

## **How Curious – Marland Mansion**

### **How did an Italian palace come to be on the Oklahoma Plains?**

**MUSIC:** How Curious theme

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Hello. Welcome to How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin. And today I'm joined by one of my colleagues.

#### **Jolly Brown**

I'm Jolly Brown, Development Director for KGOU.

#### **Rachel in Situ**

And you came up with an idea for How Curious. What was your idea?

#### **Jolly Brown**

How did an Italian palace come to be on the Oklahoma plains? So I grew up in Ponca City, Oklahoma, just around the corner from the Marland Mansion. It was part of my every day. But when you step back and you think about it, it's like this smaller type community having this type of craftsmanship and opulence. I don't know if it's opulent, but to have this kind of thing in a small prairie town is kind of remarkable.

#### **Rachel in Situ**

It is remarkable. I would absolutely say it's opulent. You don't think it's opulent? [Laughing]

#### **Jolly Brown**

It's a little opulent. I mean, yeah. It is.

SEGUE

#### **Gary Pinnell**

The mansion is like the Sistine Chapel.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Journalist and author Gary Pinnell.

#### **Gary Pinnell**

The history of Oklahoma is on one ceiling. There's another ceiling that has \$80,000 worth of gold leaf. E.W.'s only instructions to the artisans who built the mansion was spare no expense. It's one of the most incredible things you'll ever see, right there in Ponca City.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

The man whose vision led to this sumptuous structure was named Ernest Whitworth Marland, though he went by E.W.

#### **Bob Burke**

E. W. Marland was a consummate oil man.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Historian Bob Burke

**Bob Burke**

He was a risk taker and the greatest oilmen have always been risk takers.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Indeed. E.W. was born in Pittsburgh, PA in 1874. Although his parents were well off, he was not one to rest of his inherited laurels. He loved adventure, was competitive by nature, and wanted to make his own way. Small wonder, then, that the oil business – then experiencing something of a regional heyday in Pittsburgh area – called to him. He quickly made his first fortune, then just as quickly lost it in the financial crisis of 1907.

Undaunted, he simply borrowed money to start afresh – but what and where?

**Sonya Abercrombie**

So he'd heard great things about California ...

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

This is Sonya Abercrombie.

**Sonya Abercrombie**

... but he had a nephew that was a colonel at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. His nephew's job was to transport a federal prisoner to the 101 to be in a wild west show. So his nephew talked him into coming to Ponca City. That's where he met the Miller brothers. The Miller brothers had the 101 Ranch.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

This was a huge outfit that was specially famed for those wild west shows.

**Sonya Abercrombie**

And by the way, that federal prisoner the nephew was bringing to the 101, that was Geronimo.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

That sounds like a subject for a future How Curious.

Anyway once here, E. W. became convinced that the surface geology of the land was indicative of oil below.

**Sonya Abercrombie**

He drilled 8 wells and hit gas most of the time. Gas did not have a value. He could only drill one more time and he just knew the sacred land of the Ponca. So he asked Chief White Eagle "do you mind if I drill?" Well, he did and he told him no. But Joe Miller, one of the Miller boys, grew up with the Ponca tribe. He spoke their language. He's the one that negotiated the deal. The well was Willie-Cries-For-War and that started his second fortune.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Marland later recalled the excitement of this time. His words are read here by Cody Dennis.

### **E.W. Marland memoir read by Cody Clark**

I have slept in the derrick of many a discovery well, gone for a week at a time without even taking my boots off, wet to the skin in freezing weather – meals out of a dinner pail – and loved it for the excitement it gave and the sense of satisfaction that came from tapping a treasure house of nature, filled with liquid gold.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It was 1911 – the first of many years of huge wealth to come Marland's way.

### **Sonya Abercrombie**

In the 19 teens and 20s, E.W. was pulling in a million dollars a day. But they were not stingy. He gave all of his employees free health care, free dental, free life insurance, and a pension plan

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Sonya Abercrombie again. She's the interim director of the Marland Estate, and she showed me around the Marland Grand Home in Ponca City – which is distinct from the Marland Mansion.

### **Sonya Abercrombie**

The first lady here is Mary Virginia.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

She was Marland's first wife.

### **Sonya Abercrombie**

Mary Virginia loved children but she couldn't have them. Her sister Margaret had four of them and Margaret's husband was supporting the family of six by selling vegetables off of a cart. So they're going to adopt Lydie at 16 and George at 18. Until that point, believe it or not, the Marlands lived in the old Arcade Hotel. The Old Arcade Hotel here in Ponca City, America, was home to 22 millionaires. After they adopted the kids, they said "you know what? We have a family so we need a home". So this is the starter home. It was built in 1916 at a cost of \$350,000.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

That'd be over \$10 million today. It may not be on the scale of the later Mansion, but the Grand Home is a large, very attractive and well appointed property where the Marland family lived for 12 years. Here's Bob Burke again.

### **Bob Burke**

What happens in the 1920s: Virginia Marland gets sick. She can no longer be the hostess for the many parties that they had, the entertaining, so that fell to teenager Lydie, and so Lydie becomes the hostess, if you will. But I never suspected that E.W. was anything other than an uncle and father, but I don't think he was a dirty old man. There's nothing of people who were contemporaries of his whoever indicated that that might be the case. Now there was a huge age

difference between E.W. and Lydie, but by the time Virginia dies, Lydie is the consummate host. And then they decide to build the palace on the prairie.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

The reason Bob's just explained all that is because only just over a year on from Virginia's death, Marland and Lydie were married.

**Bob Burke**

When you adopt a child, that child becomes your legal heir and becomes your child. SO he couldn't marry his child, so they did the right thing by annulling the adoption and then they get married. Now that was the talk of all of the National Enquirers of the day. It was the Woody Allen of the 1930s.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

What a scandal. It's thought that Lydie in particular was hurt by all the gossip their wedding had generated. Hopefully the construction of the palace proved a distraction.

**David Keathly**

We're glad to be at the Marland Mansion this morning. We have a really beautiful day outside.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

David Keathly is the Tour Director of the Marland Mansion which, like the Grand Home, is open to the public.

**David Keathly**

This is the formal dining room. The house itself is modelled loosely after the Davanzati Palace in Florence, Italy. The Marlands had travelled there after World War One and were highly impressed. So they came back to America, hired architect John Duncan Forsyth and started laying out plans for this house. The house has 55 rooms, 43,500 square feet, and it's on three and a half levels, and on and on. It's an amazing house. We believe it's probably the outstanding house in Oklahoma but we're a little biased.

**SEGUE**

**Bob Burke**

He really wanted to build a palace.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Bob Burke.

**Bob Burke**

There was gold leaf everywhere. I mean on the door handles. There was gold leaf on paintings. The ceilings in the mansion, they had gold on them. So he had gold everywhere. And then he has a series of lakes and all the flower gardens.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Today the mansion grounds consist of 26 acres. Back then, E.W. had over 26 hundred acres landscaped! I asked Gary Pinnell what he thought had motivated Marland to go so very all out.

**Gary Pinnell**

I think he wanted to have the biggest home in Oklahoma. He also was a big partier. The manor ...

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

That's the Grand Home.

**Gary Pinnell**

... was a big party mansion, and he wanted a bigger party mansion. He had, for instance, two ballrooms. And so that tells you something. And these two ballrooms joined.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Yet even as the mansion was still taking shape, Marland's empire was starting to crumble.

**Bob Burke**

As often happens in the oil and gas business, there are booms and busts. You get into the late 20s and we go through a time when the price of oil goes down, and as the price of oil goes down, E.W. gets in trouble financially, so he has to go to the big banks to get additional financing to keep all of his operations going until, he knew, that there would be a rise in prices and it would be okay. Well that didn't happen and over time, these big trusts who were lending him the money from the east coast, big banks, they kept saying "we need another seat on the board, we need another seat on the board." So finally he no longer controlled his board of directors and that's when they kicked him out. And when that happens, it devastates him and he almost goes completely broke.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

A letter written by Lydie to a friend from this time gives you an idea of the stress the couple were under. The reader is Nicole Poole.

**Lydie Marland letter excerpt read by Nicole Poole**

Do you remember Damocles? The man who was sitting under the sword, which was suspended by a hair – ? I have been him for two and a half years. (...) I could tell you the details of what we have been reduced to (...) For instance, our drug, cleaning & some other things have not been paid since Dec. and Jan. It doesn't seem possible but is too true. The situation here is so tense and difficult it takes most of my energy trying to keep my head & not be nervous, but I'm all broken out in bumps from nervousness.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

The couple moved out of the mansion, the upkeep of which now proved punitively expensive, and into one of the supporting buildings on the estate. Marland tried repeatedly to get another oil enterprise going but without success. So instead he turned to politics, serving first as in the House of Representatives and then as Oklahoma's Governor with a desire to ...

**E.W. Marland memoir read by Cody Clark**

Bring the New Deal to Oklahoma.

SEGUE

**Gary Pinnell**

He came in in 1935. He went out in January of 1939.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Back then governors could only serve one term.

**Gary Pinnell**

You've seen how presidents age. Barack Obama, for instance, his hair turned white while he was in office. Marland aged exponentially. He came in as a relatively young 61 year old and he left as an old, old man at 65. He was going to go in the next few years and he knew it. That's why he sold the mansion.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

The only buyer Marland could find was an order of monks. They bought the palace, which had cost 5 and a half million, for a mere 66 thousand dollars.

Marland died in 1941 at the age of 67 leaving Lydie, now aged 41, alone, vulnerable, and increasingly isolated.

**Bob Burke**

She has lost so much. She stays around for 12 years but she's a recluse. Then, of course, we know that in 1953 Lydie could no longer take it and she leaves for parts unknown. She disappears and it becomes national news. The cover of one of the major magazines of the day has a big headline that says "Where is Princess Lydie?"

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

She was gone for 22 years. Where she went and what she did during that time is the subject of endless speculation. The only person from her old life with whom she's known to have remain in contact was a lawyer called C. D. Northcutt.

**Bob Burke**

She would send him money each year to pay the taxes on the carriage house and so she must have felt that she some day would come back to Ponca City. In her travels, Lydie gets the closest to Ponca City she has been in 22 years in the spring of 1975, when she is working as a hotel cleaning person in Wichita, Kansas. C.D. gets in contact with her. He sees her. She is toothless. Here this former beautiful first lady of Oklahoma is near toothless and she is beaten down. And so C.D. convinces her to come home.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Coincidentally this was just around the time that Ponca City voters were deciding whether to support a temporary tax to buy the Mansion. The town had benefitted hugely when E.W. was alive and wealthy – amongst other things, he'd provided it with a hospital, land for the high school, the American Legion's Children's Home, and the Ponca City Military Academy. Now it had the possibility of keeping the Mansion too for posterity. Despite her withdrawn disposition, Lydie wrote to the local newspaper in support of this step.

### **Lydie Marland letter excerpt read by Nicole Poole**

I do believe that for the city to own it is the best answer for ensuring the protection for the future of a structure that is unique – and also, I feel it would add to the many unusual and attractive features that make Ponca City the outstanding city (...) that it is.

My own feelings about the place are naturally emotional and personal – but I would like to say this much – to me it is a place of rare beauty and artistic integrity. A structure that is an expression from mind into substance, of the quality, the strength, and the heart of a man.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Lydie Marland lived quietly in the carriage house on the Marland Mansion grounds for the rest of her life. She died in 1987.

Thanks to all of the contributors to today's episode, including my colleague Jolly Brown and readers Cody Dennis and Nicole Poole. Additional thanks to Lynda Ozan of the State Historic Preservation Office. You can see photos of the Marland Mansion on the episode webpage - search for KGOU and How Curious.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As always, if you have an idea for a future episode, please let us know at [curious@kgou.org](mailto:curious@kgou.org).