

Bluford "Blue" Duck

Blueford "Blue" Duck was a murdering outlaw and a Cherokee Indian from the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). There is very little recorded history concerning his activities. His fame mostly comes from two events not related to his illegal activities. The first event was a photo taken in Fort Smith, Arkansas, while he was awaiting an appeal for a murder conviction. With him in the photo is Belle Star the Bandit Queen. The second event is the famed *Lonesome Dove* series written by Larry McMurtry. In McMurtry's four books relating the lives of Texas Ranger Captains Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call the names of several real-life characters are used. The characters and their real-life models bear little resemblance. Blue Duck appears in the book as the half-Mexican half-Comanche son of Chief Buffalo Hump who was a noted Comanche war chief in real life. The real Blue Duck was a Cherokee and none of the activities of the real Blue Duck match the fictional character.

Blue Duck's Cherokee name was Sha-con-gah Kaw-wan-nu and it appears that he was born along Rogers Creek near Oologah, Oklahoma, in Rogers County. The year of his birth is listed as 1858, 1859 and 18??. His tombstone lists a birth of June 17, 1859. I seriously doubt the accuracy of the exact date.

Some stories try to connect him with Belle Starr, even to the point of being a lover. Other stories having him ride with Sam and Belle Starr when they formed a small gang of cattle rustlers and sellers of whiskey to the Indians. The photo of the two in Fort Smith occurred while Belle was waiting for trial on a charge of cattle rustling in Judge Isaac Parker's court. She was in a studio having her photo taken when Blue Duck's attorney appeared and ask if she would pose with Blue Duck. The next day they both appeared for the photo together. Blue Duck had been sentenced by Judge Parker to hang for murder on July 23, 1886, but was apparently out on an appeal of the conviction. One of Belle Starr's biographers, Glenn Shirley, says that there was no evidence that the two had ever met before that event and that they never saw each other again. Some



folks claimed that the photo was taken after Blue Duck's release from prison. Belle was killed in 1889, long before Blue Duck was released from prison.

In the late 1870s Blue Duck was thought to be a member of a small gang that robbed stages and rustled cattle. Actual events of this period are almost unknown. The one event that everyone seems to agree on would become the most famous real-life occurrence for which he is noted. On June 23, 1884, Blue Duck and a fellow by the name of William Christie were both drunk in the Flint District of the Cherokee Nation. They rode up to the farm of a young man named Samuel Wyrick while he was working in his fields. Blue Duck emptied his revolver into Wyrick killing him. Blue Duck then reloaded and shot at a young Indian boy working for Wyrick. This resulted in the boy's horse being shot from under him. Blue Duck and Christie then rode to a neighbor and shot at another farmer without effect.

Deputy US Marshall Frank Cochran arrested Blue Duck and Christie for the murder of Wyrick. They were taken to Fort Smith where they would appear in Judge Parker's court where they were tried in January of 1886. Maybe Christie never fired a shot, or it wasn't proven that he did, as he was acquitted and Blue Duck convicted. Judge Parker sentenced Blue Duck to hang from the gallows on July 23, 1886, two years and one month to the day after the murder had been committed. Thomas Marcum, a very capable attorney, appealed to President Cleveland for a commutation of Blue Duck's sentence from death to life in prison.

The appeal was successful and Judge Parker committed Blue Duck to the Menard Penitentiary at Chester, Illinois, "for the term and period of his natural life." Prison records indicate that on October 16, 1886, Blue Duck was admitted as inmate number 2486. He was pardoned on March 24, 1895, after serving less than nine years. The prison records give no reason for the pardon and the entry was hand written into the record. Again, Shirley writes that President Cleveland pardoned him on March 20, 1895, because he had consumption and only had one month to live and was released so he could die among friends. (**NOTE:** If you caught the nine years between the two acts by President Cleveland, remember that he was the only president elected to non-consecutive terms and he is the only one counted twice in the numbering of presidents (22 and 24)).

By all accounts, he did die shortly after being released from the prison. The date on his tombstone is listed as May 7, 1895, but I am not sure that date is accurate either. He is buried in the Dick Duck Cemetery in Catoosa, Oklahoma.

Just to give some other inconsistencies in his legend, Henry Sinclair Drago wrote in *Outlaws on Horseback* that not only was the picture taken after his release, he also wrote that he was only in prison for a year before Belle Starr secured his release and that Sam Starr probably killed Blue Duck because of jealousy. Sam Starr was killed in December of 1886, two months after Blue Duck was sent to prison.

