

## Echoes From the Past

### **MATTHIAS SPLITLOG “THE INDIAN MILLIONAIRE”**

*Note: addendum at bottom*

Not many visitors to Cayuga’s Methodist Church that was completed in 1896 are aware of the colorful character that created it. Matthias Splitlog, who was born in New York in 1812 half Cayuga and half French, was removed to Ohio to live with the Wyandot Tribe. It was here that he met and married his wife Eliza Barnett and as a result of this marriage became a member of the tribe. In 1843 the Wyandots moved to Kansas where Matthias obtained an allotment of land lying in the fork of the Missouri and Kansas (Kaw) Rivers. His land allocation included some of the area and other holdings south of the river in the community of Westport. Westport which had been founded 10 years earlier had become the “jumping off” point for wagon trains heading west on the California, Oregon, and Santa Fe Trails. In 1857, a group of speculators, the Wyandotte City Company, began buying land and platting what would eventually become Kansas City. Splitlog owned a substantial portion, however, he held out living on his land until 1860 and eventually selling at an inflated price. A portion is still known today as “Splitlog Hill” in the renovated Westport District north of downtown.

Although he could neither read nor write Matthias spoke seven languages, and was a mechanical genius. He built the first grist mill in Kansas and in 1860 he constructed a steamboat to carry freight to small settlements on the river. During the early stages of the Civil War he enlisted in the Union Army and ferried materials on the river until he was captured by Confederates, paroled and returned to Westport. In 1863, the Union Pacific Railroad was under construction and crossed a portion of his land near the river. Ever the shrewd businessman he was paid what was termed a “fabulous” sum of money for the right of way and the location of railroad shops.

By this time, because of broken treaty promises in Kansas, most of the Wyandot tribe had removed to Indian Territory, later northeastern Oklahoma, to a section of land provided by the Seneca Tribe as repayment for an old debt. Splitlog decided to join them and in 1874 chose a location on Cowskin Prairie by the Elk River and Carr Branch Creek. The town that he built came to be known as Cayuga Springs and the stage was now set for the “Indian Millionaires” greatest venture.

He first constructed a saw mill then a grist mill and soon a general store followed, all of which provided employment for local citizens. He added a blacksmith shop and a three story factory for the manufacture of buggies and two seated hacks. An elementary school was built with tuition set at five cents a day. Always far sighted and innovative, in 1887 Matthias provided most of the financing for the “Splitlog Line” a railroad constructed from Joplin to Neosho, then on to “Splitlog City” with plans to connect to Cayuga Springs. Unfortunately that undertaking involved some unscrupulous partners and another, the speculation on a gold and silver mine that didn’t materialize nearly derailed him. Soon after these debacles, in 1890 at age 78 he also was elected Chief of the Seneca’s thus adding time consuming political responsibilities and tribal interests in Washington to the strain of his various business activities. But even so, Matthias was about to embarked on a new venture.

During his lifetime he wasn't particularly religious although French Jesuit priests had ministered to the tribe during his New York childhood. His wife a devote Quaker had recently converted to Catholicism and in 1893, influenced by the work of Father William Ketcham among tribes in the region, he also became a confirmed Catholic. History doesn't record why Splitlog decided to construct a church but perhaps it was when Eliza became incurably ill with cancer that he wanted to build a memorial to her. Construction on the Cayuga Mission Church began in 1893 but unfortunately Eliza died the following year and her funeral was held in the partially completed structure. The ornate church, evidence of a typical Splitlog endeavor was dedicated on November 25, 1896. Matthais died the following January but as it turns out Cayuga Church now well over 100 years old, proved to be his most lasting and impressive project. It remains today as a monument to the "Indian Millionaire" one of northeast Oklahoma's most outstanding citizens.

*Following publication of this article, I found the following information on page 188 of Heritage of the Hills. "On the first Monday in September, I (Ollie F. Mason) was the clerk acting under W.E, Jones who made the final sale of the Matthias Splitlog estate on that date. They had been from some two or three years selling or settling the estate. He was the man who started to build a railroad from Kansas City to the Gulf of Mexico and did succeed in getting it built to Neosho and today the old grade of a mile or more of unbuilt road can be traced southward from the little town of McElhaney, Missouri.*