, Mollie and her children had planned to spend the night with her sister Rita and Rita’s husband, Bill Smith, at their house, but James had an ear infection, so Mollie left to take him to the doctor, she said. An explosion that night killed the Smiths.

As she grew older, Margie watched television airings of “The FBI Story,” a 1959 movie starring Jimmy Stewart that showcased the murders. She also began

seeking out information on her own. Gradually, she came to understand the full dimensions of racism and greed that drove the conspirators, as well as the removal, oppression and cultural theft endured by her ancestors. “Native American history just hurts me so bad,” she said.

Mollie had died in 1937 in her 50s, remarried and forever estranged from Ernest. Margie began to mourn the extended family she had not been allowed. “I think really what bothers me the most is that Ernest and Hale, all of them, they deprived me of my cousins,” she said. “I could have had all of these cousins.”



Rita Smith, Margie Burkhart's aunt, who was killed when her home was bombed in 1923. (Bettmann Archive)

She put her anger and sadness in a box and tried to go about her life. She married a Creek Indian; raised two children, now adults; and engaged in a career tending to the health needs of Native people. “I didn’t want to bother anybody,” she said, “and I didn’t want to think about it.”

It was more than a decade after her father’s death in 1990 that she began to realize how deeply she had been affected.

A Sioux professor who attended her Catholic church — Mollie had converted after the federal government made her attend a Catholic boarding school —

asked her about the Reign of Terror. She began to cry uncontrollably, she said. A friend recommended she see a Native American therapist.

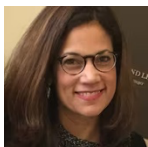
Purging her emotions for the first time helped, as has her commitment to exercise and nutrition. Yet she still feels she carries sadness, in part due to the weight of history. She worries that her children and grandchildren will carry it, too.

She hopes the “Killers of Flower Moon” movie — which she has seen and appreciates — will provide her family some release. She wishes her father were alive to watch it.

“It might have helped him feel validated,” Margie said. “People can now see that this wasn’t his fault. And it wasn’t Mollie’s fault. It was those evil men. It was them and only them.”



Margie Burkhart still feels she carries sadness, in part due to the weight of history. (Michael Noble Jr.)



By [Sydney Trent](#)

*Sydney Trent has been a journalist at The Washington Post since 1999. Most recently, she was Senior Editor/Social Issues, supervising award-winning coverage of religion, gender, poverty and other topics. In this role, she ran coverage of the 2013 inauguration of Barack Obama and Pope Francis' U.S. papal visit in 2015.*