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A SMALL-TOWN PAPER LANDS A VERY BIG STORY

*In Southeast Oklahoma, a father-son reporting duo's series on
the county sheriff led to an explosive revelation.*

By Paige Williams

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As the drama unfolded, a staffer at the Gazette said, "I cursed our lives by deciding to move here." Photographs by Joseph Rushmore for The New Yorker



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Bruce Willingham, fifty-two years a newspaperman, owns and publishes the *McCurtain Gazette*, in McCurtain County, Oklahoma, a rolling sweep of timber and lakes that forms the southeastern corner of the state. McCurtain County is geographically larger than Rhode Island and less populous than the average Taylor Swift concert. Thirty-one thousand people live there; forty-four hundred buy the *Gazette*, which has been in print since 1905, before statehood. At that time, the paper was known as the *Idabel Signal*, referring to the county seat. An early masthead proclaimed “INDIAN TERRITORY, CHOCTAW NATION.”

Willingham bought the newspaper in 1988, with his wife, Gwen, who gave up a nursing career to become the *Gazette's* accountant. They operate out of a storefront office in downtown Idabel, between a package-shipping business and a pawnshop. The staff parks out back, within sight of an old Frisco railway station, and enters through the “morgue,” where the bound archives are kept. Until recently, no one had reason to lock the door during the day.

Three days a week (five, before the pandemic), readers can find the latest on rodeo queens, school cafeteria menus, hardwood-mill closings, heat advisories. Some headlines: “Large Cat Sighted in Idabel,” “Two of State’s Three Master Bladesmiths Live Here,” “Local Singing Group Enjoys Tuesdays.” Anyone who’s been cited for speeding, charged with a misdemeanor, applied for a marriage license, or filed for divorce will see his or her name listed in the “District Court Report.” In Willingham’s clutterbucket of an office, a hulking microfiche machine sits alongside his desktop computer amid lunar levels of dust; he uses the machine to unearth and reprint front pages from long ago. In 2017, he transported readers to 1934 via a banner headline: “NEGRO SLAYER OF WHITE MAN KILLED.” The area has long been stuck with the nickname Little Dixie.

Gazette articles can be shorter than recipes, and what they may lack in detail, context, and occasionally accuracy, they make up for by existing at all. The paper does more than probe the past or keep tabs on the local felines. “We’ve investigated county officials *a lot*,” Willingham, who is sixty-eight, said the other day. The *Gazette* exposed a county treasurer who allowed elected officials to avoid penalties for paying their property taxes late, and a utilities company that gouged poor customers while lavishing its executives with gifts. “To most people, it’s Mickey Mouse stuff,” Willingham told me. “But the problem is, if you let them get away with it, it gets worse and worse and worse.”

The Willinghams' oldest son, Chris, and his wife, Angie, work at the *Gazette*, too. They moved to Idabel from Oklahoma City in the spring of 2005, not long after graduating from college. Angie became an editor, and Chris covered what is known in the daily-news business as cops and courts. Absurdity often made the front page—a five-m.p.h. police “chase” through town, a wayward snake. Three times in one year, the paper wrote about assaults in which the weapon was chicken and dumplings. McCurtain County, which once led the state in homicides, also produces more sinister blotter items: a man cashed his dead mother’s Social Security checks for more than a year; a man killed a woman with a hunting bow and two arrows; a man raped a woman in front of her baby.

In a small town, a dogged reporter is inevitably an unpopular one. It isn’t easy to write about an old friend’s felony drug charge, knowing that you’re going to see him at church. When Chris was a teen-ager, his father twice put *him* in the paper, for the misdemeanors of stealing beer, with buddies, at a grocery store where one of them worked, and parking illegally—probably with those same buddies, definitely with beer—on a back-road bridge, over a good fishing hole.

Chris has a wired earnestness and a voice that carries. Listening to a crime victim’s story, he might boom, “*Gollll-ly!*” Among law-enforcement sources, “Chris was respected because he always asked questions about how the system works, about proper procedure,” an officer said. Certain cops admired his willingness to pursue uncomfortable truths even if those truths involved one of their own. “If I was to do something wrong—on purpose, on accident—Chris Willingham one hundred per cent would write my butt in the paper, on the front page, in bold letters,” another officer, who has known him for more than a decade, told me.

In the summer of 2021, Chris heard that there were morale problems within the McCurtain County Sheriff’s Office. The sheriff, Kevin Clardy, who has woolly eyebrows and a mustache, and often wears a cowboy hat, had just started his second term. The first one had gone smoothly, but now, according to some colleagues, Clardy appeared to be playing favorites.

The current discord stemmed from two recent promotions. Clardy had brought in Larry Hendrix, a former deputy from another county, and, despite what some considered to be weak investigative skills, elevated him to undersheriff—second-in-command. Clardy had also hired Alicia Manning, who had taken up law enforcement only recently, in her forties. Rookies typically start out on patrol, but Clardy made Manning an investigator. Then he named her captain, a newly created position, from which she oversaw the department’s two dozen or so deputies and managed cases involving violence against women and children. Co-workers were dismayed to see someone with so little experience rise that quickly to the third most powerful rank. “Never patrolled one night, never patrolled one day, in any law-enforcement aspect, anywhere in her life, and you’re gonna bring her in and stick her in high crimes?” one officer who worked with her told me.

Chris was sitting on a tip that Clardy favored Manning because the two were having an affair. Then, around Thanksgiving, 2021, employees at the county jail, whose board is chaired by the sheriff, started getting fired, and quitting. The first to go was the jail’s secretary, who had worked there for twenty-six years. The jail’s

administrator resigned on the spot rather than carry out the termination; the secretary's husband, the jail's longtime handyman, quit, too. When Chris interviewed Clardy about the unusual spate of departures, the sheriff pointed out that employment in Oklahoma is at will. "It is what it is," he said. In response to a question about nepotism, involving the temporary promotion of his stepdaughter's husband, Clardy revealed that he had been divorced for a few months and separated for more than a year. Chris asked, "Are you and Alicia having sex?" Clardy repeatedly said no, insisting, "We're good friends. Me and Larry's good friends, but I'm not having sex with Larry, either."

Meanwhile, someone had sent Chris photographs of the department's evidence room, which resembled a hoarder's nest. The mess invited speculation about tainted case material. In a front-page story, branded "first of a series," the *Gazette* printed the images, along with the news that Hendrix and Manning were warning deputies to stop all the "backdoor talk." The sheriff told staffers that anyone who spoke to the *Gazette* would be fired.

Manning has thick, ash-streaked hair, a direct manner, and what seems to be an unwavering loyalty to Clardy. She offered to help him flush out the leakers, and told another colleague that she wanted to obtain search warrants for cell phones belonging to deputies. When Chris heard that Manning wanted to confiscate *his* phone, he called the Oklahoma Press Association—and a lawyer. (Oklahoma has a shield law, passed in the seventies, which is designed to protect journalists' sources.) The lawyer advised Chris to leave his phone behind whenever he went to the sheriff's department. Angie was prepared to remotely wipe the device if Chris ever lost possession of it.

John Jones, a narcotics detective in his late twenties, cautioned Manning against abusing her authority. Jones was the sheriff's most prolific investigator, regarded as a forthright and talented young officer—a "velociraptor," according to one peer. He had documented the presence of the Sinaloa cartel in McCurtain County, describing meth smuggled from Mexico in shipments of pencils, and cash laundered through local casinos. Jones had filed hundreds of cases between 2019 and most of 2021, compared with a couple of dozen by Manning and Hendrix combined. The *Gazette* reported that, on December 1st—days after confronting Manning—Jones was bumped down to patrol. The next day, he quit.

In the summer of 2021, the *Gazette* got a tip about morale problems at the county sheriff's department. Then employees started getting fired, and quitting.

"If I was to do something wrong," one law-enforcement officer said, "Chris Willingham one hundred per cent would write my butt in the paper."

Within the week, Hendrix fired the department's second most productive investigator, Devin Black. An experienced detective in his late thirties, Black had just recovered nearly a million dollars' worth of stolen tractors and construction equipment, a big deal in a county whose economy depends on agriculture and tourism. (At Broken Bow Lake, north of Idabel, newcomers are building hundreds of luxury cabins in Hochatown, a resort area known as the Hamptons of Dallas-Fort Worth.) Black said nothing publicly after his departure, but Jones published an open letter in the *Gazette*, accusing Hendrix of neglecting the case of a woman who said that she was raped at gunpoint during a home invasion. The woman told Jones that she had been restrained with duct tape during the attack, and that the tape might still be at her house. Hendrix, Jones wrote, "never followed up or even reached out to the woman again." Curtis Fields, a jail employee who had recently been fired, got a letter of his own published in the *Gazette*. He wrote that the sheriff's "maladministration" was "flat-out embarrassing to our entire county," and, worse, put "many cases at risk."

Around this time, Hendrix was moved over to run the jail, and Clardy hired Alicia Manning's older brother, Mike, to be the new undersheriff. Mike, who had long worked part time as a local law-enforcement officer, owned IN-Sight Technologies, a contractor that provided CCTV, security, and I.T. services to the county, including the sheriff's department. The Willinghams observed that his new position created a conflict of

interest. In late December, the day after Mike's appointment, Chris and Bruce went to ask him about it. Mike said that he had resigned as IN-Sight's C.E.O. that very day and, after some prodding, acknowledged that he had transferred ownership of the company—to his wife. He assured the Willinghams that IN-Sight's business with McCurtain County was "minuscule." According to records that I requested from the county clerk, McCurtain County has issued at least two hundred and thirty-nine thousand dollars in purchase orders to the company since 2016. The county commissioners have authorized at least eighty thousand dollars in payments to IN-Sight since Mike became undersheriff.

Mike urged the Willinghams to focus on more important issues. When he said, "I'm not here to be a whipping post, because there's a lot of crime going on right now," Chris replied, "Oh, yeah, I agree." The undersheriff claimed to have no problem with journalists, saying, "I'm a constitutional guy."

State "sunshine" laws require government officials to do the people's business in public: most records must be accessible to anyone who wishes to see them, and certain meetings must be open to anyone who would like to attend. Bruce Willingham once wrote, "We are aggressive about protecting the public's access to records and meetings, because we have found that if we don't insist on both, often no one else will." The Center for Public Integrity grades each state on the quality of its open-government statutes and practices. At last check, Oklahoma, along with ten other states, got an F.

In January, 2022, Chris noticed a discrepancy between the number of crimes listed in the sheriff's logbook and the correlating reports made available to him. Whereas he once saw thirty to forty reports per week, he now saw fewer than twenty. "The ones that I get are like 'loose cattle on somebody's land,' all very minor stuff," he told me. He often didn't find out about serious crime until it was being prosecuted. In his next article, he wrote that fifty-three reports were missing, including information about "a shooting, a rape, an elementary school teacher being unknowingly given marijuana cookies by a student and a deputy allegedly shooting out the tires" of a car. The headline was "SHERIFF REGULARLY BREAKING LAW NOW."

Two weeks later, the sheriff's department landed back on page 1 after four felons climbed through the roof of the jail, descended a radio tower, and fled—the first escape in twenty-three years. Chris reported that prisoners had been sneaking out of the jail throughout the winter to pick up "drugs, cell phones and beer" at a nearby convenience store.

Three of the escapees were still at large when, late one Saturday night in February, Alyssa Walker-Donaldson, a former Miss McCurtain County, vanished after leaving a bar in Hochatown. When the sheriff's department did not appear to be exacting in its search, volunteers mounted their own. It was a civilian in a borrowed Cessna who spotted Walker-Donaldson's white S.U.V. at the bottom of Broken Bow Lake. An autopsy showed that she had suffered acute intoxication by alcohol and drowned in what was described as an accident. The findings failed to fully explain how Walker-Donaldson, who was twenty-four, wound up in the water, miles from where she was supposed to be, near a boat ramp at the end of a winding road. "Even the U.P.S. man can't get down there," Walker-Donaldson's mother, Carla Giddens, told me. Giddens wondered why all five buttons on her daughter's high-rise jeans were undone, and why her shirt was pushed above her bra. She told a local TV station, "Nothing was handled right when it came to her." Giddens suspected that the sheriff's

disappointing search could be attributed to the fact that her daughter was Black and Choctaw. (She has since called for a new investigation.)

Not long after that, the sheriff's department responded to a disturbance at a roadside deli. A deputy, Matt Kasbaum, arrived to find a man hogtied on the pavement; witnesses, who said that the man had broken a door and was trying to enter people's vehicles, had trussed him with cord. "Well, this is interesting," Kasbaum remarked. He handcuffed the man, Bobby Barrick, who was forty-five, then cut loose the cord and placed him in the back seat of a patrol unit. An E.M.S. crew arrived to examine Barrick. "He's doped up *hard*," Kasbaum warned. When he opened the door, Barrick tried to kick his way out, screaming "Help me!" and "They're gonna kill me!" As officers subdued him, Barrick lost consciousness. Several days later, he died at a hospital in Texas.

The public initially knew little of this because the sheriff refused to release information, on the ground that Barrick belonged to the Choctaw Nation and therefore the arrest fell under the jurisdiction of tribal police. The Willinghams turned to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, a nonprofit, headquartered in Washington, D.C., that provides pro-bono legal services to journalists. (The Reporters Committee has also assisted *The New Yorker*.) The organization had recently assigned a staff attorney to Oklahoma, an indication of how difficult it is to pry information from public officials there. Its attorneys helped the *Gazette* sue for access to case documents; the paper then reported that Kasbaum had tased Barrick three times on his bare hip bone. Barrick's widow filed a lawsuit, alleging that the taser was not registered with the sheriff's department and that deputies had not been trained to use it. The suit also alleged that Kasbaum and other officers had turned off their lapel cameras during the encounter and put "significant pressure on Barrick's back while he was in a face-down prone position and handcuffed." Kasbaum, who denied the allegations, left the force. The *Gazette* reported that the F.B.I. and the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation were looking into the death.

Chris and Angie got married soon after joining the *Gazette*. By the time Chris began publishing his series on the sheriff's department, they were in their late thirties, with small children, two dogs, and a house on a golf course. They once had a bluegrass band, Succotash, in which Angie played Dobro and Chris played everything, mainly fiddle. He taught music lessons and laid down tracks for clients at his in-home studio. Angie founded McCurtain Mosaics, working with cut glass. The couple, who never intended to become journalists, suppressed the occasional urge to leave the *Gazette*, knowing that they would be hard to replace. Bruce lamented, "Everybody wants to work in the big city."

Five days a week, in the newsroom, Chris and Angie sit in high-walled cubicles, just outside Bruce's office. The *Gazette's* other full-time reporters include Bob West, who is eighty-one and has worked at the paper for decades. An ardent chronicler of museum events, local schools, and the weather, West is also known, affectionately, as the staffer most likely to leave his car running, with the windows down, in the rain, or to arrive at work with his toothbrush in his shirt pocket. He once leaned on his keyboard and accidentally deleted the newspaper's digital Rolodex. One afternoon in May, he ambled over to Angie's desk, where the Willinghams and I were talking, and announced, "Hail, thunderstorms, damaging winds!" A storm was coming.

Bruce and Gwen Willingham own commercial real estate, and they rent several cabins to vacationers in Hochatown. Chris said, “If we didn’t have tourism to fall back on, we couldn’t run the newspaper. The newspaper *loses* money.” An annual subscription costs seventy-one bucks; the rack price is fifty cents on weekdays, seventy-five on the weekend. During the pandemic, the Willinghams reduced both the publishing schedule and the size of the broadsheet, to avoid layoffs. The paper’s receptionist, who is in her sixties, has worked there since she was a teen-ager; a former pressman, who also started in his teens, left in his nineties, when his doctor demanded that he retire. In twenty-five paces, a staffer can traverse the distance between the newsroom and the printing press—the *Gazette* is one of the few American newspapers that still publish on-site, or at all. Since 2005, more than one in four papers across the country have closed; according to the Medill School of Journalism, at Northwestern University, two-thirds of U.S. counties don’t have a daily paper. When Chris leads tours for elementary-school students, he schedules them for afternoons when there’s a print run, though he isn’t one to preach about journalism’s vital role in a democracy. He’s more likely to jiggle one of the thin metal printing plates, to demonstrate how stagehands mimic thunder.

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Bruce Willingham, who has been in the small-town-news business for more than five decades, struggles to find good reporters. “Everyone wants to work in the big city,” he said.

As the Walker-Donaldson case unfolded, Chris got a tip that the sheriff used meth and had been “tweaking” during the search for her. Bruce asked the county commissioners to require Clardy to submit to a drug test.

Urinalysis wasn't good enough—the *Gazette* wanted a hair-follicle analysis, which has a much wider detection window. The sheriff peed in a cup. Promptly, prominently, the *Gazette* reported the results, which were negative, but noted that Clardy had declined the more comprehensive test.

“This has to stop!” the sheriff posted on the department’s Facebook page. Complaining about “the repeated attacks on law enforcement,” he wrote, “We have a job to do and that is to protect people. We can’t cater to the newspaper or social media every day of the week.” Clardy blamed the *Gazette*’s reporting on “former employees who were terminated or resigned.”

Locals who were following the coverage and the reactions couldn’t decide what to make of the devolving relationship between the *Gazette* and county leadership. Was their tiny newspaper needlessly antagonizing the sheriff, or was it insisting on accountability in the face of misconduct? Craig Young, the mayor of Idabel, told me that he generally found the paper’s reporting to be accurate; he also said that the county seemed to be doing a capable job of running itself. He just hoped that nothing would disrupt Idabel’s plans to host an upcoming event that promises to draw thousands of tourists. On April 8, 2024, a solar eclipse will arc across the United States, from Dallas, Texas, to Caribou, Maine. McCurtain County lies in one of the “totality zones.” According to NASA, between one-forty-five and one-forty-nine that afternoon, Idabel will experience complete darkness.

In October, 2022, Chris got another explosive tip—about himself. A local law-enforcement officer sent him audio excerpts of a telephone conversation with Captain Manning. The officer did not trust Manning, and had recorded their call. (Oklahoma is a one-party-consent state.) They discussed office politics and sexual harassment. Manning recalled that, after she was hired, a detective took bets on which co-worker would “hit it,” or sleep with her, first. Another colleague gossiped that she “gave a really good blow job.”

The conversation turned to Clardy’s drug test. As retribution, Manning said that she wanted to question Chris in one of her sex-crime investigations—at a county commissioners’ meeting, “in front of everybody.” She went on, “We will see if they want to write about that in the newspaper. That’s just the way I roll. ‘O.K., you don’t wanna talk about it? Fine. But it’s “public record.” Y’all made mine and Kevin’s business public record.’ ”

At the time, Manning was investigating several suspected pedophiles, including a former high-school math teacher who was accused of demanding nude photographs in exchange for favorable grades. (The teacher is now serving thirteen years in prison.) Manning told a TV news station that “possibly other people in the community” who were in a “position of power” were involved. On the recorded call, she mentioned pedophilia defendants by name and referred to Chris as “one of them.” Without citing evidence, she accused him of trading marijuana for videos of children.

Chris, stunned, suspected that Manning was just looking for an excuse to confiscate his phone. But when he started to lose music students, and his kids’ friends stopped coming over, he feared that rumors were spreading in the community. A source warned him that Manning’s accusations could lead to his children being forensically interviewed, which happens in child-abuse investigations. He developed such severe anxiety and

depression that he rarely went out; he gave his firearms to a relative in case he felt tempted to harm himself. Angie was experiencing panic attacks and insomnia. “We were not managing,” she said.

That fall, as Chris mulled his options, a powerful tornado struck Idabel. Bruce and Gwen lost their home. They stored their salvaged possessions at the *Gazette* and temporarily moved in with Chris and Angie. In December, the *Gazette* announced that Chris planned to sue Manning. On March 6th, he did, in federal court, alleging “slander and intentional infliction of emotional distress” in retaliation for his reporting. Clardy was also named as a defendant, for allowing and encouraging the retaliation to take place. (Neither he nor Manning would speak with me.)

In May, both Clardy and Manning answered the civil complaint in court. Clardy denied the allegations against him. Manning cited protection under the legal doctrine of qualified immunity, which is often used to indemnify law-enforcement officers from civil action and prosecution. She denied the allegations and asserted that, if Chris Willingham suffered severe emotional distress, it fell within the limits of what “a reasonable person could be expected to endure.”

On the day that Chris filed his lawsuit, the McCurtain County Board of Commissioners held its regular Monday meeting, at 9 A.M., in a red brick building behind the jail. Commissioners—there are three in each of Oklahoma’s seventy-seven counties—oversee budgets and allocate funding. Their meeting agendas must be public, so that citizens can scrutinize government operations. Bruce, who has covered McCurtain’s commissioners for more than forty years, suspected the board of discussing business not listed on the agenda—a potential misdemeanor—and decided to try to catch them doing it.

Two of the three commissioners—Robert Beck and Mark Jennings, the chairman—were present, along with the board’s executive assistant, Heather Carter. As they neared the end of the listed agenda, Bruce slipped a recording device disguised as a pen into a cup holder at the center of the conference table. “Right in front of ’em,” he bragged. He left, circling the block for the next several hours as he waited for the commissioners to clear out. When they did, he went back inside, pretended to review some old paperwork, and retrieved the recording device.

That night, after Gwen went to bed, Bruce listened to the audio, which went on for three hours and thirty-seven minutes. He heard other county officials enter the room, one by one—“Like, ‘Now is your time to see the king.’”

In came Sheriff Clardy and Larry Hendrix. Jennings, whose family is in the timber business, brought up the 2024 race for sheriff. He predicted numerous candidates, saying, “They don’t have a goddam clue what they’re getting into, not in this day and age.” It used to be, he said, that a sheriff could “take a damn Black guy and whup their ass and throw ’em in the cell.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like that no more,” Clardy said.

“I know,” Jennings said. “Take ’em down there on Mud Creek and hang ’em up with a damn rope. But you can’t do that anymore. They got more rights than *we* got.”

After a while, Manning joined the meeting. She arrived to a boisterous greeting from the men in the room. When she characterized a colleague's recent comment about her legs as sexual harassment, Beck replied, "I thought sexual harassment was only when they held you down and pulled you by the hair." They joked about Manning mowing the courthouse lawn in a bikini.

Manning continually steered the conversation to the *Gazette*. Jennings suggested procuring a "worn-out tank," plowing it into the newspaper's office, and calling it an accident. The sheriff told him, "You'll have to beat my son to it." (Clardy's son is a deputy sheriff.) They laughed.

Manning talked about the possibility of bumping into Chris Willingham in town: "I'm not worried about what he's gonna do to me, I'm worried about what I might do to him." A couple of minutes later, Jennings said, "I know where two big deep holes are here, if you ever need them."

"I've got an excavator," the sheriff said.

"Well, these are already pre-dug," Jennings said. He went on, "I've known two or three hit men. They're very quiet guys. And would cut no fucking mercy."

Bruce had been threatened before, but this felt different. According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, forty-one journalists in the country were physically assaulted last year. Since 2001, at least thirteen have been killed. That includes Jeff German, a reporter at the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, who, last fall, was stabbed outside his home in Clark County. The county's former administrator, Robert Telles, has been charged with his murder. Telles had been voted out of office after German reported that he contributed to a hostile workplace and had an inappropriate relationship with an employee. (Telles denied the reporting and has pleaded not guilty.)

When Bruce urged Chris to buy more life insurance, Chris demanded to hear the secret recording. The playback physically sickened him. Bruce took the tape to the Idabel Police Department. Mark Matloff, the district attorney, sent it to state officials in Oklahoma City, who began an investigation.

Chris started wearing an AirTag tracker in his sock when he played late-night gigs. He carried a handgun in his car, then stopped—he and Angie worried that an officer could shoot him and claim self-defense. He talked incessantly about "disappearing" to another state. At one point, he told his dad, "I cursed our lives by deciding to move here."

It was tempting to think that everybody was watching too much "Ozark." But one veteran law-enforcement official took the meeting remarks seriously enough to park outside Chris and Angie's house at night, to keep watch. "There's an undertone of violence in the whole conversation," this official told me. "We're hiring a hit man, we're hanging people, we're driving vehicles into the McCurtain *Gazette*. These are the people that are *running* your sheriff's office."

On Saturday, April 15th, the newspaper published a front-page article, headlined "COUNTY OFFICIALS DISCUSS KILLING, BURYING GAZETTE REPORTERS." The revelation that McCurtain County's leadership had been caught talking wistfully about lynching and about the idea of murdering journalists became global news. "Both the FBI and the Oklahoma Attorney General's Office now have the full audio," the *Gazette* reported. (The McCurtain County Board of Commissioners declined to speak with me. A lawyer for the sheriff's office

wrote, in response to a list of questions, that “numerous of your alleged facts are inaccurate, embellished or outright untrue.”)

On the eve of the story’s publication, Chris and his family had taken refuge in Hot Springs, Arkansas. They were still there when, that Sunday, Kevin Stitt, the governor of Oklahoma, publicly demanded the resignations of Clardy, Manning, Hendrix, and Jennings. The next day, protesters rallied at the McCurtain County commissioners’ meeting. Jennings, the board’s chairman, resigned two days later. No one else did. The sheriff’s department responded to the *Gazette’s* reporting by calling Bruce’s actions illegal and the audio “altered.” (Chris told me that he reduced the background noise in the audio file before Bruce took it to the police.)

People wanted to hear the recording, not just read about it, but the *Gazette* had no Web site. No one had posted on the newspaper’s Facebook page since 2019, when Kiara Wimbley won the Little Miss Owa Chito pageant. The Willinghams published an oversized QR code on the front page of the April 20th issue, linking to a Dropbox folder that contained the audio and Angie’s best attempt at a transcript. They eventually put Chris’s articles online.

In a rare move, the seventeen-member board of the Oklahoma Sheriffs’ Association voted unanimously to suspend the memberships of Clardy, Manning, and Hendrix. The censure blocked them from conferences and symbolically ostracized them from Oklahoma’s seventy-six other sheriffs. “When one goes bad, it has a devastating effect on everybody,” Ray McNair, the executive director, told me. Craig Young, Idabel’s mayor, said, “It kind of hurt everyone to realize we’ve had these kind of leaders in place.”

Young was among those who hoped that Gentner Drummond, the attorney general, would depose the sheriff “so we can start to recover.” But, on June 30th, Drummond ended his investigation by informing Governor Stitt that although the McCurtain County officials’ conversation was “inflammatory” and “offensive,” it wasn’t criminal. There would be no charges. If Clardy were to be removed from office, voters would have to do it.

Decades ago, Bruce launched “Call the Editor,” a regular feature on the *Gazette’s* opinion page. Readers vent anonymously to the newspaper’s answering machine, and Bruce publishes some of the transcribed messages. When the world ran out of answering machines, he grudgingly upgraded to digital, which requires plugging the fax cable into his computer every afternoon at five and switching it back the next morning. A caller might refer to Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer as “buffoons,” or ask, Why is the Fire Department charging me a fifty-cent fee? There have been many recent messages about the sheriff and the commissioners, including direct addresses to Clardy: “The people aren’t supposed to be scared . . . of you or others that wear a badge.”

Bruce and Gwen worried that the ongoing stress would drive Chris and Angie away from the *Gazette*—and from McCurtain County. Sure enough, they’re moving to Tulsa. Angie told me, “We’re forty years old. We’ve been doing this half our lives. At some point, we need to think of our own happiness, and our family’s welfare.” Bruce protested, but he couldn’t much blame them. ♦

The newspaper managed to secretly record a county meeting and caught officials talking about the idea of killing Gazette reporters.

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Before the caucuses, snow had kept the former President away from his enthusiastic crowds. On Saturday, he finally arrived in Des Moines.

By Antonia Hitchens

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

The Donald Trump Doom Loop

Sitting in a courtroom, feet away from the woman he sexually assaulted, the ex-President keeps trying to outrun the consequences of his own bad acts.

By Eric Lach