

NED CHRISTIE, JUSTICE GONE WRONG

Ned Christie was charged with the murder of U.S. Deputy Marshal Dan Maples on May 5, 1887. According to witnesses, Christie had shot Maples as he was returning to an encampment of deputy marshals who were investigating illegal liquor sales near Tahlequah. Christie, who according to reports, was “passing out drunk at the time,” denied the charges. Never-the-less, a warrant for his arrest had been issued by “Hangin” Judge Parker who instructed his deputies to bring him in “alive or dead.” Christie, suspicious of justice under the white man’s law, fled to his home near Spring Branch Creek.

Thus began one of the most interesting human interest stories related to northeastern Oklahoma, the hunt for Ned Christie. Born December 14, 1852, Ne-de Wa-de or Ned, grew up in the Going Snake District of the Cherokee Nation. He attended Caney Creek, a one room school until he was nine, then assisted his father, a blacksmith, and in his youth, at the age of ten, became renown as an excellent marksman. Imbued with the Cherokee traditions and later a member of the Keetoowah Society, when he grew to manhood, Ned was elected to serve on the Cherokee National Council. Christie’s bias toward the traditional ways of the Cherokee was well known, as was his suspicion of most of the white man’s motives involving the nation. He was particularly outspoken about the federal government’s decision to build railroads across the nation, viewing that as a complete disregard of sovereign rights. So, over time, Christie’s opinions had generated opponents, even enemies among those who benefitted from the very activities he opposed. Silencing Ned would please them. To compound his problem, Ned previously had one brush with the law, he had shot another youth during a dispute, but was acquitted. So the implication was that he would be capable of murder. Then, there was another issue, Ned also found great satisfaction in whiskey and sometimes became belligerent, so the combination of these issues made the possibility of his guilt believable.

Returning to his home, Ned prepared for the worst and it was soon to come, if revenge for Maples was not enough motivation, a thousand dollar reward prompted nine attempts during the next four and one half years. But he was not alone, friends and neighbors who believed him innocent, devised signals to warn him of approaching bounty hunters. And when they came, Christie, noted for his marksmanship, sent prospective captors fleeing by deliberately missing or slightly wounding them.

The first raid of significance was led by Heck Thomas whose fame as a lawman had been assured when, singlehandedly he arrived in Fort Smith with 32 prisoners. Now, approaching Christie’s home during September of 1889, Thomas’ posse of five succeeded in burning the house down and wounding Ned, but then retreated. Recovering, Christie re-built a fortress-like home on the site with double thick walls with sand poured in between. The windowless home, stocked with supplies and ammunition, had small slots on all sides so anyone could be seen approaching. In a second attempt in November, Thomas returned and was amazed by the newly constructed “fort.” He and his party left and Thomas never returned. For the next three years, attacks on “the fort” garnered the same results.

But inevitably, an assault involving a posse of sixteen, armed with dynamite and a three pound cannon resulted in Christie's death. During the fray, in addition to thirty eight rounds from the cannon, two thousand rounds of ammunition were used. All of this firepower failed, but the dynamite finally did the trick, setting the fort on fire and forcing Ned to emerge and die in a hail of bullets. Seemingly, Dan Maples' death had been avenged. To demonstrate that crime does not pay, Christie's body, allegedly shot 117 times, was displayed on Judge Parker's courthouse steps in Fort Smith.

But, in this instance, justice did not prevail. In 1918, a Cherokee freedman named Dick Humphrey came forward to confess he had witnessed the murder of Dan Maples by another man, Bud Trainor. Christie had been drinking with Trainor at his girl friend's house. She was a local bootlegger and Trainor was afraid Maples would arrest her. Returning to town on a trail near Maple's camp and dizzy from the drink, Christie lay down, covered himself with his coat and passed out, Following him, Trainor took his coat, put it on and waited for the deputy. When Maples returned to camp with another deputy, Trainor ambushed, then killed him and returned the coat to the unconscious Christie. Dick Humphrey, hiding in the bushes, saw the crime but was afraid Trainor and his friends would kill him if he came forward. Now, in 1918, 87 years old and with all accomplices deceased, Humphrey told his story confirming Christie's innocence. Books and songs have been written and movies made about justice gone wrong, but none comes closer to home in northeastern Oklahoma than the saga of Ned Christy.

