

# Sooner Nation

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Geoffrey Standing Bear leads the Osage Nation with both tradition and vision.

**M**ovie audiences in Oklahoma, especially in the Osage Nation, have waited eagerly—apprehensively, even—for Martin Scorsese’s film “Killers of the Flower Moon.”

Would Osage people be portrayed as helpless victims for gruesome entertainment? One-dimensional stereotypes of traditional Hollywood?

Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear, a 1976 OU alumnus, is sanguine, just the right tone of calm and confidence for a sovereign leader recently re-elected for a third term.

The book by David Grann and the filmed-in-Oklahoma movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro—rumored to be premiering at the Cannes Film Festival in May—depict the “Osage Reign of Terror” that followed the discovery of oil in the 1920s, when wealthy tribal members were murdered for their lucrative headrights. “It’s a story of human greed,” Standing Bear says, “and a legal, social and economic system allowing that behavior to thrive.” Many more victims died than are revealed in the book and film, the chief adds.

Grann did incredible research, Standing Bear says. “He came among the Osage in a very respectful way.” Scorsese did the same, working closely with the Osage Nation’s language and culture departments. Osage language and culture are subjects close to Standing Bear’s heart.

He is the great-grandson of legendary Principal Chief Fred Lookout, who was just 10 in the era of buffalo hunts when his tribe made the long walk from Kansas to the new Osage reservation in Oklahoma.

Standing Bear began his own march to leadership as an OU sophomore and president of the American Indian Student Association at a time of roiling change and conflict for Native Americans.

He soon immersed himself in a personal study of “the concept of nations within nations.” In law school at the University of Tulsa, he was mentored by Indian law scholar Rennard Strickland, later senior scholar in residence at OU Law.

As a practicing lawyer, Standing Bear concentrated on federal Indian law, was among the first group to litigate is-

ues with the new Indian Child Welfare Act, and was involved in the first federal gaming case in Oklahoma. He served as assistant principal chief and as a member of the Osage Nation Congress before being elected principal chief in 2014.

The principal chief is charged with protecting and enhancing Osage culture, language and lands. Standing Bear views that mandate as more of a sacred duty than a job.

Under his leadership, the tribe purchased Ted Turner’s 43,000-acre Bluestem Ranch, making the Osage Nation one of the biggest landowners in Osage County. “The whole point is to preserve the land for our children and the future,” he says. “The number one priority was to rebuild our traditional dance arbors at our three districts in Pawhuska, Gray Horse and Hominy.”

More than half of the Osage people do not live in Oklahoma, Standing Bear explains. They gather in these special places to preserve culture and traditions through dances, ceremonies, songs and meals.

He is proudest of activities to preserve the dying Osage language. “Osage and English cultures are very different in how we view the same world. There are many ways to look at this world, and our language is critical.”

It is more than critical, agrees Rodger Randle. “Language is the DNA of a culture,” says the director of OU-Tulsa’s Center for Studies in Democracy and Culture. “The words we use [express] the influences, ways of thinking and concepts of the world basic to that culture.”

Standing Bear is a traditionalist. “We have to stay focused on our own culture, language, history and growth,” he says. Even so, the principal chief is a modern man with a progressive eye on the contemporary need for a better tribal health care system and treatment for mental health. Currently, Osage citizens are sent to Texas or California for mental health or alcohol treatment. “The Osage Congress and I are committed to a new project to provide primary residential treatment here.”

Even visionary leaders like Standing Bear must weather criticism from a sometimes-fractious constituency. The significant purchase of the Turner ranch was not universally ac-



Cody Hammer/Osage News

Osage Nation Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear listens as Martin Scorsese tells a story at the Office of the Chiefs in Pawhuska.

cepted. Nobody understands that better than Harvey Payne, attorney, photographer and commonly acknowledged “Sage of the Tallgrass Prairie,” who has known Standing Bear for more than 35 years.

“What he has done is legendary,” Payne says. “Not that many years ago the Osage tribe, per se, was extremely poor. Now, they’re a very prosperous, thriving tribe, and a lot of that is because of Geoffrey Standing Bear.”

“Killers of the Flower Moon” has drawn curious visitors to the Osage Nation. Some look at the land and imagine the conspiracy of murders. Others remember spotting mov-

ie stars in Pawhuska, Bartlesville, Fairfax and Tulsa. What does Standing Bear see when he looks out over the prairie and his people?

“Our ancestors addressed the sun as ‘Grandfather,’” he says. “Grandfather Sun was closer to God so he could better deliver our petitions. I see a people cautiously looking at one another, and there is a bright morning sun on the horizon.” 🍷

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*Connie Cronley is the author of several biographies of famous Oklahomans, including A Life on Fire: Oklahoma’s Kate Barnard. She lives in Tulsa, Okla.*