

BILL DOOLIN AND THE BLACK OKLAHOMBRES

A Legendary Lawman on the Western Frontier Who Rode for Judge Isaac Parker

By Art T. Burton

The “King of the Oklahoma Outlaws” was the title Deputy U.S. Marshal Bill Tilghman gave Bill Doolin. Doolin’s criminal career was affected by African Americans on both sides of the law on several momentous occasions and one incident that is questionable.

OUTLAW GEORGE LANE

The first incident of note was the Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, federal jail break of July 5, 1896. This was the famous break that gained the freedom of fourteen prisoners including Bill Doolin and “Dynamite” Dick Clifton. The man that engineered the break was an African American criminal named George Lane, who was part Cherokee Indian. One early account stated Doolin told Lane he was going to be lynched and Lane went berserk and grabbed the jail guard. Well it didn’t happen that way. Lane had been arrested for selling whisky in the Osage Nation and had served a prior prison sentence in Texas for horse stealing.

On the night of the July 5, night guards J.T. Tull and Joe Miller were inspecting the prisoners in the “bull pen.” Lane appeared to be reaching through his cell bars to reach the water bucket to fill his tin can. Lane was doing this as Tull was passing his cell. In an instant, Lane shoved his head and shoulders through the doorway, and quickly he grabbed Tull and pinned his arms to his sides. While so imprisoned, three other convicts were able to get Tull’s revolver. Doolin shortly thereafter gained Miller’s gun, which had been left in a box near the corridor entrance. The guards were then made to open all the cell doors. Thirty-five prisoners refused to go and remained in the jail. Lane’s daring was the catalyst for Doolin’s escape from the federal jail and thus became part of the outlaw legend of Bill Doolin.

Lawman Heck Thomas later told the Oklahoma State Capitol that he regarded Lane as the real “bad man” in the territory. He said, “Doolin, Dynamite Dick and all of them were afraid to make the break, except Lane.” During his escape Lane had boasted that he wouldn’t be taken alive by the law. On November 19, 1896, Heck Thomas and Chris Madsen took a train to Greenwood, Missouri, thirty miles east of Kansas City, to arrest Lane. Thomas had received a tip that Lane was staying with friends in Greenwood. Locating the cabin where Lane was holed up, Madsen took the front door and Thomas the back door. They went in with pistols drawn. Lane surrendered without a struggle. Lane related that he had been hotly pursued, that on one occasion he had to swim the cimarron River with bullets whizzing by his head. At another time he stepped over the sleeping bodies of the Osage chief of police and two deputies, secured a gun and walked away. Lane said, “I knew the country better than my pursuers...but it was a dog’s life I led.” Lane was returned to Guthrie on November 27, 1896.

LAWMAN CHARLES PETTIT

In Bailey C. Hanes' book *Bill Doolin, Outlaw O.T.*, he mentions an incident that was supposed to have taken place at Ingalls, Oklahoma Territory. Hanes related the story that Marshall E.D. Nix had a physically large African American deputy U.S. marshal on staff named Charles Pettit. Supposedly Pettit was very eager to collect the reward for the capture of Doolin and let it be known he would bring him in. Shortly thereafter, he went to Ingalls and started hanging around the town saloons. According to Hanes, Doolin confronted Pettit in one of the bars, demanded to see the warrant for his arrest then made Pettit eat it and wash it down with a whisky for a chaser. Doolin then supposedly told Pettit to leave town and if he ever came back he would kill him, at which time Pettit mounted up and rode out of town in a hurry. As far as I know there is no documentation that this event between Doolin and Pettit ever happened.

What we do know about Charles Pettit is that Chris Madsen called him a "colored giant who worked the Osage country." Pettit is said to have worked out of the Guthrie office. He was stationed at Pawhuska, Osage Nation, for the Guthrie court. In his autobiography, Frank "Pistol Pete" Eaton claims he assisted Pettit in making an arrest in Pawhuska on one occasion.

This is an interesting article on Pettit from **The Oklahoma State Capitol**, July 2, 1896:

Pettit, The Terror – One of the Best Posted and Most Daring Deputies in the Territory

Charlie Pettit, the colored deputy marshal, the terror of the woods but one of the best known and trusted and good natured men, a man that fears neither man nor devil, is in the city...Charley Pettit is at the same time the most gentle, well disposed fellow in the territory. He is colored, it is true, but a great genius could build a romance on his life that would beat all the "yellow backs" that were ever written. He could be made out to be in fiction – and in truth, too – as the "Black Terror of the Territory.

Charley Pettit is here as posseman of H.H. Callahan, a brave deputy marshal who killed some time ago the famous outlaw, Tom Crook, in the Osage nation. If ever there was a man that deserved a deputy marshal's commission in his own name, it is Charley Pettit. He is as gentle as a lamb and you would think butter would melt in his mouth, but at the same time, he is as courageous as a lion.

I haven't been able to find out if Pettit ever received a commission under Nix, but it appears he received a prior commission as a deputy U.S. marshal under William Grimes of Oklahoma Territory. Grimes' payroll record for January 1 to June 30, 1893 shows Charles Pettit receiving \$340.02 in wages and reimbursements. The following notations were found in territorial newspapers concerning Pettit's police work:

The Guthrie Leader, June 14, 1894:

"Deputy Charlie Pettit (sic), down from Perry with prisoners, most selling whisky."

The State Capitol, March 6, 1895:

"Deputy Chas. Pettit came in last month from the Osage country with W.S. Kennedy, an Osage whisky peddler. He was given lodging at the federal jail."

The Guthrie Leader, April 27, 1895:

“Deputy Charles Pettit arrived yesterday from the Osage country with Will Hill and Perrin Rich, two Osage dealers in ardent spirits and turned them over to the keeper of the federal inn.”

LAWMAN RUFUS CANNON

Doolin was killed by a federal posse on August 24, 1896 near Lawson, Oklahoma Territory. The posse was led by the famous lawman Heck Thomas. On Sunday night, August 23rd, while encamped on Dry Creek northeast of Chandler, the Thomas posse was joined by African Cherokee deputy U.S. Marshal Rufus Cannon, a noted gunman and manhunter.

Rufus Cannon was one of the most important black lawmen of the Oklahoma territorial era. Recent research shows that he may have to rank second only to Bass Reeves and Grant Johnson in regards to black peace officers on the Oklahoma frontier.

The newspaper printed a story after Doolin’s death that Rufus Cannon, for certain, had been the posseman who had shot Doolin. They later changed the story before the paper went to press and stated Thomas had done the deed. The newspaper stated Cannon was a half-blood Cherokee and didn’t allude to his African ancestry. Did Cannon actually pull the trigger on the shotgun that killed Doolin? We will never really know for sure. A year later in a letter of correspondence, Thomas took credit for Doolin’s death. But if Cannon didn’t kill Doolin, he shot and arrested his share of bad men.

The Fort Smith National Historic Site has records that show Rufus Cannon receiving a deputy marshal commission on September 15, 1892, and June 1, 1893 from Judge Issac C. Parker’s court for the Indian Territory. Cannon’s exact length of service is not known, but what is known due to the newspaper reports is that he worked both the Oklahoma and Indian Territories.

One of the first notable captures of outlaws by Cannon was the arrest of the notorious African Creek outlaw Captain Willie. The outstanding Oklahoma City deputy U.S. Marshal George Thornton had been murdered by Captain Willie near the Sac and Fox Agency in October, 1891. Below are a couple of newspaper articles related to this event:

The Watonga Republican. October 26, 1892:

A DESPERADO CAPTURED

Guthrie, O.T., Oct. 17 – United States Marshals Rufe Cannon and J.P. Hunter arrived here tonight with the noted Creek desperado, Captain John Wiley (sic). Wiley killed Deputy Marshal George Thornton a year ago besides several other men during his criminal career.

The Fort Smith Elevator. November 4, 1892:

A FATAL SHOT

Deputy Marshal Rufus Cannon, who arrested the notorious Creek outlaw Captain Wylie, arrived in the city Tuesday. Deputy Cannon reports that on his way back he was overtaken near the Oklahoma line by a gang of drunken outlaws, who charged into his camp. One of the party was captured with three quarts of whisky in his possession, and placed under

arrest. As soon as his comrades discovered he was missing they returned and fired into the camp. Mr. Cannon returned fire, and the leader of the attacking party fell dead, shot through the neck. Mr. Cannon shortly afterward surrendered to Deputy Hunter.

The next incident of note occurred when Cannon, along with black deputy U.S. Marshal Ike Rogers (of Cherokee Bill fame), led their posse into a gunfight with the Cherokee outlaw Henry Starr and his gang near Bartlesville. This altercation took place on January 21, 1893. Starr and Ed Newcome escaped the posse, but Cannon shot the right arm off a white outlaw named Jesse Jackson with a shotgun. Jackson was captured and turned over to lawman Heck Thomas for robbing the Santa Fe railroad train on November 8, 1892 at Wharton, Oklahoma Territory.

The Coffeyville Journal on February 24, 1893 carried the following story:

“Deputy U.S. Marshal Rufus Cannon of Fort Smith, was in the city Monday, having in charge Scott Bruner, who is implicated in robbing the Santa Fe train at Wharton, Oklahoma Territory and the Pacific train at Coney (Caney ?) last fall. Bruner is a desperate fellow and the capture is an important one. He was captured down on the Osage line at the house of a man named Washington while making love to his sweetheart.”

Scott Bruner was taken to Fort Smith Monday as was expected. One reason was the marshal was waiting for witnesses to arrive. U.S. Marshal Tom Weeks, who made the arrest with Cannon, came up from the territory Monday night and was here all day yesterday. Weeks says Bruner is undoubtedly a bad man. He held up two men not long since in the territory and was surely in the Wharton robbery. Bruner is already under bond for Peddling whiskey. Weeks and Cannon were to take Bruner to Fort Smith Tuesday evening. There is a reward of \$1000 for the arrest and conviction of the men who robbed the train at Wharton last fall and two of them are now captured.”

The Guthrie State Capitol on August 14, 1894 printed:

“Deputy Marshall Rufus Cannon is in the city;” and on September 13, 1894: “Deputy Marshalls Sam and Morris O’Malley and Rufus Cannon came in with a batch of prisoners from the Creek country.”

The Muskogee Phoenix on September 22, 1894 carried a story about a shooting Cannon was involved in:

“About a year and a half ago, Rufus Cannon and W.L. Stamphill, deputies under Marshal Yoes, had a fight near Wewoka with a portion of the Woodward gang. Joe Pierce was killed and his friends claim that the killing was unjustifiable. They attempted to have the deputies indicted for murder, but failed. The special grand jury.....took up the case again and returned indictments against both. Stamphill was in the city and surrendered at once. Rufus Cannon was out in the Seminole nation, but came in today and gave himself up to C.J. Lamb. Both had admitted to bond and are confident of their acquittal.”

In July of 1895, Bob and Bill Christain broke out of the Oklahoma City jail and in doing so murdered Police Chief Milt Jones. An extensive and intensive manhunt followed. Cannon arrested William “Old Man” Christain and W.H. “Bill” Carr on July 22, 1895 in Pottowatomie County, Oklahoma Territory. “Old Man” Christain and former lawman Carr had been implicated in assisting with the escape.

The Guthrie State Capitol on November 2, 1895 reported:

“Deputy Marshal Rufe Cannon is over from the Creek country.”

The next incident of importance for Cannon was the subduing of Bill Doolin with the Heck Thomas posse. Being a fully sworn deputy, Cannon was ineligible for reward monies as the member of a posse. Cannon received \$10 for mileage and reportedly Thomas gave him a share of his reward money. Cannon died in Kansas City, Missouri at the age of 105.

In Bill Doolin’s last year, he was able to break out of jail due to the initiative of a black outlaw. Doolin may have lost his life to a black lawman who was a member of the posse that killed him. Doolin’s grave was dug and he was buried by a black man named Sherman Patton. This took place on August 28, 1896 at Summit View Cemetery, Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, where Patton was the groundskeeper.

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