

## Cookson Hills outlaw haven



Judge Parker



"Pretty Boy" Floyd

**TABLEQUAH** (cnhi) – The oak-strewn woods that cover the Cookson Hills, once known as the Cherokee Hills and also known as the foothills of the Ozarks, have been home to more than just the elusive deer that evade hunters each fall during hunting season.

Since the late 19th century, the Cookson Hills have also been the havens and hideouts for some of the most notorious outlaws the South has known.

Such infamous individuals as "Pretty Boy" Floyd, Frank and Jesse James and the Daltons sought

refuge in the heavily wooded area that was the Cookson Hills.

Others like Kye Carlisle, Belle Starr and Ned Christie also hid from the law in the wild woods of the Cookson Hills.

The Cookson Hills marked a stretch of land that covered nearly everything between Tablequah and Sallisaw and from the Arkansas state line to the Arkansas River.

In the middle to late 1800s, this area was so wild with thick growth and treacherous rocks and hills that few people managed to make a life living on that land.

The folks who did, however, were a tough group whose distrust of strangers was almost as strong as their distrust of the government.

It was this distrust of outsiders that initially brought those running from the law into the area.

Many outlaws like Floyd, Carlisle and others were thought of as Robin Hoods who stole from the establishment and gave to the poor in the area in exchange for their silence.

Another luring aspect of the Cookson Hills was the lack of authority. While the Cherokee Nation had set its capitol in Tablequah with its own effective form of controlling crime, the only law affecting whites came from Fort Smith under inept eyes of William Story.

It wouldn't be until 1874 when "Hangin' Judge" Isaac Parker took over for Story that a concerted effort to stop the outlaws in the Cookson Hills began.

Parker has been said to have hanged at least 79 people in Fort Smith, with the number of death sentences numbering as high as 160. Under Parker's appointment to the Fort Smith bench, more than 100 deputy marshals died trying to bring the criminal element to justice.

For all of Parker's diligence, however, the outlaws were a hard group to put down. In Cookson, in the years before the 20th century, it was said that most residents trusted the outlaws more than they did the law.

There were many law enforcers who went into the woolly Cookson hills to never be seen nor heard from again. The Cherokee people who lived in the area resented the lawmen for the killing of Ned Christie – a man accused of killing a Tablequah marshal in 1889.

Many believe now that Christie was probably innocent.

Folks living in Cookson also distrusted the law mostly due to the enforcement of prohibition laws.

The Cookson hills were alive with the bubbling and gurgling of homemade moonshine stills and home beer breweries.

The battle for law and order began to sway away from the outlaws in the 1890s, most notably after the Dalton gang was gunned down across the border in Kansas.

Three men who were instrumental in the fight were Deputy United States Marshals Bill Tilghman, Chris Madsen and Heck Thomas – otherwise known as the "Three Guardsmen."

The hills were always rampant with bad company.

As the 1900s began to get rolling, it seemed that the vision for lawfulness could come to pass.

That was, until the 1910s when there was a rash of bank robberies. Many believed the mastermind behind the robberies was Henry Starr, a relative of the outlaw queen, Belle Starr.

With a new rash of bank and train robberies, murders and bootlegging, in 1925, Gov. M.E. Trapp

put into works the foundation that would blossom into the new agency named the Oklahoma Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation – a.k.a. the State Crime Bureau.

The State Crime Bureau was the first of its kind in the nation: it combined field operatives who tracked down and apprehended criminals with personnel who specialized in fingerprinting and identification.

Despite the state's increase in manpower and technology, the state's bloodiest years were still to come.

In 1932, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd managed to rob three banks, in Paden, Castle and Dover, in two days.

"Pretty Boy" Floyd took to the Cookson Hills and managed to avoid capture for several months.

Gunfight after gunfight, Floyd managed to elude lawmen, earning him a reputation as one of the most notorious desperados in Oklahoma's tainted past.

That same year there were a rash of shootouts between lawmen and outlaws involving the "Bonnie and Clyde" gang in Stringtown, and Fred Barker, a member of the "Ma" Barker gang who robbed the bank in Bixby. Floyd robbed more banks in Henryetta and Sallisaw.

In 1933 the Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation, what would later be known as the FBI, was sent into Oklahoma to help take care of the outlaw problem. Early operatives, known as

"G-Men" were able to track down and squelch the desperadoes and end their reign of crime. Soon, George "Machine Gun" Kelly was captured and imprisoned.

In 1934, "Pretty Boy" Floyd was killed by G-Men and Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were also killed by Louisiana lawmen. The next year saw the end of the "Ma" Barker gang with Ma and her son Fred being killed in Florida by federal agents.

The Cookson Hills have undergone quite a few changes since the days when fugitives and outlaws trampled through the woods in an effort to elude the law.

Roads began to be built in the Cookson area where once were only trails connecting the many small communities. Highway 82, built with the aid of convict labor, opened up the closed-off hideout for travelers. And later when the Tenkiller Dam was built and the Illinois River flooded, tourists began to pour into the area.

Regardless of whether there are criminals hiding out in the trees of the Cookson Hills, the legends have survived. Whether it's children scouring through the woods in search of buried loot or old wives' tales about the restless spirit of Ned Christie roaming the woods, Oklahoma's past is still fresh on everyone's mind.

By Gregg Winkler  
Tablequah Daily Press

## Okie noodlers gather

**PAULS VALLEY** (cnhi) – There's a saying that can be heard around the Pauls Valley area.

"If you ain't been noodlin' you ain't been fishin'."

At least that's what countless die-hard noodlers proclaim who regularly engage in the exhilarating sport that many observers describe as nothing short of bizarre.

Noodling - a practice that involves locating catfish underwater and hauling them to the surface using nothing more than a person's bare hands - has captured the

public's fascination for decades.

And to celebrate the long-standing Oklahoma tradition, noodling fans and practitioners from all over this part of the country began to congregate five years ago for an annual Okie Noodlin' Tournament and Fish Fry.

While most people would rather not participate in the rugged competition part of the event, a large crowd still shows up every summer to admire the huge catches of the day, sample some fried catfish with all the trimmings and enjoy some shoulder-to-shoulder

camaraderie. This year's catfish extravaganza is June 26 at Bob's Pig Shop, 829 North Ash, in Pauls Valley. Fish weigh-in begins at 7 p.m. and T-shirts will be available to commemorate the festive event.

Bob's Pig Shop owner Phil Henderson said a live band will be "crankin' out some tunes" throughout the evening and attendees are guaranteed an unforgettable experience.

By Jim Richardson  
Pauls Valley Daily Democrat

## Stillwater hall of fame tribute to wrestling



Greco-Roman sculptures depicting the world's oldest sport are found inside the Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater. (cnhi photo by Alec Richards/Stillwater NewsPress)

**STILLWATER** (cnhi) – It's not the oldest hall of fame but it holds the history of possibly the world's oldest sport - wrestling.

Since 1976, it has been located a block away from possibly the most storied collegiate wrestling program in the country, an Oklahoma State program that has won an unprecedented 32 NCAA Division I championships.

"If you are a wrestling fan, of course the wrestling history in the hall of fame is for you. But if you are not even a fan of the sport, it is a place where you can visit on an afternoon and really get a sense of a museum dealing with something a lot of people have never seen or learned about," said Oklahoma State head coach John Smith, a six-time World Champion and Olympic gold medalist in 1988 and 1992.

The National Wrestling Hall of Fame features a variety of sculptures, photographs, banners, plaques, medals, trophies, uniforms and other memorabilia.

The Bill Hein Library, recently augmented by his mammoth collection of books, theses, dissertations, films and videotapes, houses a growing collection.

The Wall of Champions lists more than 5,000 wrestlers who have won national championships or have represented the United States on Olympic, Pan American and World teams.

Although a Monday through Friday visit can easily fill up an afternoon, the annual Honors Weekend celebrates the induction of new members and brings together the wrestling community from coast to coast. Exceptional high

school athletes are honored with the Dave Schultz Award and the weekend culminates with the annual induction of a new class of Distinguished Members.

The annual gathering of wrestling fans takes place the first Saturday in June and always includes a wide variety of former athletes who have contributed to the sport on and off the mat.

Did you know?

- Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert coached Yorkville High School in Illinois to the 1976 state wrestling championship. Hastert entered the hall of fame in 2000 as a recipient of the Outstanding American Award.
- Former President William H. Taft was voted into the hall of fame in 1996 as an Outstanding American.
- The Medal of Courage honoree in 2002 was Chief Raymond Downey of the New York Fire Department. He lost his life in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City just months after receiving the Crystal Apple Award, issued by the mayor of New York. His sons, Joe and Ray, competed for Hofstra University in New York.

In the spring of 2003, the international wrestling community realized the importance of housing its long and illustrious history as well. A visit to Stillwater by FILA President Raphael Martinetti and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame quickly became the world's historical museum for wrestling.

Among the first class of international inductees where Smith and legendary Russian heavyweight Alexander Karelin, who did not

lose a match for a decade while winning nine-straight world championships before losing in the 2000 Olympic gold medal match to Rulon Gardner of the United States.

"Getting elected to the hall of fame is the highest honor in our sport," said Kerry McCoy, the U.S. Olympic hopeful this summer in freestyle. "You come here and you are surrounded by champions, the greatest this sport has ever known. When you join these guys, you know you've done something special in your career. Just being mentioned in the same breath with some of these guys is an honor."

By Roger Moore  
Stillwater NewsPress

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Wrestlinghalloffame.org

### HOURS

Hours Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
On weekends by appointment

### ADMISSION

Adults \$5  
Family \$10  
Students \$2  
Group \$25  
Kids younger than 5 free