

Hunter Howe Cates can't remember if he was reading "To Kill a Mockingbird" or watching the film version of Harper Lee's novel, but he does remember the comment his mother made. "She said, 'Your grandfather did the same thing,'" Cates said. Cates' grandfather was Elliott Howe, a Tulsa lawyer who in the early 1950s was working as a public defender. In the spring of 1953, he was assigned a case that would ultimately attract national attention. On March 12, 1953, an 11-year-old girl named Phyllis Jean Warren disappeared from her north Tulsa neighborhood. Her body would be discovered a few days later, buried under a pile of brush just a few blocks from the tar-paper shack that she and her extended family called home. One of the people questioned was Buster Youngwolfe, a 21-year-old Cherokee who was related to Phyllis Warren by marriage, and who lived nearby. After an extended interrogation, Youngwolfe confessed to the crime, but later recanted, saying that he had been coerced into confessing. "This story was a part of family lore," Cates said. "But for the longest time all I knew were the bare bones of it. I soon learned there was so much more to this history, and figured if anyone was going to tell this story, it might as well be me." Cates said he also realized that he was in something of "a race against time," as many of the people who had first-hand knowledge or memories of the case were getting up in years. Cates published a piece about the Youngwolfe case and his grandfather's involvement in This Land Press in 2013. "One of my teachers at the University of Tulsa, Joli Jensen, said I should turn that piece into a book," Cates said. The result is "Oklahoma's Atticus: An Innocent Man and the Lawyer Who Fought for Him" (Bison Books, \$27.99). The book paints a detailed picture of life in Tulsa in the 1950s, juxtaposing the impoverished lives of people like the Warrens and Youngwolfes in the slums of north Tulsa with the ease and prosperity of those who benefited from the city's status as "The Oil Capital of the World" and "America's Most Beautiful

City.â€• Buster Youngwolfe was himself far from a model citizen. He had had previous run-ins with law enforcement and was on probation when Phyllis Warren went missing. That might have explained his nervousness around the police officers who questioned him â€” a nervousness that officers assumed was borne out of guilt. â€œOne of the things that really flabbergasted me while I was doing the research was the extent of the lawlessness with which Buster was treated,â€• Cates said. â€œBecause he was Cherokee, he was assumed to be guilty. It was a way of dismissing the whole case â€”

â€”some Indian guy did it.â€™ â€œI believe that is also why so many potential leads werenâ€™t pursued by investigators, why there wasnâ€™t an autopsy done until weeks after the body was found, why the prosecutors were so sloppy in their work,â€• he said. â€œIt showed how deep the corruption went.â€• Elliott Howe was perhaps the only person who was convinced of Youngwolfeâ€™s innocence. â€œI know that my grandfather would have fought hard for any client he believed to be innocent,â€• Cates said. â€œBut I think one reason why he believed in Buster is because they had this shared biography.â€• Howe was a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and he also came from humble beginnings. Like Youngwolfe, Howe was sent to the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, which Howe later said made him â€œbitter, rebellious, (someone who) had lost all respect for authority.â€• In an interview with Redbook magazine, which in 1954 ran a feature on the Youngwolfe case, Howe said that one reason why he was so passionate about his work as a public defender was â€œbecause I might have been a

Buster Youngwolfe.â€• Cates said that, while one impetus for writing the book was to honor his grandfather, he also realized this story of a crime that took place more than 60 years ago resonates today. â€œOf course,â€• he said, â€œany historical story has some kind of contemporary resonance, because human nature is what it is. But itâ€™s also important to preserve these pieces of our history. â€œThis case of my grandfatherâ€™s received national attention at the time,â€• Cates said, â€œbut most people today have

never heard of it. Just as many people knew nothing about the Tulsa Race

Massacre or the Osage Reign of Terror until someone determined to tell those stories.

It makes me wonder how many parts of our history have become lost â€”

and how many innocent people like Buster Youngwolfe were punished for crimes they didnâ€™t

commit, because they did not have a lawyer willing to fight for them.â€• Featured

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