

TALES OF THE OLD WEST

Ned Christie

Was Ned Christie a murdering villain or a hero? That depends on which side you were on. To most white folks and some members of his Cherokee tribe he was a black hearted, stone cold killer. To some of the Cherokees he was a tribal statesman and hero.

Christie, NeDe WaDe in the Cherokee language, was born on December 14, 1852 at Wauhiilla, Going Snake District, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. He was the son of Wat and Lydia Thrower Christie. Wat was a survivor of the Trail of Tears. They were of the Keetowah band, the most traditional of Cherokee peoples. While still a young boy his father joined the Union Army during the Civil War.

In adulthood he was described as a tall, lean, good looking man, standing about 6 feet 4 inches who wore his hair long in the old tribal fashion. He had several wives, marrying at least four times, first to Nannie Dick in 1871; second to Peggy Tucker in 1875; third to Jennie Scrapper in 1877; and fourth to Nancy Grease in 1888. His family grew. His children numbered somewhere between eleven and twenty-one, depending on which researcher you read. He followed in his father's footsteps and became a blacksmith. He also was an expert gunsmith.

Christie was a deeply bitter over the fact that the Cherokee Tribe had been forcefully uprooted from their land in North Carolina and forced to march on foot thousands of miles to the Indian Territory. Thousands of Cherokee people lost their lives along the way. He was also bitter because white immigrants were moving into Cherokee land, the advancing railroads, increasing talk of statehood, and allocating parcels of the Cherokee land to individual owners. Ownership of land was unheard of in Indian tribes. All the land belonged to the tribe and no one had ownership of a particular piece of property.

In 1885 he was elected to his first term in the National Council where he gave angry speeches supporting Cherokee sovereignty.

On Easter morning, April 10, 1887, the Cherokee Female Seminary burned. The Executive Council, including Christie, was called into special session in Tahlequah, the Cherokee Nation's capital, to see what could be done about rebuilding the seminary. While the council was in session he usually stayed at the home of Senator Net Grease, a relative of his third wife.

Christie had remained a peaceful man in spite of the bitterness he held for the things going on in his nation. He and his friends often drank too much and on December 24, 1884, he went to trail related to the death of a young Cherokee man that involved drinking. He was acquitted.

While in town for the council meetings related to the women's seminar he met a half blood Cherokee by the name of John Parris. Parris was a bad fellow who had spent a lot of time in the courtroom of Judge Isaac Parker in Fort Smith. Parris always knew where to find some whiskey. The two of them wandered from downtown Tahlequah to a rough section known as Dog Town.

They proceeded to the home of Nancy Old Lady Shell where they knew they could buy whiskey. Thomas Bub Trainor, Jr. was also at Nancy's having supper. Trainor came from a good, well-to-do family but he was wild and reckless. Christie and Parris bought a bottle of whiskey from Nancy. She had run out of corks so she ripped a strip of cloth from her apron and used it to seal the bottle. Christie and Parris left Nancy's and ran into three other Cherokee men and they were all drinking.



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In the meantime, U.S. Deputy Marshall Dan Maples was in Indian territory searching for outlaws, especially those that were bootlegging whiskey, a real problem in the Indian territory. He was a highly respected lawman and was accompanied by a small posse which included his son. The posse camped close to Big Spring, a plentiful water supply. Maples and a posse member named George Jefferson went into town for supplies. On the way back to the camp they walked into an ambush as they were walking across a log that served as a bridge over Big Spring.

Jefferson, in the lead, saw moonlight reflected off a shiny revolver in the thicket just ahead of them. The man with the revolver fired twice and Maples went down. As he was falling he managed to pull his gun and fire four shots into the bushes but the shooter managed to get away. The next day investigating officers found the broken neck of a whiskey bottle near the tree where the assassin had stood as he fired the shot. In the neck of the bottle was a piece of cloth. A short distance away, they found Christie's jacket with the shattered remains of the bottle in the pocket.

Maples died a few hours later, shortly after midnight on Thursday, May 5, 1887, and Christie was going to be peaceful no longer and he was about to become the biggest thing in Indian Territory news.

Maples was buried in the Bentonville Cemetery in Bentonville, Benton County, Arkansas



Dan Maples and his tombstone

The next morning Christie, who had passed out, awoke from his drunken spree the night before to find that he was the chief suspect in the murder. Parris and the other three men were also suspects as they had all been spotted near Big Spring at the time of the murder. Senator Grease advised him to get out of town until things cooled off. Christie refused to leave and declaring his innocence claimed that he didn't even have a gun that night.

When the National Council convened its meeting the next morning Christie was in attendance. When he learned that U.S. Marshals had a warrant for his arrest he changed his mind. He hid out near his home in Rabbit Trap. Family members and folks of the Keetoowah society set up a system of signals and warned him when ever a marshal was in the area.

Christie sent a message to Judge Parker, the Hanging Judge, saying that he would surrender if the Judge would grant him bail. Killing a white man was punishable by death and Maples was not only white he was a lawman. Judge Parker could not grant such a request under those conditions.

For the next two years Christie remained extremely elusive and get the blame for almost every crime committed in the Indian territory. The new U.S. Marshal Jacob Yoes made Christie a top priority and called in his best deputy, Thomas Heck, and assigned him the task of capturing or killing Christie.

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Thomas (Photo at right) and Deputy Marshal L. P. Isbell left on his usual circuit searching for outlaws. When he reached Muskogee he had 13 prisoners that he left there in the jail for safe keeping. He also met Bub Trainor, Christie's old drinking buddy. Trainor was quite anxious for Thomas to catch or kill Christie to clear his own name in the Maples murder. He knew Christie quite well and his usual habits. He was able to lead Thomas and his four-man posse past the normal lookouts and brought them to Christie's home in Rabbit Trap. At dawn on September 26, 1889, as the posse stealthily approached the Christie home the dogs began barking.



Thomas ordered Christie to surrender. Instead he opened fire with his Winchester. Thomas yelled out that if he was going to fight to send out the women and children, but Christie kept firing. The posse set fire to Christie's gun shop located near the home in the hope that the smoke would force them out. Nancy ran out and while the posse held their fire she ran into the woods and disappeared. James, the young son remained in the house and loaded his father's weapon as he emptied them.

Deputy Isbell was badly wounded when he took a round to his right shoulder. Thomas hurried to his aide and wrapped a bandage around the shoulder. The fire from the gun shop set the house on fire making the posse believe that Christie would have to come out soon. They were not aware that a bullet had smashed Christie's nose, struck his left eye, ranged around the side of his head, and lodged in the back just beneath the skin. The bullet knocked him down and now he was blinded and could not move or speak. James took the Winchester and continued to fire at the posse in an effort to convince the posse his dad was still alive and dangerous. With the cabin fire growing James was unable to move his father and knew it was time to get out of the house. As he fled through the smoke one of the posse members shot him in the back and the bullet went through a lung.

Thomas wanting to get medical help for Isbell and knowing that the sounds of the gunshots would bring help for Christie withdrew back to Tahlequah. Nancy returned to the burning home and neighbors began to arrive. They were able to get Christie, who had regained some eyesight but was still unable to speak or move, out of the house and hid him in the woods. They also found James and summoned Dr. Bitting, a white man, who lived nearby.

Dr. Bitting declared that Christies wound was serious but not critical. His nose was broken, he was blind in his left eye and his good looks were ruined. Christie, James and Deputy Isbell all recovered from their wounds. Isbell had to leave the marshal service because his arm was paralyzed. And it left a bitterness in Christie that would last as long as he lived. It was reported that he never said another word in English. He did say that he bore no animosity against any lawman but would shoot any that came within range of his gun. He also said that the only man he wanted to kill was Bub Trainor who was doing everything he could to help the marshals capture or kill him.

Friends and family all pitched in to build Christie a rock fort on a hilltop about a mile from the burnt-out cabin. The woods around the cabin were cut down to give him an uninterrupted view of anyone who would approach the fort. It was built of a parallel row of logs with sand between the logs. The interior walls were then lined with oak to further strengthen the impregnability. The fort had a root cellar and was two-storied. There was only one door and no windows, only gun ports upstairs for firing his Winchester. It was well stocked with food, water and ammunition. The fort made Christie feel so secure that he sent word to Deputy Thomas as to where he could be found and invited him to come up for another try at arresting him and have another shootout.

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Deputy Thomas and a posse, including Bub Trainor again, did make another trip to Rabbit Trap in November of 1889. Taking one look at the fort, Thomas decided it would take a large contingent US militia to take Christie inside that fort. So Thomas called off the attempt, returned to Ft. Smith and never again made an attempt to capture Christie.

Christie loved having family about him. Mary Gattis, his oldest daughter, and her year-old daughter Charlotte, came to live there. A fourteen-year-old nephew, Arch Wolf or Little Arch, spent a lot of time there. And during this time many regarded him as a hero. In the summer of 1890 things begin to change somewhat. Many robberies and other crimes in the area was laid at his feet. Support began to dwindle as the crimes became too violent to be acceptable.

The folks in Ft. Smith had become ever more determined to put Christie out of business, dead or alive. They raised the reward to \$1,000 and Marshal Yoes and Judge Parker were sure that this would bring results.

In 1891 and 1892, Christie took shots at several deputies as they roamed through his area hunting for him. Five and a half years after the murder of Deputy Maples one more dedicated effort was made to capture Christie.

At dawn on October 12, 1892, Deputy Marshal Dave Rusk and a posse of five other deputies approached Christie's fort. Again Christie was alerted by his barking dogs and in the shootout two deputies were wounded. Rusk set fire to an outbuilding as Thomas had done hoping that it would ignite the fort. This time the outbuildings had been built further from the home and the ploy was unsuccessful. Then they tried dynamite but the fuse wouldn't burn. Rusk called Ft. Smith for more help and was told to hold the fort, that help was on the way. After firing on the fort day and night, Rusk gave up and withdrew because they were doing no damage.

Undaunted by another failure, Marshal Yoes put together yet another posse. This one was under the direction of Gus York, a civilian of some note in the area where Christie was holing up. York designated Deputy Gideon S. "Cap" White, a former captain in the U.S. Cavalry during the Civil War to head up the posse. This time they meant business and were armed with a borrowed cannon that fired a 3-pound shell shaped like a bullet. On the way to Rabbit Trap the posse accumulated more men including the men at Big Spring with Dan Maples and Maples' son Sam.

On November 3, 1892, the posse surrounded the fort at about 4:00 a.m. and hid in the brush. The expected dogs were strangely silent. There were even more people inside the house on that morning. Along with Ned was Nancy, Mary and granddaughter Charlotte; Little Arch; a young Cherokee named Charles Hare; and Charles Grease a seven-year-old nephew of Nancy's. James was not at home and was possibly out hunting with the dogs. Thus their silence.

Just after daylight Mary and Charlotte came out of the house and went back inside. Little Arch came out and was told to surrender, he refused and the battle commenced and Little Arch was wounded. York then called for Christie to surrender and then had Sheriff Ben Knight'; a full-blooded Cherokee, repeat the order in Cherokee just to be sure that it was understood. Christie's response was to fire a hail of bullets at the posse. Then it was requested that the women and children be sent out. They were all in the root cellar and Christie called them up and told them to leave. All of them left except for some unknown reason 7-year-old Charlie Grease was left behind. The *Oklahoma Evening Gazette* reported that James was caught trying to take two boxes of shells to his father and that the people in the house kept a steady and constant fire all day.

Wat Christie was sent for hoping he would convince his son to surrender and he refused. He said that he did not see evil in his son. Mary told the posse that there was a baby inside. Knight doubted her word, pulled on her apron and five boxes of shells fell out.

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The posse continued firing at the fort from a long distance until the cannon arrived. After the cannon was set up 38 shells bounced off the walls without damage. It was decided to use a larger charge and the cannon exploded.

The fight went on through the day and into darkness. Some of the posse members were wounded and the good guys were doing no damage. After the moon went down Deputy Charlie Copeland ran up to the house in the dark and placed a dozen sticks of dynamite next to the house with a long fuse. At daylight on the 4th the deputies lit the long fuse. The blast wrecked the house and knocked out one corner according to the *Arkansas Gazette*.

The house was now burning and still Christie and the others fought on and refused to surrender. Eventually they retreated to the root cellar and the roof fell in. Arch Wolf's hair caught fire and Charles Hare was struck by burning timbers. Most likely Charley Grease was already dead.

Smoke was filling the clearing around the fort. Christie crawled out from under the burning floor firing at the nearest deputies and almost got away in the thick smoke. Deputy Marshal Wess Bowman heard Christie yell and turned to see him running at him and two other deputies and firing as he ran. The deputies opened fire and Christie's body was riddled with bullets. Silence fell on the scene and Sam Maples ran up and emptied his revolver in the body. Badly burned Charley Hare was seen trying to escape and was arrested.

Arch lost all his hair but did manage to escape and fled to the North. Later he was arrested in Chicago.

Christie's body was strapped to the door of the fort and carried back to the posse camp. They then hauled his body to Ft. Smith and placed it in front of the jail where the public could view it. Judge Parker personally thanked each member of the posse.



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At four o'clock the public viewing ended and the body was placed on a train to Ft. Gibson where it was received by his father. Wat took the body to Rabbit Trap and buried it in the family cemetery.



The \$1,000 reward was given to Gus York. After paying the expenses the rest was divided and each member receiver \$74.



Members of the posse that killed Ned Christie posing with his corpse in November 1892. 1) Paden Tolbert 2) Capt G.S White; 3) Coon Ratteree 4) Enoch Mills 5) Ned Christie {deceased}; 6) Thomas Johnson 7) Charles Copeland 8) Heck Bruner

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Charley Hare and Little Arch were convicted of resisting arrest and intent to kill. They served time. Little Arch was admitted to a hospital for the insane and was not released until 1907. Eight months after his father's death James was murdered and it was reported that his head was severed.

In 1918 a story appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* about how a Tahlequah blacksmith Richard Humphrey, on the night of the Maples murder, was on his way home from work when he saw Bub Trainor stooped over Ned Christie who was passed out in the bushes. He saw Trainor remove Christie's dark jacket and slip it on over his white shirt. He watched as Trainor with pistol in his hand hid behind a tree. He witnessed the assassination of Deputy Marshal Dan Maples.

Like everyone else in Tahlequah, Humphrey was afraid of Trainor. Trainor was reportedly killed in 1896 in Talala on Christmas Eve by four negroes firing four shotguns. Humphrey was still afraid to come forward for fear of Trainor's friends. He was 87 years-old and 26 years after the murder when he finally told his story and set the record straight.

What would life had been like for Ned Christie if Humphrey had come forth at the time. He had been a respected member of the tribe and a member of the National Council. True he was angry about some things but he was not a bitter man.

References: *Ned Christie – Cherokee Outlaw*, by Bonnie Speer in *Wild West Magazine* February 200 issue and *Ned Christie: Cherokee Outlaw – HistoryNet* on the Internet
The Two Faces of Ned Christie, by Robert Barr Smith in the book *Outlaw Tales of Oklahoma*