

THOMAS, MATIE MOWBRAY

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. MATIE MOBRAW
THOMAS

FIELD WORKER REUBEN PARTRIDGE
April 14, 1937

Henry Andrew Thomas was given the nickname of Heck by his boyhood friend, Charlie Clinton (father of Dr. Fred Clinton of Tulsa), when they went to school together in Georgia and he was always called "Heck" Thomas. Mr. Thomas was born at Rome, Ga., Jan. 6, 1850, and was the youngest of twelve children of a cultured and wealthy Southern family. He was being educated for a minister, but when the Civil war broke out, went as courier to his uncle, Gen. E. L. Thomas. His relatives were all officers in the Confederate Army. At the age of 18 he was serving on the police force in Atlanta, and during a race riot was shot in the thigh. At 22 he decided to go west and located in Galveston, Texas, where he was employed by the Texas Express Co. Later, he moved to Ft. Worth, where he was express messenger for the same company. There had been numerous train robberies along the line, mostly by the Sam Bass gang of outlaws, and he prepared to outwit them if they held up his train. He cut newspapers the size of greenbacks, and filled several express envelopes with them, sealing in express manner, and writing

various amounts on them, and deposited them in his safe. A few weeks later, his train was held up at McAllen Texas, (this happened in 1877). He was ordered to open the door, and threatened with death if he refused. He refused, and his car was run down onto a side track and set fire to, the bandits shooting into his car, meanwhile. He was shot through the neck and directly under one eye. He had seventy thousand dollars on board, it was summer time, no fire in the little stove, and he concealed the money packages in the ashes and unburned coal, leaving a sack of silver (about 9 or 10 dollars), and the dummy packages, in the safe. He then opened the door to the outlaws, who quickly entered the car, compelling him to open the safe and throw the money in their sack, then running to their horses and galloping away. For this he received a sum of money, a handsome watch, and was promoted to express agent at Ft. Worth where he served until the company was merged with one of the larger companies.

He was always fond of adventure, and loved the great outdoors, so he secured a commission as Deputy U. S. Marshal from the Paris, Texas, Court. A gang of outlaws had been terrorizing the country in the southern part of Indian Territory.

They were the Lee gang, who had killed four men at one time, and had killed and robbed many others. Heck Thomas followed them four months, and finally killed both the Lees in a gun battle close to Ardmore. He received \$5200 for this, and the blessing of the whole country.

At one time, with the help of his posse, he took forty one prisoners, in one bunch, to jail at Ft. Smith, hauling them in seven two-horse wagons, a distance of two hundred and seventy-five miles. This was the greatest number of prisoners to be brought in at one time. He brought hundreds of law breakers into court, some of them, the worst outlaws in the country.

In 1888 he had a battle with the Purdy gang, 16 miles South from Red Fork, Okla. He captured the leaders of the gang and several others, wounding two leaders badly, and was badly wounded himself, a wound eight inches long in the side, and a shattered wrist. He was near death for some time. When wounded, he had his men put the wounded outlaws in the wagon, and he himself rode horseback, sixteen miles to the railroad, holding his arm to his side where the blood was gushing. He always threatened his prisoners well, would tolerate no abuse of them by his men.

He wounded Bill Raidler, another bad outlaw who was sent to the penitentiary for several years.

In bitter cold winter weather he nearly froze in quite a spectacular capture of Della Humba, a negro desperado in the Chickasaw nation. Thomas swam his horse seven times across the river, in one day, having to chop the ice off its tail each time with an ax before he was able to proceed but he got his man. There are hundreds of others that he captured, Ol Yantis, a bank and train robber, Ed Newcombe, bank robber. He had been on the trail of the Dalton gang for six weeks, and the raid on the banks at Coffeyville, was to get money to get out of the country as they feared capture. Emmet Dalton told Heck Thomas this, in the presence of Mrs. Thomas, after he was pardoned.

Bill Doolin was a member of the Dalton gang, but on account of a lame horse was not in the Coffeyville bank robbery. He afterward organized a gang of his own, and perpetrated a number of train and bank robberies, horse thefts, and so on. He was captured by Bill Tibghman at Eureka Springs, where he, Doolin, was being treated for rheumatism, and taken to Guthrie federal jail, where he and twelve others made a jail break in July, 1896.

Of these men who were ever captured, Heck Thomas captured all but one. Heck took up the trail of Bill Doolin and found him at the home of his father-in-law at a little place close to Ingalls. Doolin was coming down the road from the house, in the bright moonlight, leading his horse, and carrying his Winchester in his hand. Thomas and posse were concealed at the side of the road, and at Thomas's cry of "Halt", Doolin fired several times, the bullets going wild. Thomas had a No. 8 shot gun, and at the first shot, Doolin fell without speaking a word. His body twitched convulsively a minute or so and he was dead. Thirteen thousand dollars reward was collected on him. He was called the King of the outlaws.

When pursuing the Cook gang in the Creek nation, the outlaws escaped up a gully in the darkness of night, but the officers were so close that they captured Bill Cook's horse, saddle and bridle. His field glasses with his name scratched on them were in the saddle pocket, and are now in the possession of Mrs. Thomas, who has, also, two letters written to Doolin by his wife, while he was in the federal jail at Guthrie. Doolin is buried at Guthrie.

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Heck Thomas was guard at the land office at Perry, at the opening of the Cherokee strip in 1893, and was appointed assistant chief of police there, with Bill Tilgman as chief. They served until the town was settled, about six months, and then Heck said things were getting too tame, and he once more took up his Deputy U. S. Marshal work.

He worked at this, capturing all kinds of law breakers, through the burning heat of summer, the chilling winds and cold of winter, his bed nearly always on the ground, with his saddle for pillow, many times waking to find he was covered with snow. He was ever on the alert, and as a prominent Divine has said, did more to Christianize the Indian Territory, than all the ministers sent here. When the Kiowa and Comanche country was opened he was working for the Government and as he was so tired and worn from his years of hardship and exposure, he accepted a position as Chief of Police at Lawton, Okl, which he filled as no other could for seven years. He then went back to work as Deputy U. S. Marshal, but the country was pretty well settled, and the worst of the outlaw gangs were obliterated, so his work was mostly by train and auto.

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He had been suffering from a heart weakened by his strenuous life, and from fighting fire in Lawton, where he was also Chief of the Volunteer Fire Dept., before a city department was organized, and because of a kidney ailment he was forced to retire. He was confined to his bed a year and a half, and died at Lawton, Okla., Aug. 15, 1912, where he sleeps to-day, a rest well earned.

Heck Thomas was, one of nature's noblemen, a good husband and father, a good friend to all alike, and one of the best officers Oklahoma has ever had. Chris. Madsen, Bill Tilghman, and Heck Thomas, worked together many years, and were often called "The Three Guardsmen". Heck Thomas came of illustrious ancestry. His mother, who died in 1870, was a direct descendant of Pocahontas. She was a Rolfe of Virginia. Another of his ancestors was Gen. Leonard Covington who was a general in the Revolutionary War. His ancestors came to America in 1632, by name Edmond Howard (Carbone History), second son of the Duke of Norfolk who was disinherited because he forsook the Catholic Faith and became a Protestant. His ancestor Sir Thomas Holliday was Lord Mayor of London in 1605 (see Burke's Heraldry).

This typewritten story is almost the exact copy of that which was written by the widow of the late Heck Thomas, who is Mrs. Matie Mobray Thomas, of 547 N. Cheyenne St, Tulsa, Oklahoma.