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Interview with Alex R. Matheson
Fort Gibson, Oklahoma
February 23, 1937
By
H. L. Ramage, Field Worker

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Mr. Matheson was born in St. Louis, Missouri, March 28, 1867.
(English and Irish).

FATHER:

My father, Don Matheson, was born in Tunbridge Wells, a suburb of London England, (don't remember date) and died in Fort Gibson, Oklahoma, January 2, 1892. (Englishman)

MOTHER:

My mother's maiden name was Anna Cunningham. She was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, (don't remember date) and died in Claremore, Oklahoma, March 24, 1915. (Irish)

SCHOOLING:

I first attended a country school about ten miles from Forsyth, Missouri, when I was seven years old. The teacher boarded in our home, (don't remember his name). We had to walk two and one-half miles to school. The school was built of logs and fashioned like any other log building. Having only one door and two windows. The seats were long benches made by splitting a log in half and turning the flat side up. The desks were also home made. Early in the morning and late in the evening when going and coming from school, we would see lots of wild game such as deer, turkey, wildcat, c tamounts, gray wolf. They were much larger than the wolf in this country. We also had a lot of panthers there. I remember one evening when the teacher and I were coming home from school, we heard a young lady screaming, about a quarter of a mile from the trail, we ran to where the screams were coming and arrived just in time to save her life. She had been visiting a neighbor and was on her way home, riding horseback. A panther had attacked her. The teacher carried a pistol and emptied it at the panther, but did

not hit him. The lady was pretty well scratched up but not seriously injured. I attended school there two years. In those days a term of school was four months instead of nine, as we have now. We moved to Windsor Missouri in 1879 and I attended a city school there until my parents moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas in December 1882. There I attended the university for two years, which was the end of my schooling. While going to school there, I worked in a drug store and learned the painting trade after my hours were through at the drug store.

LIFE AND CUSTOMS:

In 1885 I decided to leave home and make my own way. I told my mother and father that I was going to Tahlequah, in the Cherokee Nation. I had forty dollars which was a lot of money in those days. I went to the railroad station and found that I would have to go to Pierce City, Missouri on the RRisco, change there and take the same road to Vinita, Oklahoma, then take the Katy to Muskogee, Oklahoma. Change there and take a hack to Tahlequah. The fare was a little over seventeen dollars. As it was only about sixty-five miles from Fayetteville to Tahlequah, straight through the wilderness, I decided to walk through the country. About three o'clock in the evening of the first Sunday in December 1885, I started on my journey. A group of my boy-friends accompanied me for a couple of miles, razing and kidding me about my trip through the jungles, saying a panther or bear would get me the first night, but before they left me, they earnestly wished me a good trip and lots of luck in the future. I walked until about nine o'clock that night, making it to a friend's house where I stayed all night. I left there early the next morning. I traveled about twenty miles that day, putting me into Indian Territory about dark. I came to a little log house, but not seeing anyone around the place I went to the front porch, (which was just a small contraption) and knocked on the porch with a stick

I had out to walk with. A full blood Indian woman came to the door. I asked if I could stay all night. She just grunted, turned and went back into the house. I didn't think she was going to let me stay but pretty soon she came back with a three-legged stool, set it down, grunted and pointed to the stool and went back into the house. I knew then I was going to have a place to sleep. It was not long until a good looking Indian girl came to the house. I spoke to her and she smiled and nodded her head and went on into the house. Soon after she arrived an Indian boy, about my age, came out of the woods to the house. When he got close enough I spoke to him and was very much surprised when he answered in perfect English. I got my supper which consisted of stewed deer meat, cornbread and black coffee which had been cooked over a fireplace. I was also given a place to sleep and my breakfast the next morning. I offered to pay them for the meals and night's lodging but they refused to take anything. However, when I left I pitched a dollar on the table and told the girl to get her a new dress. ~~xxxxxxx~~ These Indians later moved to Tahlequah and we were great friends. I left there not knowing where I would find another house, but was very lucky. I arrived at the Dick Wolf home on Barrenfork River about noon. Mrs. Wolf was the only one at home. She fixed my dinner and just as I sat down to eat, Mr. Wolf came in. After we finished eating I told Mr. Wolf that I must be going. He and Mrs. Wolf insisted that I stay until morning as I would not reach another house until I got to the Illinois River and that was about fifteen miles away. I told them that I was in a hurry and would have to move on. That fifteen miles was a mighty lonesome walk, all of the timber was tall virgin pine trees and about the only place I could see the sky was by looking straight up. I walked as fast as possible in order to get there before it got so late. I arrived there between sundown

and dark, it was the Cornelius Boudinot place, which stood about where the highway bridge now stands. I stayed all night. They were mighty fine people and when I got ready to leave the next morning, Mr. Boudinot set me across the river. I rode a mule and he rode a horse. I offered to pay him for his kindness but he would not accept a cent. It was about five miles on to Tahlequah. I was about half way from the river to Tahlequah when I heard a lot of gun shots and running horses. They were getting real near and I hid in the bushes. Soon I saw a rider coming. When he passed I saw that he was wearing stripes, then I knew he was an escaped convict from the Cherokee prison. After he passed I stepped out into the road. In three or four minutes the High Sheriff and a posse came charging up. They asked me if I had seen the escaped prisoner. I told them the way he went but I never did learn whether he got away or not.

After I reached Tahlequah I secured a permit to work. This permit cost me fifty cents a month. That was the fee for a non-citizen to work in the Cherokee Nation. I went to work in a drug store for the Evans Brothers. It was the only drug store there. The next closest drug store was in Fort Gibson. There were a lot of tough characters in and around Tahlequah. I was well acquainted with Tom Starr, Zeck Procter and Bill Pigeon. The government sent these three men word that if they would lay their guns in and surrender and be law abiding citizens, that the government would dismiss all charges against them. Jake was sold at the drug store but Mr. Evans told me not to sell it to anyone that I did not know. One day while Mr. Evans was out for lunch, Bill Pigeon (I did not know Bill at that time) came in and asked where Walter (Evans) was. I told him that Walter had gone to lunch. Bill told me he wanted a bottle of Jake. I told him we did not have any. He pulled his gun and said he knew damn

well we did have and he wanted an eight ounce bottle, and that if I did not give it to him he would shoot the joint up. I let him have the Jake. As he left he said for me to tell Walter that he would be back before long. He and Walter got back at the same time in front of the drug store. He told Walter about what a time he had in getting the Jake. They had a big laugh at my expense. Bill wore cowboy boots, two six shooters and a big white hat; a pair of blue ducks tucked in at his boot tops.

The U. S. Marshal was trying to catch Bill Pigeon but was not having much luck. Just before election time, Bill sent the marshal word that he would be in Tahlequah to vote, so early on the morning of election day, thirteen U. S. Marshals rode in to get Bill. They stationed themselves on the square where Bill would have to pass to reach the building where the voting was held. About ten o'clock Bill (a full blood Indian) and about seventy-five more Indians holding Winchesters across their saddles, came riding in single file. The marshals never moved a hand and as soon as Bill and his friends passed, the marshals got on their horses and left town.

Mr. Evans also warned me never to say anything about a girl that most of the Indians were related in some way and that I would never know just who I was talking to. He also told me if I ever saw a shooting or a killing to never say anything about it and I would get along alright. There were never any hold-ups or robberies in those days. That did not begin until the Indian payments started. At that time there were about sixteen or eighteen boys and about fifteen girls around that were my age, living in Tahlequah. We had a good time going to dances and parties and also had a real good singing class at church. We attended church regularly. One Sunday while we were at church practicing on our singing, a man riding

a horse at breakneck speed passed the church shouting that the female Seminary was burning down. A young fellow and myself were the first to reach the livery stable to get a rig to take in the fire. When we reached the Seminary, which was about five miles from town, the walls were falling in. The girls were standing around in groups. Some of them with about half of their clothes on. No one was burned to death but most of them had lost about all of their clothing. There is where I first saw the girl I later married. I never will forget how she looked. She was standing with some more girls and had only one shoe and stocking on. She had lost the other while escaping from the fire. This occurred in 1887. There are only about seven of the old bunch living.

If a white man was to marry a Cherokee girl in the Cherokee Nation and marry according to their laws, he had to get ten Cherokees of character to sign a petition saying you were a good law abiding citizen. You could marry a Cherokee girl without going through this procedure, but you would not be a citizen. Even if you married according to their laws you would only be an adopted citizen and could hold the office of assistant chief, treasurer, or enter into private business but could not be chief.

October 1, 1889 I married Miss Maude Eiffert and moved to Fort Gibson. I was employed by Mr. John S Scott who was in the General Mercantile business, located in what is known as old Ft. Gibson. I worked for Mr. Scott about three years before I decided to enter business for myself. I opened a drug store in old Ft. Gibson. I occupied one room of the three room brick building facing west on the road leading to the old stockade. There was a post office in one of the rooms and Mrs. Brown rented sleeping beds in the other. I continued in the drug business there until April 1905.

I then moved to Coffeyville, Kansas and entered the real estate business and continued in that until March 1912. I moved from there to Nowata, Oklahoma

and opened a drug business where I stayed until 1915. I quit the drug business and opened a real estate office. I handled real estate until 1924 then moved to Kansas City, Missouri. I again entered the real estate business also contracted painting work. In 1930 I moved back to Fort Gibson and since that time I have been in the poultry business.

WS:

As I said earlier in the story, there were no hold-ups until the Government started making the Indian payments. There was only one that I knew of. That was the time the Negro mailcarrier was held up, when the postoffice was located at old Ft. Gibson. The Negro would meet the train at the Kansas & Arkansas Valley depot (which is now known as the Missouri Pacific) and transfer the mail to the postoffice. He was making the transfer from an early night train when someone held him up and took the mail sacks. He came on to the postoffice and reported the robbery. A posse was quickly formed but they never did find the man or mail but found the mail sacks split open, about one half mile from where the robbery occurred.

While I lived in Tahlequah, I knew a lot of outlaws such as Ned Christy, Tom Starr, Zeck Proctor, Bill Pigeon, Alex Tehee, Bub Trainer, Ed Bean, Lenord Williams, The Woffard boys, Theens and Ely Walker, and others I have forgotten. They loafed around town as anyone else would until word arrived that U. S. Marshals were coming, then they would take to the brush. A lot of people have wondered how they would know when the Marshals were coming. It was worked in this manner, usually three marshals would leave Ft. Smith, Arkansas early in the morning. There was always someone at Ft. Smith to start the signal by firing a gun so many times. This would be taken up and repeated by the next man until it reached Tahlequah. If one man firing the signal did not get an answer, he would ride on firing at intervals until he did get an answer. The Marshals would make the trip

going by the way of Sallisaw, Webbers Falls, Braggs, Fort Gibson, Tahlequah then back to Fort Smith, when they made an arrest, they would take the prisoner all the way around with them, after they made two or three arrests. They would deputize one or two men to help guard the prisoners, after they had gathered as many as four or five they would get a wagon to haul them in, at night the prisoners would be chained to trees. As a general rule they would have ten to fifteen prisoners when they returned to Ft. Smith. It would take a month or six weeks for them to make the trip.

In 1899 the F. H. Nash Merchantile Store at Ft. Gibson was robbed by the Cook gang. This hold-up occurred one night just after dark. I was working at the Nash store at this time and had gone to supper, when I returned to the store, Little Jim met me at the door, told me to come in and close the door. When I got in he told me to get on the counter and sit down. After I sat down, Little Jim pulled his mask off saying to his pals, there is no use for me to wear this, everyone knows me anyway. They did not get any money, didn't seem to want money, they took tobacco, food, clothing and shoes. After they got what they wanted, we were taken out the back door and through a cotton field to where one of their gang was holding the horses. They mounted their horses and told us we could go back to the store. They were never arrested for the robbery.

CHEROKEE BILL:

Cherokee Bill's right name was Crawford Goldsby. I knew Cherokee Bill when he was eighteen years old. He cleaned up and swept out our store. He was the best working and the most honest Negro boy that worked for us. His father was a white man, his mother was a half-breed, Half Indian and half Negro. Cherokee Bill was whiter than most half-breeds. He was a pretty good boy. About the only trouble he ever had was a few fist fights

until one night he went to a dance and had a fight with a Negro boy by the name of Bill Lewis. A Negro deputy sheriff was there and held his gun on Cherokee Bill while Lewis beat him up. Lewis worked for Mr. Bowden on Garrison Hill. Early the next morning Cherokee Bill went to the Bowden barn and hid in a manger and waited until Lewis showed up. When Lewis was inside the barn, Cherokee Bill stepped out of the manger and shot Lewis three or four times but did not kill him. Although he was shot up pretty bad, as Cherokee Bill was using a 45 six shooter, I lived about what would be termed two blocks from the Bowden home. After the shooting, Cherokee Bill went from the Bowden home to Frenchy Millers, a distance of about a quarter of a mile, as none of them were up he went to the barn and saddled up one of Miller's horses and rode to where the Cook Gang was holed up on Fourteen Mile Creek; about where the town of Hulbert is now located, and joined the gang. That was the beginning of his outlaw career. About eighteen months later I was squirrel hunting up on the Grand river and met Cherokee Bill and had a long talk with him. He told me he had always been a good boy, but hereafter he was going to be plenty tough. He had two quarts of whiskey and asked me if I wanted it, saying he never used the stuff. He later quit the Cook gang and went up about Nowata Territory. After he had been around there a while he killed the depot agent. They say he killed a lot of men, but I think these was all that he actually killed. The agent at Nowata, a man at Lenapah and the other was Larry Katting, a guard at the Ft. Smith jail. Henry Starr was in jail there at that time. He went to Cherokee Bill's cell and in some way got the pistol away from Cherokee Bill. Cherokee was later hung at Ft. Smith. Clarence Goldsby, Cherokee Bill's brother went to Hoyden to attend the payment, this was in 1888. Ike Rogers, a Negro U. S. Marshal who was instrumental in getting Cherokee Bill caught, was

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there. When Clarence got back he came in the store and told us how Rogers had abused him in every way imaginable. He broke down and cried like a baby, said he was going to kill that damn Negro marshal. Some time later he found out in some way that Rogers was going to be on the ten o'clock train the next night. I was city clerk at that time. About four o'clock, Clarence came to me and wanted a commission to carry a gun. I issued him the commission. The next day just before the ten o'clock train run, Clarence went to the depot to wait for the train. When the train pulled in, Ike Rogers stepped off. As soon as he was on the platform, Clarence said, "Rogers I am going to kill you." Rogers went for his gun but was too slow. Clarence killed him and left town. Sometime later in St. Louis, Clarence took pneumonia and died. I talked to several U. S. Marshals after that and they all said if there had been a warrant for Clarence Goldsby's arrest they knew nothing of it.

I have seen and known lots of outlaws but the Buck gang was the toughest bunch I ever saw. There were seven of them in the gang, and all were hung at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

BRIDGES:

I dont know any thing of interest about bridges, There was one thing I could never understand, back in the early days, the bridges over the Creeks, had roofs, over them, I never could figure why they did that, and at each end of a bridge was a sign which read \$5.00 fine to drive over this bridge faster than a walk.

OPENING OF CHEROKEE STRIP

Sidney Bell, H. D. Lanom, Mr. Fuller and my self decided to go to Stillwater and watch the run, we were driving a good team, and two seated hack, every thing went alright until we arrived at Cushing, we were driving down the street just a peaceful as you please, when a gang of men run out from a saloon and pulled us out of the hack, and taken us into the saloon, bought the drinks and eats, would not let us pay for a thing said our money was no good, Mr. Bell asked about our team and hack, they told us, the team was in the livery stable and the bill for the night was payed. Every one was celebrating for the opening of the strip. We tried to buy some groceries at Stillwater, in the morning before the fun started at noon, but there was not a bite of food to be bought, as they had sold every thing in stock. We went with out food until we reached Perry, we stayed there four or five days, watching the sights, it was a filthy place, I am telling the truth when I say a person could not recognize his own brother. There was one incident that I saw, when a woman used her brain, This woman was driving a sulky, when the pistol was fired that started the race, this woman did not get more than forty or fifty feet, when some one run into her sulky knocking a wheel off, she did not get the least bit excited, just jumped out and drove her stake in the ground.

I saw a good many fist fights, did not see any one get killed. Saloons were doing a loud business, beer was selling for thirty five cents a

bottle, did not pretend to save the empty bottles, when they were emptied, the bar tender would throw them over in the pile, most of them would be broken. ¹²⁹
I left the boys and went home on the train.

CHURCHES:

I dont know much to tell about Churches, There seemed to be more people attending Church when I was a young fellow, in comparison with the population then now, my parents always attended Church, and would see that I went to Sunday school and Church each Sunday. I think the Churches were much more strict in those days than they are now.

CHEROKEE PAYMENT AT FT GIBSON:

My Father in law was treasurer at Ft Gibson during the Cherokee payment, by him being Treasurer, and me being well acquainted with the others that made the payment I was allowed to stay in the pay office, there was just one million dollars stocked on the tables, each person on the roll drew two hundred sixty five dollars and seventy cents, they had it divided in piles for one payment, and on up to five payments, a payment for each individual were as follows, two, one hundred dollar bills, three, twenty dollar bills, one, five dollar bill, one, half dollar and two, ten cent pieces.

The town was just a big show, during the payment, The first merry-go-round and carnival was here at that time every one had a big time, There were no drunks to speak of, the public at this time thinks the town was wild and plenty tough, during the payment, but that is a big mistake, every one had a good time and layed off of the rough stuff.

OLD TIMERS:

The following list of names are men that lived at Ft Gibson and were real old when I was a young man, These were all honorable men, and at that time were our leading citizens, I am pretty sure that they are all dead now.

I. S. Scott, Merchant.

Wm Brewer, Farmer and stockman.

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Uncle Tim Walker, care taker at the female Seminary at Tahlequah. Henry Meiggs, Ex-District Judge, and Clerk, George O. Sanders, Judge of higher Courts and was an interpreter canon Vann, Farmer.

John Vanhoy, hunter and Ferry boat builder, he built all Ferry boats between Tulsa and Fort Smith.

F. H. Nash, Merchant.

Uncle Frank Nash, Druggest.

Dick Thompson, Farmer, was my wife's Grandfather.

Wm Brown, Farmer and Stockman.

James Alexander, Farmer and Stockman.

Herbert Kneeland, School teacher and Carpenter.

Wm P. Ross, Ex- Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Lawyer & farmer, Connell Rogers, Politican and Farmer.

Henry Eiffert, Politician and Farmer, Mr. Eiffert was my Father-in-law.

Wm Galager, Farmer and stockman.

Lewis Thornton, Farmer.

Dan Young, Farmer.

W. J. Mounts, Carpenter, was the only first class carpenter in this part of the country.

~~Wm Percyville, Merchant.~~

J. S. Holden, News paper publisher, published the Ft Gibson post Captain,

Wm Jackson, Lawyer and Farmer.

Gid Sleeper, Stockman.

Tom French, Farmer, Stockman, he was what we classed as a rounder, he was the Father of Little Jim French, the out law.

Frenchy Miller, Resturant owner, was a soldier when he came to Ft Gibson.

Dr. J. S. Fuller, Doctor.

Dr. George, McBride Doctor.

Ben and Mose, La Fayette, operated, the settlers store, owned by the Government, they handled beer for the soldiers.

Dave Allen, Presbyterian Preacher.

Uncle Jack Walker, Farmer and Clerked in Stores.