

CRAWFORD “CHEROKEE BILL” GOLDSBY

....the toughest of them all

By Bennie J. McRae, Jr.

On a sunny afternoon on March 17, 1896 as Crawford “Cherokee Bill” Goldsby escorted by prison guards, his mother Ellen, Amanda Foster, an elderly lady who had help raise him, and Father Pius, a Catholic priest, walked to the gallows to be hanged for murder. Looking around at the crowd that had gathered to witness the occasion, he stated, “This is about as good as day to die as any.” A short time later there was a creaking sound as the trap was sprung and he was dead ending the life at twenty of the most notorious outlaws to roam the Indian Territory and perhaps the entire Western Frontier. For over a two year period during the last decade of the nineteenth century, he led a reign of terror throughout the territory which included murder and robbery. He murdered his brother-in-law, lawmen, and anyone he disliked who crossed his path.

Crawford Goldsby was born on February 8, 1876 at Fort Concho, Texas. He was the second of four children and the oldest son born to Ellen Beck and George Goldsby. The older sister was Georgia Eller and the two brothers were Clarence and Luther.

Ellen was born in the Delaware District of the Cherokee Nation. Crawford’s maternal grandfather was Luge Beck, described as being a Cherokee of the half blood, and grandmother was Tempy Beck. Both had been slaves once owned by Jeffery Beck, a Cherokee.

In a signed deposition on January 29, 1912, George Goldsby stated that he was born in Perry County, Alabama on February 22, 1843. His father was Thornton Goldsby of Selma, Alabama and his mother was Hester King, a mulatto, who resided on her own place west of Summerfield Road between Selma and Marion, Alabama. George also stated that he had four brothers and two sisters by the same father and mother, Crawford, Abner, Joseph, Blevens, Mary, and Susie.

George served as a hired servant with a Confederate infantry regiment during the Civil War. While at Gettysburg, he escaped and went to Harrisburg worked as a teamster in a Quartermaster unit and subsequently enlisted as a White man in the 21st Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment under the name of George Goosby. (The spelling sometimes varied between Goosbey and Goosley).

After the Civil War ended, he returned to the Selma, Alabama area. During his last visit, the word was out that he would be captured and lynched for going over to and fighting with the Union Army, after which time he departed the area for Indian Territory.

In 1867, George enlisted in the 10th Cavalry Regiment (Buffalo Soldier) under his proper name, George Goldsby, and by 1872 he was promoted to sergeant major. After the expiration of his five-year term, he re-enlisted and became first sergeant of Company D, 10th Cavalry.

During 1878 when Crawford was two years old, serious trouble began to occur in San Angela (San Angelo), Texas between the black soldiers and cowboys and hunters. The incident that led to the largest confrontation took place in Morris' saloon. A group of cowboys and hunters ripped the chevrons from the sleeves of a Company D sergeant and the stripes from his pants. The soldier returned to the post and enlisted the aid of fellow soldiers who armed themselves with carbines and returned to the saloon. A blazing gunfight commenced resulting in one hunter being killed and two others wounded. One private was killed and another wounded.

Texas Ranger Captain G. W. Arrington with a party of rangers went on post, Fort Concho, in an attempt to arrest First Sergeant Goldsby of D Company charging that he was responsible for the soldiers obtaining the carbines. Colonel Benjamin Grierson, Post Commander, challenged the authority of the rangers on a federal post.

Sergeant Goldsby apparently knew that the Army could not or would not protect him away from the post so he went AWOL, it has been said with the assistance of an officer of the 10th Cavalry. He escaped from Texas into Indian Territory.

Sometime after being abandoned at Fort Concho, Ellen Beck Goldsby moved with her family to Fort Gibson, Indian Territory. She left Crawford in the care of an elderly black lady known as "Aunty" Amanda Foster. She cared for him until he was seven years old and was sent to the Indian school at Cherokee, Kansas. Three years later he was sent to the Catholic Indian School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. At the age of twelve, he returned home to Fort Gibson.

Upon returning home, Crawford learned that his mother had remarried. On June 27, 1889, Ellen married William Lynch in Kansas City, Missouri. She was the "authenticated" laundress of the 10th Cavalry, D Troop and stayed with the unit which gave her rations, transportation, and quarters. She transferred to Fort Davis, Texas, and to Fort Grant, Arizona. She was also with the unit at Fort Apache, Texas.

After departing Fort Apache, she traveled to Kansas City to marry William Lynch before proceeding to Fort Gibson. Lynch, born in Waynesville, Ohio, was a private in K Troop, 9th Cavalry. He had served during an earlier enlistment with H Troop, 10th Cavalry.

Crawford and William Lynch, his stepfather, did not get along. He began to associate with unsavory characters, drink liquor and rebel against authority. When Crawford was fifteen he went to live with his sister Georgia and her husband Mose Brown. They lived near Nowata, Oklahoma Territory on land gained by her mother's Freedman status. The stay did not last very long because Mose had an intense dislike for Crawford. He returned to Fort Gibson and lived for awhile with Bud Buffington who is believed to be related to William Buffington the son of Lucinda Beck. Lucinda was also once owned by Jeffery Beck and raised Crawford's mother Ellen.

At age seventeen, Crawford began to work odd jobs cleaning and sweeping stores and working on a ranch. He sometimes worked for room and board and was later paid wages. He was described by James Turley, ranch owner, as being "quiet, good natured, hard-working boy, well-liked by all who knew him."

Crawford's first serious trouble started when he was eighteen. One night while attending a dance in the Fort Gibson area, he and Jake Lewis, a thirty-five year-old black man had a confrontation over his younger brother and he was severely beaten by Lewis. Two days later Crawford confronted Lewis with a six-shooter and threatened to kill him. Shortly afterwards, he shot Lewis twice, left him dead, mounted his horse and fled. However, Lewis recovered from his wounds. The authorities in the Cherokee Nation attempted to arrest him, but Crawford left the Cherokee Nation and went into the Creek and Seminole Nations, met and joined up with two noted outlaws Jim and Bill Cook described as being mixed-blood Cherokees.

During the summer of 1894, the government purchased from the Cherokees their rights to land called the Cherokee Strip. A certain portion of the payment was reserved for the Cherokee tribal treasury and over six million dollars was to be paid out to all who could make legitimate claim as to having the required one-eighth Cherokee blood. Each individual was to receive \$265.70. Goldsby and the Cook brothers, while traveling to Tahlequah to obtain their share of the money stopped at a hotel and restaurant on Fourteen Mile Creek operated by Effie Crittenden. Effie employed a brother-in-law of the Cooks as a cook. The gang ordered Effie to proceed to Tahlequah to obtain their money because they did not want to be seen in the area. Goldsby was wanted for the shooting of Jake Lewis and Jim Cook was wanted for larceny.

Effie Crittenden drew the payments on behalf of Goldsby and the Cooks on the treasurer's last day at Tahlequah. As Effie proceeded back to her establishment she was followed by Sheriff Ellis Rattling Gourd with the intentions of capturing Goldsby and the Cooks.

On the evening of July 18, 1894, a gunfight occurred between the Sheriff and a posse of seven men on one side and the Cooks and Goldsby on the other. In the Sheriff's posse was brothers Dick and Zeke Crittenden who was commissioned as Deputy U.S. Marshall. Effie was the separated wife of Dick Crittenden and it was alleged that Dick planned the shootout in the hopes that Effie would be killed.

During the gunfight, posse Sequoyah Houston was killed and Jim Cook was wounded. The Sheriff and four of his posse fled. Shortly afterward the Crittenden brothers escaped in the dark.

It was after this incident that Crawford Goldsby gained the alias "Cherokee Bill." While Effie Crittenden was being questioned about the murder of Sequoyah Houston, she was asked if Crawford was involved in the gunfight and she said, "No it was not Crawford Goldsby, but it was Cherokee Bill."

Shortly after the fight at Fourteen Mile Creek, the famous Cook gang was organized. The gang was integrated, however, most of the members were black men some being Cherokee Freedmen. Members included Bill Cook, Cherokee Bill, Lon Gordon, Sam McWilliams, Henry Munson, and Curtis Dayson, and others. A reign of terror took place during the month of July 1894 which included robberies and murder in the Cherokee and Creek Nations. On July 14, 1894, the Muskogee-Fort Gibson stage was held up. Shortly afterwards, a prominent Cherokee, William Drew was held up and relieved of money, a pistol, and other items. Two days later the Frisco train was held up at Red Fork.

On the morning of July 31, the Cook Gang robbed the Lincoln County Bank at Chandler, Oklahoma Territory of an unknown amount of cash. The barber across the street sounded

the alarm and was killed by one of the outlaws. During the getaway, numerous shot was fired. One of the gang members was shot in the hip and captured. The others escaped into the hills. The terror continued throughout the months of September and October 1894. A store was robbed at Okmulgee. Individuals were robbed in the areas of Muskogee and Fort Gibson. On October 11, the Missouri Pacific depot at Claremore was robbed and two hours later the Katy Railroad agent at Chouteau was also robbed. On October 20, the gang wrecked and robbed the Missouri Pacific Railroad's Kansas City and Memphis Express at Coretta.

Panic reigned throughout the area especially in the northern half of Indian Territory. A wire was sent to the Office of Indian Affairs in Washington by Union agent Dew M. Wisdom in which he summarized the conditions in the area stating among other things that the affairs were in desperate condition; business was suspended, people intimidated and individuals were being robbed day and night. He also stated that his police force was not equal to the emergency and the U.S. Marshall at Fort Smith stated that he did not have the money to keep marshals in the field for a campaign against the outlaws.

Chief United States Marshall Crump of Fort Smith, Arkansas was summoned to Washington to give an account of the gang's operation. The U.S. Attorney General and Secretary of War pledged full support of the government. The Secretary of War threatened to abrogate the treaties, abolish the tribal relations and establish a territorial government." Rewards was posted for the capture of any or all of the gang members.

Numerous detailed accounts by citizens were reported as the gang robbed and murdered through out the region. They sought revenge on those who knew them and reported their activities to authorities. A black man by the name of Burl Taylor who lived in the Creek Nation had several encounters with Cherokee Bill and reported the other gang members as being Jim and Bill Cook, Jim French, Sam McWilliam, who was known as the Verdigris Kid, Texas Jack and Skeeter.

Cherokee Bill had an irresistible charm with women. However, this caused his downfall and capture as we will see later. Supposedly he had a girlfriend in nearly every section of the territory and was often protected by loyal friends. Lawmen who pursued him usually kept a safe distance in order to avoid engaging him in battle. He was on good terms with Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles and moved through their villages and lands easily. In some areas the lawmen could not move around as freely. Some towns even passed ordinances allowing him to move around or through out the respective areas unmolested.

Cherokee Bill was credited with most of the murders that occurred during the gang's rampage. Many times he killed for no cause or reason. The number ranges from seven to thirteen. One account said he murdered a least fourteen men. In September 1894 Cherokee Bill shot and killed his brother-in-law, Mose Brown, reportedly over an argument about some hogs. The account of the incident as stated by the daughter of Georgia and Mose relates to her mother receiving a letter from Cherokee Bill requesting that she visit him.

However, Mose objected to her going and later insisted on going along despite the pleas from Georgia that he not accompany her on the trip. Upon their arrival at the location Cherokee Bill was residing, Mose was asked why he came and during the altercation that followed Mose was shot and killed.

Just before noon on November 8, 1894, two men identified as Cherokee Bill and Sam McWilliams, the Verdigris Kid rode into Lenapah located between Coffeyville, Kansas and Nowata, Indian Territory with the intent of robbing a store operated by Schufeldt and Son. Cherokee Bill entered the store while his companion waited outside and he ordered the owner to open the safe in which he secured the cash contents. Afterwards he decided to take some clothing and ammunition. While this activity was in progress, a group of men who was working next door appeared at the window on the outside of the store to see what was going on due to the commotion. Without warning and for no apparent reason Cherokee Bill shot Ernest Melton and he died instantly. After the robbery and murder the two outlaws rode out of town.

The shooting of an innocent bystander by Cherokee Bill eventually led to his arrest and conviction to hang. An intense search was mounted that forced the gang to separate. Many of the members was either captured or killed. Those captured received long prison sentences or were sent to the gallows. Sam McWilliams, the Verdigris Kid, was shot and killed by an Indian deputy sheriff just east of Fort Gibson. One of the Cook brothers was captured on a cattle ranch near Fort Sumner, New Mexico Territory in the same area where Pat Garrett had killed Billy the Kid.

Cherokee Bill continued to be elusive and many lawmen were reluctant to confront him face to face because of his feared reputation as being one of the toughest desperados in the area. It was said that he could shoot faster than two ordinary men. Using his rifle he could hit a squirrel in the eye as far as he could see and could shoot from his waist and hardly ever miss the target. The citizens of Lenapah were outraged and shaken up by the murder and it was stated that an ordinance was passed granting him the privilege of free movement without being molested which was one of the most unusual acts in the history of the Western Frontier.

The Deputy U.S. Marshall began to solicit the aid of citizens who knew Cherokee Bill and his movement patterns. One acquaintance visited his hideout and was given a locket that was taken during the robbery at the Schufeldt store in Lenapah. A few days later Deputy U.S. Marshall W.C. Smith came in contact with Clint Scales described as being a black man who sometimes worked as a handyman. He advised the marshal that Cherokee Bill would sometime meet one of his girlfriends, Maggie Glass, at the cabin of Ike Rogers, just east of Nowata. Maggie was described as being of African and Cherokee descent and was the niece of Ike Rogers' wife. Ike was also of African-Cherokee descent.

Deputy Smith contacted Ike Rogers and developed a plan to lure Cherokee Bill into a trap by using Maggie Glass unsuspecting to bait the trap with Clint Scales causally dropping over to spend the night. Ike held a deputy marshal's commission, however, he had a bad reputation was not very effective.

Cherokee Bill was constantly on guard and very suspicious of Ike Rogers and refused to leave even after Maggie urged him to do so. Ike played the part of a generous host by offering him whiskey laced with morphine, but Bill refused to drink and he kept his rifle with him at all times even at the dinner table. The weapons belonging to Ike and Clint were kept out of sight because they did not want give Bill an excuse to shoot them. After breakfast the next morning Ike gave Maggie a dollar and instructed her to go and purchase some chickens from a neighbor so as to get her out of the house.

Shortly after Maggie departed Bill took some paper and tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. When he leaned over towards the fireplace to light it Ike struck him across the back of the head. Ike felt the blow would have killed an ordinary man but it only knocked him down. Ike's wife grabbed Bill's rifle while Ike and Clint attempted to subdue him. After a twenty minute tussle on the floor the two managed to get a pair of handcuffs onto Bill.

Bill was placed in a wagon with Clint Scales and Ike rode behind with a shotgun. While enroute to Nowata, Cherokee Bill broke the hand cuffs and grabbed at Clint's rifle. Clint fell out of the wagon with his rifle while Ike kept him covered with the shotgun. After arriving at Nowata, Cherokee Bill was turned over to Deputy Marshals Bill Smith and George Lawson.

The deputies took charge of the prisoner and placed him in the federal jail in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Cherokee Bill was later arraigned before Judge Isaac Charles "Hanging Judge" Parker charged with the murder of Ernest Melton. Ellen, Bill's mother, retained J. Warren Reed described as being the most famous trial lawyer in Fort Smith to defend him.

During the trial the prosecutor produced seven witnesses who positively identified Cherokee Bill as the person who killed Ernest Melton. The defense lawyer put on the stand "alibi" witnesses who swore Bill was seen fifty miles south of Lenapah the day Melton was murdered.

Judge Parker charged the jury and within a few minutes returned with a guilty verdict. When the verdict was read, Cherokee Bill smiled. His mother and sister who had been in the courtroom throughout the trial wept loudly. Bill said, "What's the matter with you two?" "I ain't dead yet." He was placed back in jail and reunited with his old friend Bill Cook who had been captured in New Mexico and the two acted as if nothing had happened.

On April 13, 1895 Cherokee Bill was taken to court for sentencing and June 25 was set as the execution date. The execution date was reset to March 17, 1896 after the appeal process to the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the lower court. During the spring of 1895, there were over 200 prisoners in the Fort Smith jail and constant scheming to escape. The head jailer, J.D. Berry, ordered a search of the entire prison on July 10. In Cherokee Bill's cell they found nine .45 caliber cartridges, and in the bathroom they located .45 caliber revolver hidden in a bucket of lime fully loaded. Everyone denied knowing where the weapons and ammunition came from. There were many suspects, including Sherman Vann, a black trusty and Henry Starr, the grandson of Cherokee outlaw Tom Starr and nephew of Sam Starr. However the search failed to uncover a second revolver that had been smuggled into the jail and hidden by Cherokee Bill.

On July 26, 1895 at 7:00 in the evening, Turnkey Campbell Eoff and Guard Lawrence Keating entered Murderer's Row. Keating was shot and killed while passing Cherokee Bill's cell after he disobeyed Bill's order to give up his weapon. Eoff ran up the corridor and Bill stepped from his cell and fired twice. George Pearce, another outlaw and one of the plot's ringleaders, ran after Eoff. This probably saved Eoff's life because Cherokee Bill could not shoot at him without probably shooting Pearce.

Cherokee Bill held the jail under siege and began firing at random from his cell. Each time he would fire, he would gobble, a sound half between the bark of a coyote and that of a turkey. The prisoners were badly frightened and many had crawled under their bunks or

huddled in the corner of their cells. Cherokee Bill continued to hold out and refused to surrender.

Henry Starr volunteered to go to Bill's cell and attempt to talk him into giving up the weapon. The authorities agreed to allow Starr to visit the cell and agreed not to fire during the consultation. A short time later Starr emerged from the cell with Cherokee Bill's weapon.

The second trial lasted three days resulting in a guilty verdict and Judge Parker sentenced Cherokee Bill to be hanged on September 10, 1895. A stay was granted pending an appeal to the Supreme Court. On December 2, the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the Fort Smith court and Judge Parker again set the execution date as March 17, 1896.

On the morning of March 17, Cherokee Bill awoke at six, singing and whistling. He ate a light breakfast sent from the hotel by his mother. At 9:20, his mother and "Aunty" Amanda Foster were admitted to his cell and shortly afterwards Father Pius arrived.

The hanging was scheduled for 11:00 a.m., but was delayed until 2:00 p.m. in order for his sister Georgia to have the opportunity to see him before the hanging. She was scheduled to arrive at 1:00 p.m. on the eastbound train. Shortly after 2:00 p.m. while on the gallows, it was reported Cherokee Bill was asked if he had any thing to say and he replied, "I came here to die, not make a speech." Approximately twelve minutes later Crawford "Cherokee Bill" Goldsby, the most notorious outlaw in the Territory was dead.

The body was placed in a coffin which was placed in a box and taken to the Missouri Pacific depot. Placed aboard the train, Ellen and Georgia escorted the body to Fort Gibson for burial.

Crawford "Cherokee Bill" Goldsby is buried in the Cherokee National Cemetery, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma.

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Sources:

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