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# Attorney on "Killers of the Flower Moon": Wounds still felt today among Osage Nation

By Sharon Bishop-Baldwin For the Tulsa Business & Legal News 4 hrs ago 0



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Michael McBride speaks at Books Sandwiched In at Tulsa Central Library Oct. 23, 2017. MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World



More than 200 people packed into the Central Library's Aaronson Auditorium on Monday to hear Tulsa attorney Mike McBride review best-selling author David Grann's book "[Killers of the Flower Moon](#)," which chronicles murders of members of the Osage Nation in the 1920s.

While most of the audience indicated they read both book, few indicated that they had known before that of the so-called "reign of terror," a brutal period in Oklahoma's past in which racism and greed ran as deep as the oil-laden veins under the Osage Nation's earth. Before the reign of terror ended, McBride said, more than two dozen people had been murdered – many experts say the toll is significantly higher – and a painful wound that festers still today had marred a people and a state.

A veteran attorney with extensive experience in American Indian law, McBride has a personal stake in the story, too: Three generations of his family grew up in and around the Osage County town of Fairfax, and one likely ancestor was shot to death while seeking federal intervention on behalf of the Osages.

Although McBride has represented the tribe in legal matters, he emphasized at the outset of his talk that the views he expressed were his alone.

"A lot of Osages are uncomfortable with this topic," he said, noting that Grann's book brought to the surface a lot of painful history in its retelling of the murders.

McBride outlined how the Osages ended up in Indian Territory, a part of what is now northeastern Oklahoma, after a forced migration in the 1800s. The tribe purchased 1.5 million acres from the Cherokee Nation and made it their reservation. A process of allotment in the 1890s was the federal government's way of breaking up the tribal land mass that was developing in the middle of the country.

The Osages, who McBride said were fortunate to have wise leadership and legal counsel, entered into a pact with the government in 1906 that allowed Osage Nation property rights to be sold, even to non-Osages, but the mineral rights would always remain with the tribe.

There had been reports of a shiny black substance that floated in the creeks and came to rest on the banks, but no one imagined that it would become one of the largest oil reserves in the world. That bounty gave and took, McBride said.


It gave nearly 2,300 Osage Indians with headrights a windfall each year – generous even by today's standards – that allowed them to own mansions and multiple cars, hire white servants and send their children to European boarding schools. But it also took their dignity, their security and ultimately their lives.

The federal government at the time viewed Native Americans as incompetent and required every Osage with headrights – rights that could be transferred only through inheritance – be appointed a

white guardian to oversee their fortunes. McBride said those two facts combined to create an environment of greed, corruption and terror.

Some Osages fell victim to unscrupulous marriage proposals. Others were taken advantage of by guardians with ulterior motives. And then Osage Indians began to die under suspicious circumstances.

There were drownings and poisonings. Homes were bombed or burned. Eventually, foul play came even to those who tried to expose the atrocities. One white lawyer who was attempting to help the Osages was thrown from a speeding train.



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But McBride said that what struck him was how many crimes were not investigated, witnesses weren't interviewed and autopsies weren't conducted. Local and state authorities were slow to respond because of ingrained prejudice, and private investigators were brought in. But they often had criminal backgrounds and were corrupt, too, McBride said.

Even the precursor to the FBI, whose assistance finally was sought, saw limited success. The reign of terror was the first murder case for the fledgling agency, led then and for half a century by J. Edgar Hoover.

The agency made progress by drawing upon the help of Texas Ranger Tom White, who recruited the only Native American FBI agent to help root out the killers. White followed the money, a trail that frequently ended at the feet of William King Hale. Thought to have ordered the killings of a number of people, including his nephew's wife, an Osage Indian, McBride said Hale was convicted of only one – after four trials.

Sentenced in 1929 to life in a federal prison, he was paroled 18 years later.

McBride still laments "the ones who got away," noting that Grann writes in the third of the book's three "chronicles" about the culture of killing that the FBI never exposed.

Said McBride: "What else is out there that we don't know?"

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