

## JOSEPH FRANKLIN THOMPSON: AN EARLY CHEROKEE LEADER

*By T. L. Ballenger*

Though not definitely traceable, the Thompson family seems to have a touch of English royal blood coursing through its veins. The "Thompson Family Records" tell of a Morris Thompson, who was a member of the government of Oliver Cromwell, the Great Protector. They tell us of his son, Sir John Thompson, born 1647, member of Parliament and first Baron of Haversham. They tell us also of Thompsons who were veterans of the American Revolution.

James Allen Thompson and family came from Georgia to the Cherokee Nation at the time of the removal and settled at what is now the Turner Edmondson place, on Beatties Prairie, about four miles southwest of Maysville. James Allen Thompson had married Martha Lynch back in Georgia. His father was born in South Carolina and his mother in Georgia. He was a white man, his wife a mixed blood Cherokee, and, when he came here, he brought along his Negro slaves and a considerable amount of money. They reared a family of eleven children of whom Joseph Franklin was the youngest. Joseph Franklin was born at the old home place, on Beatties Prairie, Cherokee Nation, May 21, 1841.

At a Parks-Thompson family reunion at Grove, Oklahoma, in August, 1936, his son, Walter A. Thompson, referring to the birth-place and early childhood of his father, painted the following vivid mental picture of him:

I wandered alone about the old place where my father was born, the youngest of eleven children. I walked around over the very ground and touched the very stones his little bare feet had touched ninety odd years ago. Looking back across the years, I can see him now, a little round-faced fellow, bareheaded and barefooted, toddling all around the place; here and there and everywhere; down to the spring and along the creek, up through the negro quarters and out among the cattle and sheep, or listening wide-eyed to the guns and bugles of old Fort Wayne.<sup>1</sup> Old Bart, his negro body servant, and Aunt Nan and Aunt Ann, and the rest, had plenty to do keeping him from mischief and harm.

I can see him standing by the fireplace in an old log cabin leaning against his mother's knee, listening to grandpa Jim Allen Thompson and the older boys as they talked of the succession of horrors all along the 'trail of tears', or spoke in hushed tones of the conspiracy of jealous hate that resulted in the murder of Boudinot and the Ridges. He heard them

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<sup>1</sup> Fort Wayne, first built on the site of the present town of Watts in 1837, was moved in 1839, to within a half mile of the old Thompson home. It was later discontinued and the equipment transferred to Ft. Scott, Kansas. Stand Watie and his followers used the buildings as a rendezvous during the heated factionalism of the middle forties. The Confederates used the fort as a recruiting place during the Civil War. The buildings have long since fallen to decay.

talk of the trial in Arkansas in 1842 of the lion-hearted Watie for the killing of James Foreman, leader of the band that waylaid and killed Major Ridge near Dutch Mills, Arkansas, and of his triumphal acquittal through the efforts of Colonel George W. Paschal, a member of the Federal Court of the Western District of Arkansas, and the splendid eloquence of his chief counsel, Colonel Arrington.

In his childhood, Joseph attended grade school at the old Beatties Prairie school house, about a mile northwest of the Thompson home. His teachers were possibly Kenney Davis and Mose Frye, grandfather of the Fryes at Sallisaw, for these men taught there at about this time.

In the early eighteen-fifties Joseph was sent to the Male Seminary where he obtained a high school education. It was while he was here that Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, with his troops, came through Tahlequah on his way to Utah to quell the Mormon revolt.<sup>3</sup> The troops camped at the spring just south of the present city limits, and Uncle Joe tells of the seminary boys going out to visit their camp. After the temporary suspension of the Male Seminary, in 1856, he attended Cane Hill college at Cane Hill, Arkansas for a short time.

Shortly before the Civil War he went to Lebanon, Tennessee to obtain a college education and to study for the ministry. Here he attended the Cumberland University where he was graduated in 1861.

The war broke out while he was in Tennessee, and he enlisted in the Confederate service, in the Seventh Tennessee Infantry. He was soon transferred to the First Arkansas Cavalry, commonly known as Pierce's Brigade, and, a little later, joined Colonel Stand Watie's First Cherokee Regiment in the Indian Territory.

He soon became captain of Company E in his regiment, then was elected major. Upon the death of the Lieutenant Colonel, Major Thompson was promoted to that position. He became Stand Watie's chief dependence for the organization and leadership of the army. Stand Watie depended upon Colonel Thompson to keep his army records and to drill and discipline the troops in the General's absence. Thompson did valiant service for the Confederate cause at the battle of Honey Springs in 1863, and assisted Stand Watie in the famous capture of the Federal wagon train of supplies at Big Cabin in September, 1864. He was with Sterling Price at Wilson's Creek and participated in the battles of Pea Ridge and the Neosho. By the close of the war, he had risen to the rank of Adjutant General of the First Indian Brigade, C. S. A.

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<sup>3</sup> Col. Albert Sidney Johnston, 2nd Cavalry, U.S.A., was commissioned brevet brigadier general "for meritorious conduct in the ability, zeal, energy and prudence displayed by him in command of the army in Utah," on Nov. 18, 1857. After his resignation from the Army in 1861, he served as brigadier general in the Confederate States Army, and was killed in action at the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, April 6, 1862. (Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, Vol. 1 [Washington, 1903].)—Ed.

On September 2, 1862, he was married to Mary Ellen Adair. She was the daughter of James Thompson Adair and Martha Martin, daughter of the first Supreme Judge of the Cherokee Nation, John Martin. Her brothers were William Penn Adair and Frank Adair who was the father of Mrs. J. A. Lawrence of Tahlequah. The wedding of Joseph Franklin and Mary Ellen was solemnized in the old Adair home seven miles east of Stilwell, in Flint District. This commodious, two-story, double log house, in the Oak Grove community, was built in 1835 and is still standing and in a good state of preservation today (1952). Of this union, six children were born. His son, Walter A. Thompson, became one of the foremost citizens of the Cherokee Nation. He was a well educated man, taught for a number of years in the Male Seminary, and was an excellent public speaker. Joseph Franklin's wife, Mary Ellen, died April 10, 1900. He was married a second time to Mary Fannie Adair. After her death he married Mrs. Sarah Lovett.

He was in Texas when the war closed, and taught school there in Woods county, in 1865 and 1866. It was here that his son, Walter A. Thompson, was born. Returning to the Indian Territory he taught one year in the Choctaw Nation, then resumed his teaching in the Cherokee Nation at Locust Grove, where he worked from 1870 to 1873. He was then appointed to the Cherokee Board of Education in which capacity he served until 1875. The following year he was made first assistant at the Male Seminary, and served the next two years as superintendent of the Female Seminary at Park Hill. He then returned to the Male Seminary, and taught another year. Next he was superintendent of the Asbury Manual Labor School at Eufaula from 1880 to 1881. He held the superintendency of the Cherokee Orphan Asylum at Salina from 1882 to 1893, and again from 1897 to 1901. As Superintendent, he helped to educate and inspire many a Cherokee youth who has since that time assumed the responsibilities of citizenship and leadership in the new state of Oklahoma.

Mr. Thompson always kept the best interest of the people of his community uppermost in his mind. In the summer of 1900, while he was superintendent of the Orphan Asylum, a peculiar fungus growth attacked the appletrees of that region. Mr. Thompson sent a specimen and wrote to the Agricultural Experiment station, which had been established at Stillwater, Oklahoma Territory only a few years before, for information about the disease. When the desired information was returned, with instructions for its treatment, he broadcast this information through the different papers over the country to all of the people.

Mr. Thompson served in an official capacity in the Cherokee Nation at different times. He was appointed auditor by Chief Lewis Downing during the latter part of his term of office (1869—1871). He was sent to Washington as a delegate in 1894, to represent the

Cherokee Nation in a suit then pending with the United States. He was again a member of the Cherokee Board of Education in 1898.

In 1870, Mr. Thompson joined the Indian Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South and continued actively in the ministry until his death. He received his early training and practice in the ministry as circuit rider in the Grand River circuit, serving here for three years. His successive preaching stations in this circuit were Locust Grove, Spavinaw, the Butler school house on Honey Creek, the Parks home on Cowskin Prairie, Vinita, Silver Lake in Cooweescoowee district, Coody's Bluff, one other station, and then back to Locust Grove. It usually took him about a month to make the rounds. Though these long trips, always made on horseback (or, as they said at the time, "on a broom-tail pony"), were hard and grinding, he never faltered. On one occasion he returned home to find that his infant daughter had become ill, had died, and was already buried. He was far away, no one knew just where to find him, and there was no way of getting word to him. In 1874, he was made Deacon of the Methodist church and, in 1876, was raised to the office of Elder.<sup>3</sup> He served the Fort Gibson-Tahlequah circuit 1877 and 1878. In 1879 he was made Presiding Elder of the Cherokee district and, in 1881, was Presiding Elder of the Muskogee district. He filled the pastorate at Tahlequah 1896-1897.<sup>4</sup> His last preaching was done in the Tahlequah circuit.

The question has sometimes been raised by researchers in Oklahoma history as to the origin of the term "The Trail of Tears" given the roadway over which the Indian removal was made to the Indian Territory in the eighteen-thirties. The pioneer Oklahoma historian, the late Dr. Joseph B. Thoburn, often told the story of how he had first heard the term "the trail of tears" from his Methodist preacher friend, the Reverend Thompson:<sup>5</sup> Once when Mr. Thompson was preaching in the Choctaw Nation, he and Dr. Thoburn were riding along in a buggy and talking over old times. In crossing a road leading from old Skullyville toward Ft. Smith, Mr. Thompson pointed eastward up this road and remarked to Dr. Thoburn: "That's the road the Choctaws call 'The Trail of Tears.' They traveled that old road long ago during the removal from Mississippi to this country." After this visit to the region of old Skullyville in the Choctaw country,

<sup>3</sup> The official documents of appointment, the one signed by Bishop George F. Pierce at Louisville, Kentucky and the other by Bishop Holland N. Tyeire at Vinita, are in the private files of the writer.

<sup>4</sup> Sydney Henry Babcock and John Y. Bryce, *History of Methodism in Oklahoma* (1935), Vol. I, pp. 344-421, gives Mr. Thompson's appointments by the Indian Mission Conference Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1874-1904.

<sup>5</sup> Told the writer by Miss Muriel H. Wright who often heard Dr. Thoburn relate how he had first heard the term "The Trail of Tears." (Joseph B. Thoburn used the term "the trail of tears" in his first state history textbook, *History of Oklahoma* [1908] p. 51, under the sub-head "A Sad Chapter" in his chapter on "Migration of Eastern Tribes."—Ed.)

Dr. Thoburn used this term in his writings. The Methodist circuit rider who had lived for a time among the Choctaws had been impressed with the pathos of their interpretation," the trail of tears," for he was familiar with the account of the tragic removal of the Cherokees as well as that of the Choctaws to the Indian Territory. Today, the term is of such universal use that few of us ever stop to wonder about its origin.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century while the Cherokees were still embittered over Civil War factions and were beginning to be considerably wrought up over the prospective termination of their tribal government, some rather suspicious transactions took place in which several prominent citizens were either implicated or were accused of abetting. Under these circumstances many of the sober minds of the nation, regardless of party, hoped to avert disaster by electing a level-headed, unbiased chief who would be capable of leading the people out of chaos and into a more reasonable adjustment of their affairs. Joseph F. Thompson was the leader to whom they turned.

The *Pryor Creek* (?) *Enterprise* of April 29, 1899 said:

The Cherokees will elect a chief on the first Monday of next August. The old party lines will be largely effaced and in their place will be progression against retrogression. This people should put aside all ideas of the return of the good old days of the past and wake up and put forward the best plans for a solution of the questions now at the very threshold. All must realize that the United States is slowly but surely forcing Indian government to the rear, and preparation to meet coming conditions cannot be begun too soon. The progressive element desires a man for chief in whom is found decision, capability and honesty, and with a reputation clean and pure, and whose past record is not, in the least, smirched with suspicion of being connected in any way with any of the reported 'deals'. Rev. J. F. Thompson has been suggested by men from different parts of the nation, as the real, logical candidate, and a worthy representative of progression. The nomination and election of such an able, honest and capable man as Mr. Thompson for chief, at the present time, would speak volumes in favor of the Cherokees.

Again on May 4, 1899, the *Sallisaw Star* added the following comment:

There is much talk of nominating Rev. Joseph F. Thompson for chief by the Downing Convention which meets the 22nd of this month.<sup>6</sup> Those who know Mr. Thompson say he is far superior in intellect, education and general attainments, to any of the candidates heretofore mentioned. He is a college graduate, and a man in whom the people have the greatest confidence. His honesty and integrity cannot be doubted in the least. He is generous, liberal and progressive and a gentleman of the highest Christian type. He is capable in every way, of meeting any official of the great government of the United States and discussing, intelligently and with force, any subject, local, national or otherwise. His record is clean. The Cherokees need such a man for chief, right now.

<sup>6</sup> The Downing Convention commonly met at Double Springs about six miles northwest of Tahlequah.

Politics, however, is frequently not directed by sane reasoning. Mr. Thompson was not nominated.

On January 19, 1914, the Reverend Joseph F. Thompson delivered the address for the William Penn Adair Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, at the dedication of the Confederate memorial drinking fountain on the square at Tahlequah. In this address he referred to the Northern soldier with no malice nor hatred but with a generous spirit of reconciliation. He even contended that good would come to the nation out of the bloody conflict; and suggested that<sup>7</sup>

"the impartial historian may pronounce a verdict which shall exonerate both parties to it of any serious blame. . . . When we remember that the free government founded on this continent was itself born in the throes of revolution and also that questions of tremendous import were left unsettled when that government was established there is small cause to wonder, although much for regret, that resort was later had to so terrible an arbitrament. The disputants on both sides came of the blood that is 'slower to bless than to ban', prompter to strike than to parley; and a resort to arms to settle once for all issues which seemed otherwise insoluble . . . was only the instinct of that blood manifesting itself along traditional lines."

His address was closed with an original ode to his comrades illustrative of sublime pathos as well as mild humor:

I'm thinking of you today, boys,  
And the boys we used to know,  
Way back in eighteen and sixty-one,  
Some firty-three years ago,  
And through the hazy vista  
I see the camp fires glow,  
And all the boys a singing  
The songs of long ago.

Old songs, like "Annie Laurie",  
"Ben Bolt" and "Bonnie Jean"  
And "Way Down South in Dixie"  
And "The Girl I Left Behind."  
Ah, where are all those jolly lads,  
That sang those songs now rare?  
I listen for an answer,  
An echo answers, "Where?"

Some have crossed the river  
And sleep beneath the trees,  
Where thousands now are camping  
With the Johnsons and the Lees,  
Some of us are stragglng yet,  
Loitering on the way,  
But time has marked us for his own  
And we are old and gray.

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<sup>7</sup> Tahlequah Telegram.

We had some rough old times boys,  
No matter where we'd go,  
Sometimes we bunked in some old barn,  
Sometimes out in the snow.  
From Baxter Springs to Carriage Point,  
From Neosho to Webbers Falls,  
These pesky Yankees chased us  
With energy and speed.  
Never strong enough to make a stand,  
And make a decent fight,  
The only way we whipped them  
Was by strategy and flight.

Many years have passed since then boys,  
And we have never met.  
But some of our adventures still  
Are lingering with me yet.  
May your lives be long and useful boys  
And your hearts remain as true,  
As when in eighteen sixty-four,  
We skedaddled from the Blue.

In his declining years Joseph F. Thompson was familiarly known to his many friends as "Uncle Joe". He was respected and admired by all who knew him. Although he ranks high both as a soldier and an educator, in the judgment of his many friends he possibly ranks highest as one of the prominent founders and promoters of Methodism in the Indian Territory. Living through those trying pioneer days when life was lived in the raw he never failed to hold aloft the Christian banner and to use his influence toward the general betterment of all people with whom he came in contact. He lived an active and full life with never an idle moment. In his funeral eulogy Professor L. M. Logan said of Mr. Thompson: "He is one man whose Christianity dominated his thoughts; his thoughts resulted in action; his actions into habits; his habits into character; and his character into great work."

He passed to his reward November 9, 1922 and his remains were laid to rest in the Tahlequah cemetery. His best monument is the remembrance of him that lives in the hearts of the people.