

BLUE DUCK, A KNIFE AND A FAMILY ACCOUNT

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This is a personal account by me concerning a close friend of 48 years and a knife handed down through his family through 3 generations.



The artifact I refer to is a common Bowie knife, black walnut handles with pewter inlays and overall length 10 ¼". It has no makers name or markings, it a style very typical of the Fur Trade, trapping, traders, and Native Americans between about 1800 and 1870. The thing that sets this knife apart is the family history that comes with it. I will start with the 48 year friendship I had with my friend until his death in 2015. His name was Mike Millsap, and he was from McIntosh County, Oklahoma. Our relationship grew out of a common interest in history we had surrounding Eastern Oklahoma where Mike lived and Western Arkansas where I was raised. I recall this story about a knife handed down through his wife's side of the family that once belonged to a Cherokee Indian outlaw named Blue Duck. Larry McMurtry's novel "Lonesome Dove" 1985 and the TV special series that followed in 1989 has made the name well known. At the time I first heard this name from Mike it was just another of the dozens of outlaws I had read about that had been tried in the court of the famous hanging Judge Isaac Parker. I was raised in Fort Smith, where his famous court is now a museum and National Historic Park Site, and in the 1960's had access to an office for my early research projects, many of which involved the local history.

This family history of the knife is based on personal interviews I have had over the years with Mike and his daughter Melina Millsap – Goatcher, whom I acquired the knife from in 2017. The knife has been handed down through the family 3 generations to Melina, from one of two ancestors, her Great grand Mother “Dovie Newton” or Dovie’s sister “Lydia Newton” that were both said to have been raped by blue Duck. (*See the attached providence chart*) The dates of the rapes have become lost to time, but if the accounts are true they would have taken place well after the date Blue Duck is thought to have died. As you will see with very little research the accounts surrounding the time and cause of Blue Duck’s death vary widely from one account to another.

I cannot over state enough that the vast amount of information you find about Blue Duck is false, or based on very little proven fact. I will refer to several facts that are official, and based on government records. Blue Duck’s birth name was Blueford Duck and he was known as Blue Duck, his Indian name was Sha-Con-Gah Kaw-Wan-Nu. National Archive Military Records show his father was a Cherokee by the name of Jumper Duck, 2nd Lieut., Co. I, 3rd reg. Indian Home Guard, Cherokee Nation and his mother was Annie Hopper. Records show Blue Duck was born on June 17, 1859, and first mention him as living his teen years in the 1870’s on Rogers Creek, West of Oologah, Indian Territory.

Blue Duck gained fame on June 23, 1884 in Flint District, Cherokee Nation. While Blue Duck and his friend William Christie were drunk and riding to a friends farm Blue Duck shot and killed Samuel Wyrick, an innocent farm boy while he was working in a field. They were both charged with the murder, William Christie was acquitted, but Blue Duck was found guilty of murder in Judge Parker’s court and sentenced to hang on July 23, 1886. The following accounts do not have a logical explanation to me but according to period accounts Ducks lawyer confronted Belle Starr in Fort Smith on May 24th, 1886 and had her pose with Blue Duck for a photograph.



Blue Duck & Belle Starr
May 24, 1886
Fort Smith, Arkansas

This is the famous picture you see of her standing next to a seated Blue Duck. Shortly after this photo Duck's death sentence was commuted and he was sentenced to life in Menard Penitentiary, Chester ILL. by Judge Parker, His inmate number was 2486. He served sentence until March 20, 1895 at which time supposedly owing to failing health, he received a pardon from President Cleveland. He was released on March 24th and returned to the Cherokee Nation.

Most accounts will show Blue Duck's death to be less than 2 months later on May 7, 1895, and burial in Dick Duck cemetery, Rogers County, now Oklahoma. The accounts I have from members of the Millsap family state that he did not die at that time, and in fact lived until 1921, and his place of burial went un-recorded. In the Millsap accounts it is also stated that the burial in Dick Duck Cemetery on May 7, 1895 attributed to Blue Duck is in fact that of an uncle of his that often took the blame for Blue Ducks crimes. Practices like that were not all that uncommon among outlaws in those times.

On the last page in the Millsap family account I might mention the fact that the rape of Dovie Newton "Creek Indian & Great Grand Mother of Melina Millsap" resulted in a son. A relationship between Dovie and Blue Duck never resulted, but it is said that the boy did

become close to his father. The boys name was told to me to have been an Indian name, and never used by the family. His name, date of birth and death are now lost as well as 3 tin Type photos that are said to still exist. One of the photos is of Blue Duck holding the knife, and the other two are duplicates of one negative of Blue Duck with his son. I am still aiding in searches to try and locate these, but considering the locations, and passage of time they may never be found. I have good information that may lead to a stone marking the burial place of the son of Dovie and Blue Duck but until I do further investigation into this I will not say more.



Melina Millsap-Goatcher and Steve Cox 2017

In closing I would like to thank the Millsap family for all the help they have given me in this matter, it's not something they have ever said much about, and they are not proud of. Neither I nor anyone else can be sure of all the information concerning Blue Duck, but this is a first hand account I felt should be recorded.

Best Regards, Steve Cox

A piece of Blue Duck history
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Jumper Duck
 3rd Indian Home Guards
 d. Oct. 20, 1863

Annie Hopper

Blueford Duck
 Sha-con-gah Kaw-wan-nu
 "Blue Duck" and Belle Star
 b. June 17, 1859, d. ?



Family history claims that Blue Duck did not die on May 7th, 1895 as reported, but lived on and died in 1921. It is also a family claim that he is not the person that served the prison time at Menard penitentiary from Oct. 1886 to March 20, 1895. It was family history that contended the sentence was actually served by an uncle of Blue Ducks that took several falls for him. In the history books various accounts of every aspect of Blue Duck's life can be found, but very few have been proven to be factual. The information here is the result of many family interviews by myself over a period of years. Parts of this history is also known by several old timers and family members living in and around McIntosh County, Oklahoma. My research is on going in hopes of gaining more detail regarding Blue Duck and the other facts given here in.
 Steve Cox, Van Buren, AR 2017

Trail of the knife shown with green arrows

Raped

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