

Henry Andrew "Heck" Thomas

Heck Thomas, born in Athens, Georgia in 1850, was the youngest of 12 children born to Lovick Pierce and Martha Ann Fullwood Bedell Thomas. His parents intended that he grow up to be a Methodist preacher. But, when he was only 12 years old, he ran off and joined his father and his uncle and went off to the Civil War.

The father and uncle were officers in the 35th Georgia Infantry and Heck was a courier for them in the battlefields of Virginia. On the last day of the Second Battle of Bull Run, General Philip Kearney was killed in Chantilly. The general's horse and equipment was placed in the trust of young Heck, and General Robert E Lee, himself, ordered him to take the belongings through the lines to Kearney's widow. Heck told the story in a letter he wrote, "One evening while the fight was going on or, rather, just before dark, a soldier came to the rear where Uncle Ed's baggage and the darkies and I were, leading a black horse with saddle and bridle. He brought also a sword. Just after this, Stonewall Jackson crossed over into Maryland, capturing Frederick City; that was after taking Harpers Ferry and about 14,000 federal prisoners. These prisoners were held by Uncle Ed's brigade, while the army was fighting the Battle of Sharpsburg. We could see the smoke and hear their cannon from Harper's Ferry. While we were at Harpers Ferry, General Lee sent an order to Uncle Ed for the horse and equipment. I carried them forward, and it was one of the proudest minutes of my life when I found myself under the observation of General Robert E. Lee. Then General Lee sent the horse and everything through the lines, under a flag of truce, to General Kearney's widow. I had ridden the horse and cared for him up to that time, and I hated to part with him." Heck contracted typhoid fever in 1863 and was sent home to the family in Georgia.

By the age of 18 he was an Atlanta, Georgia, police officer and in 1871, he married Isabel Gray, the daughter of a preacher. The family moved to Texas in 1875, and he secured a job as a railroad guard and became a railroad detective. While with the railroad, on March 18, 1878, the notorious Sam Bass Gang held up a train Heck was guarding. The gang used innocent men for shields, and Heck was unable to use his gun. The Bass gang riddled the express car with bullets and Heck was hit in the neck and grazed just below his eye. He still managed to hide \$22,000 in money packages in the stove. When the gang managed to breach the express car they looted the safe and happily rode away with decoy money packs and \$89.00 in real cash.

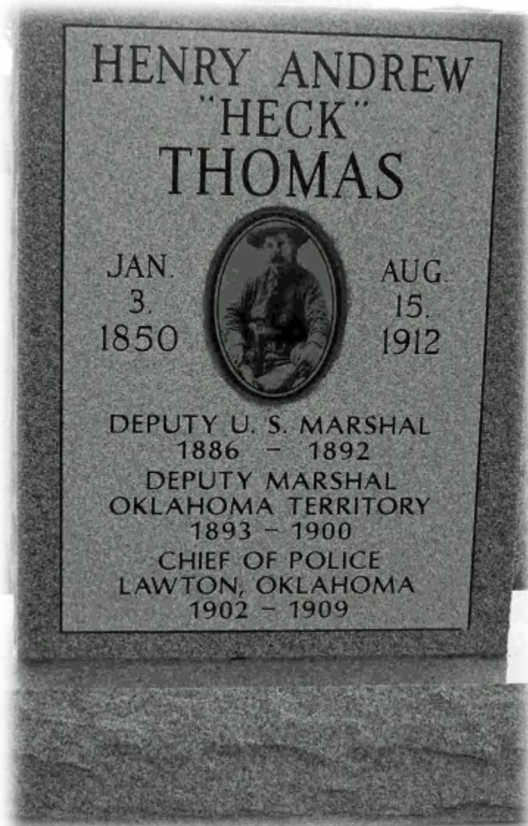
He left the railroad in 1885 and went to work for the Fort Worth Detective Association for a year. The famed "Hanging Judge", Isaac Parker appointed him a deputy US Marshall out of Fort Smith, Arkansas. From 1886 to 1900, his jurisdiction was the Indian Territory, now known as Oklahoma. Famed for his bravery, integrity and fairness, he quickly became a legend. In the three-year period between 1893 and 1896, he was responsible for the arrest of 300 wanted men and, with Bill Tilghman and Chris Madsen, became known as one of the "Three Guardsmen". They were largely responsible for bringing law and order to the territory. Heck had no equal when it came to hunting fugitives and his most notable accomplishment was the

hunting down and killing of Bill Doolin in August of 1896, after Doolin had been captured by Tilghman and then broke out of jail. After a gun battle, Doolin's body was placed on public display and photographed with 21 holes in his body.



Heck Thomas as U.S. deputy marshal

By 1888, his wife Isabel was disgusted with the rough frontier life and moved the five children back to Georgia. After the divorce he married Mattie Mowbray and had three more children, one dying in infancy. In 1902, Thomas became chief of police for Lawton, Oklahoma and lost the job in 1909 because of failing health. Three years later he died of Bright's disease. He is buried in the Highland Cemetery in Lawton, Oklahoma.



Heck Thomas' memorial and headstone

My thanks to Don Pestun for the recent memorial headstone photo

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, by Dan L. Thrapp, and *Encyclopedia of Western Gunfighters*, by Bill O'Neal.