

HOME SHOWS SCHEDULE VIDEOS WHERE TO WATCH WOMEN IN SCIENCE

TELLING AMERICA'S STORIES

Search

# SOUL OF A PEOPLE

WRITING AMERICA'S STORY

- ABOUT
- VIDEO
- AUDIO
- IN YOUR TOWN

SHARE

## The Darkest Guidebook Ever?

Before Jim Thompson became the dean of American noir novelists with classics like *The Killer Inside Me* (soon to be a major motion picture with Kate Hudson and Casey Affleck) and *The Grifters*, he grew up in a place where life mirrored pulp. Born in Oklahoma in 1914, by his twenties Thompson had bounced around Oklahoma towns, worked as a West Texas oil hand, and procured booze and women to hotel guests as a bellboy.

In the 1930s, as the Great Depression deepened, Thompson was struggling to avoid poverty by writing about the outlaws, bad cops and wild spaces of Oklahoma. First he wrote for the pulps – *Master Detective*, *True Detective*, and more. But when he couldn't eke out a living for his family with the pay from those magazines, Thompson took a job writing for the tours section of the WPA guide to Oklahoma.

Gradually his writing skills made him invaluable and he worked his way up to become the guide's main editor. The result may be one of the darkest guidebooks ever. Thompson kicked off a chapter about local folklore with an account of an Oklahoman who "ran amuck on a visit to town and, in the course of a few minutes, killed a representative of each of five races."

Retracing his steps with the WPA guidebook is like getting a Coen Brothers' tour of the *Blood Simple* or *No Country for Old Men*. It opens your eyes to a side of America that Thompson saw for real before he made it up.

Thompson pulled no punches and gave his hometown a dead-eye stare. He called Oklahoma City a big town built on the ideas of small men, a place "whose cultural life is wrapped in the rusty hide of a lean, long-dead steer." Yet from 1936 to 1938, he poured himself into the WPA guide, delving into Oklahoma's stories, researching auto tour routes and editing the drafts of others, including a young Louis L'Amour.



Thompson's guide is a Dante-like trip through the state's towns and parks, and from oilfields to small towns lit by a chilling glow. Meanwhile, he kept writing true-crime stories for the pulps, as-told-to articles about the murder of a hobo, or an unsolved Oklahoma City serial killer. Retracing his path then reveals a young Thompson examining Oklahoma and gleaming from it the attitude that would shape his 1952 novel, *The Killer Inside Me*, which Stanley Kubrick called "probably the most chilling and believable first-person story of a criminally warped mind I have ever encountered."

Events in Oklahoma marking the 75th anniversary of the New Deal included an exhibit of WPA murals in Anadarko (where Thompson's father was sheriff for a time, and the family lived above the county jail) and a reunion of CCC workers swapping tales about the cabins and park structures they built in the 1930s -- places like the Chickasaw National Recreation Area.

Chickasaw is on Tour 11 in the WPA guide book, which follows the old Chisholm Trail south to the Texas line. You might find Thompson's spirit in a camping trip to Chickasaw guided by the gun-toting hosts of *Wild Oklahoma*, a website and video series. Tour 11 continues through Oklahoma City and Duncan, where Thompson's description of the Halliburton oil-drilling technology and its world-wide reach has an eerie prescience.

You might also find episodes in recent Oklahoma history that resonate: Timothy McVeigh's reading of "Invictus" as he faced execution for the Oklahoma City bombing; the prison break of Randolph Dial, a hit man who seduced a deputy warden's wife to help with his escape; and even Holly Hunter's renegade Oklahoma cop in *Saving Grace*. Thompson's dark night didn't simply come out of his head.

"You're fortunate in being away from this God-forsaken place," he wrote of Oklahoma City to Benjamin Botkin, a WPA official whom he knew from a stint in college in Nebraska.

Thompson's letters to Botkin, now in the archive at the University of Nebraska, show that Thompson was conscientious about his WPA work, idealistic about the value of working people, yet increasingly disillusioned and alert to the dark side of human nature.

When he left the WPA, Thompson returned to his fiction skills and was glad to find, as he wrote Botkin, "that I had not completely mislaid my little bag of tricks."

-- David Taylor

SHOP FOR SPRING

SmithsonianStore.com

Cherry Blossom Scarf  
Item: 22256

### Where to find Us



### Stay Connected



### Sign up for our Newsletter



### Buy on DVD and Blu-Ray



### Buy on iTunes

[FIND OUT MORE ABOUT AUTHOR DAVID TAYLOR](#)

[>>BACK TO TOP](#)



[> Download Here](#)

[TERMS OF USE](#) | [FAQ](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [PRESS](#) | [REGISTER](#) | [SUBMISSIONS](#) | [UNSUBSCRIBE](#)

© 2010 SNI/SI Networks L.L.C. All rights reserved. Smithsonian Channel is a trademark of Smithsonian Institution.

SNI/SI Networks L.L.C. is an authorized user.



Butterfly Coasters  
Item: 84020

**SHOP NEW ARRIVALS**  
[SmithsonianStore.com](http://SmithsonianStore.com)