**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Davene Alford**

Interview Conducted by

Julie Pearson-Little Thunder

May 28, 2016

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

Interviewer: Julie Pearson-Little Thunder

Transcriber: Jenna Neece

Editors: Micki White

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

**Project Detail**

The purpose of the *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project* is to document the development of the state by recording its cultural and intellectual history.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on April 15, 2009.

**Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Davene Alford is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 28, 2016.

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**About Davene and Eugene Alford…**

Opened in 1884, Chilocco Indian School was one of the largest federally-funded boarding schools for Native American youth in the country. Located twenty miles north of Ponca City, Oklahoma, the school offered a half academic / half vocational curriculum, focused on assimilating Native students into the dominant culture. Like most boarding schools, Chilocco went through different phases of development, reflecting changes in the federal policy towards Native Americans. These changes were often prompted by the efforts of Native educators, community workers and activists, and shifting attitudes within the larger society. Throughout these shifts, however, the school’s status as a National Guard center as well as boarding school made it unique.

A federal retreat from funding such schools, and rising Native enrollment in public schools, ushered in the close of Chilocco in 1980. By the time of its closing, it had seen close to 18,000 students and had awarded more than 5,500 high school diplomas during its near-centennial history. Today, the school’s land is owned in trust by the Kaw, Ponca, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, and Cherokee Nations. While remaining Chilocco alumni do not always agree on the school’s long-term legacy, most share memories of friendships and often marriages that arose from attending the school. They consider themselves part of a Chilocco family, working to share the school’s history, good and bad, and to celebrate the accomplishments of its students.

Davene Cornell Alford, of Seminole descent, was born September 14, 1928, in Wewoka, Oklahoma. Her father had attended Chilocco Indian School where he learned a variety of skills, and her mother was a full-time homemaker. Although her father discouraged use of their Native language in order to acclimate his children to the white-man’s world, Davene and her siblings still learned a smattering of the Native vocabulary. Davene attended school in Wewoka for only a few years before her family moved away, and she enrolled at Claremore. In 1942 when she was in ninth grade, she transferred to Chilocco. Fortunately, she was somewhat familiar with the school as several of her grandfather’s seventeen children had attended there, as well. At Chilocco, she learned library work, laundry and dry cleaning essentials, cooking, sewing, and the ability to fend for herself independently. In 1946, she met her husband-to-be, Eugene Alford.

Eugene Alford started at Chilocco in 1939 and was in the National Guard, 45th Division, Companies C and D. In 1940, he was called up for World War II, along with many other Chilocco students. One of his unit’s missions was to get through the Siegfried Line into Germany, moving through Munich into Dachau. During his time in the war, he saw 514 days of combat before being discharged in 1945. In 1946, he moved from Texas to Oklahoma, going to work for Thomas Gilcrease, helping with the construction of what is now Gilcrease Museum. It was in Tulsa where Eugene met Davene. They were married for forty-nine years, raised four children, worked together, and traveled, relishing every minute of their lives together.

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| **Davene Alford**  Oral History Interview  Interviewed by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder  May 28, 2016  Newkirk, Oklahoma |  |

**Little Thunder** *My name is Julie Pearson-Little Thunder with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University. I’m interviewing Davene Cornell Alford, Class of ’46, here at Chilocco for the Chilocco Alumni Association at Chilocco Indian School outside of Newkirk, Oklahoma. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. Davene, where were you born, and where did you grow up?*

**Alford** I was born in Wewoka, Oklahoma, in 1928, September 14.

**Little Thunder** *What did your folks do for a living? What did your folks do?*

**Alford** My dad was a carpenter by trade, a Jack of all trades, because he learned it here at Chilocco, and my mother was, oh, took care of us kids, I guess. (Laughs)

**Little Thunder** *How many brothers and sisters did you have?*

**Alford** I had three sisters. That was the gist of it all.

**Little Thunder** *Were you the oldest?*

**Alford** No, I’m the middle.

**Little Thunder** *Okay.*

**Alford** I lost one sister when she was three years old, so that put me in the middle then.

**Little Thunder** *What was your exposure to Creek or Seminole language or culture growing up?*

**Alford** My dad wouldn’t let us learn Indian. He said you have to work and live in the white man’s world, so you learn English. We still picked up words that we weren’t supposed to. (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *Attended school down there? Where did you attend school?*

**Alford** I started school in Wewoka. South of town there was a little country school out there called Justin, and that’s where I started. When I was, oh, in the second or third grade, my dad had, his allotment was down there north of   
Calvin, so he built a house down there and learned the trade here at Chilocco. We moved to the farm, and that was during the Depression. It’s a good thing we had plenty of fruit and milk and cows, you know. We lived there until 1937, I think it was. My mother loaded us, me and my youngest sister, and moved us to Claremore. I went to school there until I came to Chilocco when I was in the ninth grade.

**Little Thunder** *How did you end up coming to Chilocco?*

**Alford** Well, my dad come home one day, and he said, “You’re going to school.” I said, “Well, I know. School starts next week.” We lived in Claremore. He said, “No, you’re going to Chilocco.” I had been up here a time or two when him and my mother brought my uncles up here to school. My dad, his family, there was always a Cornell here from the ’20s up to the ’60s because my grandpa had seventeen kids.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, my goodness! (Laughter)*

**Alford** I had a lot of aunts and uncles.

**Little Thunder** *So the decision was made for you.*

**Alford** Yeah, yeah.

**Little Thunder** *Did they drive you up here?*

**Alford** Put me on a bus.

**Little Thunder** *Okay.*

**Alford** We lived in Tulsa. We moved from Claremore into Tulsa. I was going to go to school at Will Rogers High School. The next day, I got my trunk out and started packing. My dad said, “What are you doing?” I said, “I’m getting ready to go back to Chilocco. I know the kids up there. I don’t know these white kids down here.” (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *What were your first impressions when you came to Chilocco?*

**Alford** Just away from home. It was the first time I’d ever been away.

**Little Thunder** *Ninth grade?*

**Alford** Yeah. It was my home for four years. I took part, tried to do everything that I could, you know. I didn’t make too many friends. Some of them lasted a long time. I got that lady that lives across town from me in Tulsa that we’ve been friends ever since we was up here at Chilocco. I remember one thing I discussed with my husband because he went to school here, too. I told him, I said, “I was in wonderment of how our sidewalks never had snow on them, but everything else did.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “We would walk around the campus on the sidewalk, but we wouldn’t get down in the snow because there was no snow on there.” He said, “Go down to the powerhouse, and they will show you where the tunnel is, and you can go all over campus. No snow!” (Laughter) They heated the buildings with that, and that is what melted the snow on the sidewalks.

**Little Thunder** *I see. Who were some teachers who you remember who stood out for you?*

**Alford** Mabel Walker. She taught English; she taught us English, the group that I was with. We had A, B, and C groups. She taught us English. Some of the things she taught, they still stick with me to this day. She pounded Parliamentary procedures. She said, “You may not like it, and you may not think you’ll ever need it, but you will when you get down the road a ways.” Sure enough, I have put that to work many a time.

**Little Thunder** *Have you?*

**Alford** Yes.

**Little Thunder** *With different organizations that you served with?*

**Alford** Alumni Association mostly! (Laughter) “Where’d you learn that?” I said, “Mabel Walker!” Then we had the library down in the bottom of the school building. I worked there six weeks, helping Mrs. …. The boys called her a name. “Dumb Dora.” I said, “She’s not dumb! She is a librarian.” “Well, she is to us!” I never would call her that. She taught me a lot of things about library and how to mark the books and file them away and everything. When the students got through with the books, they’d put it in a cart. I’d have to go around and put them back on the shelf.

**Little Thunder** *Was that one of the details, I think they called it? You would get some kind of assignment. What were your other assignments or chores?*

**Alford** Well, I had to work in the laundry, and I learned to iron a white dress shirt in four minutes. If we didn’t, Ma Grinwell (that’s was what we would call her) she got it and throwed it back in there, re-wet it, bring it back. “All right, four minutes.” Sometime she’d time us. Then we learned how to pop the sheets when they come out of the mangle.

**Little Thunder** *What was the hardest thing to adjust to when you got here?*

**Alford** Not having any money. They was just coming—World War II was just getting started, and it was nip and tuck. My dad couldn’t find work sometimes, but his carpenter work, his trade, helped him quite a bit. I think I’m the only one that could get money out of him. I don’t think my sisters could.

**Little Thunder** *What was one of the easiest things to get used to here?*

**Alford** Having a good hot meal, I guess, three square meals a day. I didn’t realize until I was here, probably, in my sophomore year that everything we ate, we grew it here. We had cows, and we’d have lamb stew once in a while. They finally found out and took the hint that we wouldn’t eat it, so they cut that out. Having three squares a day helped. Eating with everybody on the campus in the dining room, that was fun. There had to be six boys and six girls at each table. If we didn’t hurry and get to the table before them boys did, we wouldn’t have no bread to eat because they’d get it all.

**Little Thunder** *I guess they sometime had dances, too. Do you remember any dances here?*

**Alford** What kind of dances?

**Little Thunder** *Boy-girl dances? Did they have any….*

**Alford** White-man dance, you mean?

**Little Thunder** *White-man dance.*

**Alford** Oh, yeah, every other Saturday night.

**Little Thunder** *Did you go to a few?*

**Alford** Yeah, unless I was punished. If you don’t have you room cleaned right, like Mrs. Robinson wanted it, we’d be on the punish list for two weeks. I was there quite a bit. (Laughter) She found our hiding place for dirty clothes. Then sometimes we’d have a standing line in the washroom to wash our clothes because there was so many in each dorm. They tried to get it all done. You learned to take care of yourself.

**Little Thunder** *What did you want to specialize in, in terms of…. What was your focus in terms of what you were learning?*

**Alford** I used to think about going to paralegal school when I got through here, but I didn’t know typing or shorthand or anything. It was just something to think about. I know my sisters, they had chances to go to college, but they didn’t ask me what I wanted to do. They just said, “You’re going to work.” They had a job for me when I left here. I didn’t like it, so I quit.

**Little Thunder** *Now, did you meet your husband while you were here?*

**Alford** No.

**Little Thunder** *You mentioned you kept in touch with one or two of your friends from Chilocco, just a couple of friends from Chilocco that you’ve kept in touch with over the years. You mentioned that you have a friend in Tulsa who you went to school with in your class of ’46.*

**Alford** Yeah, she was about seven when she came up here. Was in the sixth or seventh grade. They mixed us up and put a older girl in with young ones. When we were in Home Three, though, we were roommates. It was three girls to a room. Bobbie was one of them, and who was the other one? I just remember Bobbie because we chummed around pretty good, got along all right. The second semester of that first year, they moved her down to the dormitory on the end. There was nine girls in there, but we still seen each other and everything. It was like that all the way through high school. Then she left, though, probably mid-semester, run off and got married. (Laughter) Her son and my son are the same age.

**Little Thunder** *Okay. Who took you under their wing? Did anybody take you under their wing when you got here?*

**Alford** Nobody. I just watched what they done and tried to do the same thing, only a little bit better.

**Little Thunder** *What’s one of your favorite memories from your Chilocco days?*

**Alford** Oh, that’s hard to say. They were just constant, you know, doing the same thing all the time, going to school, because we’d go to school sometimes in the mornings and then work in the afternoon or vice versa. It all depends on what our detail was. I got to work in the employees’ dorm where the single women stayed. I got to work in the kitchen and dining room, in that part. Only thing I hated about that, I had to get up at five o’clock and be there. Had to wait on the tables and get them coffee and stuff like that. Then we got to eat afterwards. (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *I know that sometimes the Chilocco students, the young men would go from Chilocco to, I think, when they were drafted, they would go on to….*

**Alford** My husband left here in September 1940 when the war started, when Roosevelt called all the National Guards up. He was in Company C.

**Little Thunder** *Did you see Company C leave a couple of times while you were in school?*

**Alford** No, I wasn’t here when he left because I come two years later.

**Little Thunder** *Okay.*

**Alford** He came to school here in 1939, the fall of ’38, ’39. He was already gone. I didn’t meet him until after the war was over. That was in ’46, ’47.

**Little Thunder** *During the time you were here, you didn’t see any Company C fellows leave. What do you feel was the biggest or a couple of the best things that you brought away from Chilocco?*

**Alford** Take care of myself. Nobody else would take care of me, so I had to learn to do it myself.

**Little Thunder** *You went home during the summers?*

**Alford** Yeah. I wouldn’t go home at Thanksgiving; I’d stay here. Then Christmas, I’d usually go home and come back. Walked from highway down here—sometimes our bus would be late getting up here. It would be midnight or one o’clock. Nobody to greet us or bring us to the campus. There’d be about ten or twelve of us, so we’d just grab our luggage and take off walking and hope we stayed on the highway. (Laughs) There was no lights down that mile-and-a-half road.

**Little Thunder** *It could be dark, yeah.*

**Alford** Cold. We managed all right.

**Little Thunder** *Tell me how you met your husband.*

**Alford** How about letting my daughter tell you? (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *While you have the experience, she just heard the story. (Laughter)*

**Alford** Bobbie stayed with her aunt right across from Cain’s [Dance] Academy [now Cain’s Ballroom] in Tulsa. My folks lived across town, so I’d get up there to her house on Thursday nights, and we’d always go to Cain’s on Thursday night. That’s where I met him at.

**Little Thunder** *Who was playing that night?*

**Alford** Johnny Lee….but we was there every Thursday night. Sometimes we’d go on Saturday night. That is where I met him at.

**Little Thunder** *You both like country western swing or….*

**Alford** Country western swing and big band sound.

**Little Thunder** *And big band sound. And liked to dance, both of you?*

**Alford** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. She can testify to that.

**Little Thunder** *What were you—where were you working at the time?*

**Alford** I wasn’t.

**Little Thunder** *Okay.*

**Alford** I was just staying with Mama and Daddy. I met him, and we left. My folks didn’t know where I was at for three or four months. (Laughs)

**Little Thunder** *Where were you at?*

**Alford** We was down at the farm with his folks, his aunt and uncle that raised him because he lost his mother when he was nine years old. His aunt took him in, and she had a boy that was the same age as me. She took him in and raised him just like he was her own, which didn’t set too well with his dad. That’s another story.

**Little Thunder** *Yeah.*

**Alford** We had good times raising four kids, keeping food on the table for them. You could always fry a skillet full of potatoes and make gravy for them. They’d get full on them potatoes, and then you’d get that gravy going. She’s the biggest one of the whole bunch, her and her brother.

**Little Thunder** *Well, your husband served in World War II?*

**Alford** Yes, 514 days of combat.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, my goodness!*

**Alford** From North Africa. He was wounded the first day in Sicily, Italy, Southern France. What was the wall called? There was a line, Siegfried Line, between France and Germany. He went through that, on up into Germany and Munich, and then he was with the first outfit into Dachau.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, my goodness.*

**Alford** They could smell it miles away. They knew they was coming up on something bad. When he got in there, his sergeant put him in charge of the burial detail. They told him to go get those SS Troops that were behind the fence and make them dig the ditches because they come across those mass graves. He said, “I was on that for about two to three weeks then. That is one smell you won’t ever forget.” He said them Germans, they came…would point to their hand and how they would have blisters on them. He said, “Okay, you were the cause of this. Now you clean it up. Get back to work.” When he left there, he flew home. Was discharged from the service in ’45. He got his points in, and he just waited until his name was on the list to fly home. He said the night before they flew him out, an olʽ Russian liked to got him. They were in the barracks with all of his outfit that he was with. They was in there having a good time because the war was over. He said the barracks door opened, and this olʽ Russian come in there. They told him to leave, and he wouldn’t do it. … When he was in Munich, he says, “When we got in there, we found the opera house, and I got to sing in the opera house.” (Laughs) “What you doing?” He said, “It was pretty well tore up, but we all got up there on the stage and had us a big song.”

**Little Thunder** *He was a music lover.*

**Alford** Yeah, he was. He was.

**Little Thunder** *Now, did he serve with the 45th?*

**Alford** Forty-fifth, National Guard, Company C and D.

**Little Thunder** *Company C and D, okay.*

**Alford** That’s him in the picture over there.

**Little Thunder** *We’ll take a look at those pictures afterwards. Did he write home very often?*

**Alford** I didn’t know him when he was over there. I didn’t meet him until after he was home near a year.

**Little Thunder** *So you don’t know if he wrote….*

**Alford** He worked for Mr. Gilcrease. Helped build that museum there in Tulsa.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, he did?*

**Alford** Yeah, Mr. Gilcrease was just getting it started when he went to work for him in the fall of ’46.

**Little Thunder** *After he came home.*

**Alford** Yes. He had property down in San Antonio. Mr. Gilcrease decided it needed to be painted, so he sent four of his men down there to paint it inside and out. Well, the union down there got hold that they were there to work, and they wouldn’t let them do it because they weren’t unionized. They said, “We was over there fighting to keep you free. We’re going to do it.” They said, “No you’re not, neither.” They got Mr. Gilcrease’s big Studebaker he had down there, drove home, straight through.

**Little Thunder** *He ended up working on the Gilcrease Museum?*

**Alford** Yeah, they were down there probably at least two weeks. Every day, he’d sit down and write. It took me awhile to read them, though, because his handwriting was so fancy that I had to reread and figure out the words and everything. He was a pretty good writer.

**Little Thunder** *Were there any other wartime stories he shared with you?*

**Alford** Yeah, as he got older he started because he fought those Germans for at least—I guess our son was about seven or eight months old when he started cutting loose from those dreams and nightmares. Sometimes he would tell me things that happened there. One night I woke up, and I had a pillow over my face. He was fighting the Germans. I took the pillows away from him. Our firstborn was a boy, just like that one there. Then I had the girls later. That one there should have been the other boy. (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *Surprised you, huh? What would you like people to know about Chilocco, know or remember about Chilocco?*

**Alford** Well, some things that I learned, but they should have had more opportunities for us to ready yourself to go on to college, you might say. Today it’s what all the kids think about nowadays, but back then it was just kind of far fetched.

**Little Thunder** *Vocational, more vocational emphasis.*

**Alford** Yes, other than just learning to take care of myself and everything, it taught me that. Taught me how to cook, sew, and everything. We had to take afternoon classes in cooking or sewing. They called it an agricultural school; you had to learn how to take care of your home, you might say. I tried to pass that on to my girls, but I don’t know. I don’t know that I done any good or not.

**Little Thunder** *Did you remain a homemaker, or did you go on and work later on?*

**Alford** I worked later on. I took dry cleaning as a trade up here. Oh, first job I had, though, was in the ribbon department in Kress [Department Store] in Tulsa. I sold ribbon. A lot of the kids, when they come through town, they’d roam around. They knew me. I knew their face, but I couldn’t remember their name. There was so many of them. I worked there probably three or four months that I can remember. That’s been so long ago. I have to stop and think about it. That’s what I tell my son. I tell him things that happened when he was little. “I don’t remember that, Mama.” I said, “It’s in your memory bank. All you got to do is sit and think. It’ll come out.”

**Little Thunder** *Why is it important to you to come to these Chilocco reunions?*

**Alford** I worked, from early ʼ80s to after my husband passed away, with the Alumni Association. I was either the secretary or…. He was elected twice to be president, and I followed through right with him as secretary. We worked together, went places together. We liked to travel. When the kids were little, we would take our tax refund and take a vacation. The first vacation we took, we left church camp and took our oldest daughter to New Jersey. My sister’s husband was going to sea for six months, and she wanted somebody to stay with her. We took her out there and left her. She said, “What’d y’all do that for?” (Laughter) I told her, “Next weekend, your grandma and grandpa is coming out, so when they get here and they get ready to leave, they’re going to bring you back home.”

That was her first time away from home. We’d always try to take them someplace every summer to see different things. Then when our son was in the Army, he was stationed in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, for fourteen months going to computer school, we went up there twice and went to Washington, DC, and New York. I always told my husband, “You don’t have to go downtown New York. I just want to see the skyline.” He told the boy about it. The weekend, then, that we were there, he said, “We’re going somewhere in the morning.” I said, “Where we going?” “Just get in the car and ride.” We wound up in New York.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, wow!*

**Alford** I’d like to go back again someday but probably never will. I did get to go to Washington and see the World War II Memorial. I’d like to go back and see that again.

**Little Thunder** *Is there anything else that we should mention before we take a look at those pictures?*

**Alford** Bring them pictures over here, Janene. She’s my tear keeper.

**Little Thunder** *Oh, okay. We’ll take a look at these pictures here on the video.*

**Alford** This is my husband.

**Little Thunder** *What a good looking guy!*

**Alford** Yeah, and this is our son here. He’s a Junior.

**Little Thunder** *Your husband in the middle, yeah.*

**Alford** This is our oldest grandson. He was in Desert Storm. This is our next grandson. He was getting ready for his third tour of Iraq when he was killed in a car wreck. He was fifteen minutes away from home, and a truck pulled out in front of him. He was here one minute and gone just like that. This is our great-grandson. He’s a sergeant down in Fort Bliss. I’ve got another great-grandson that’s getting ready to go to the Air Force. I told him, “I’m going to scob your knob, boy! You’re supposed to be Army!” (Laughter)

**Little Thunder** *That’s the family tradition.*

**Alford** Yeah. I had an uncle that was like a brother because he was the same age as me and my sister. He was in the Air Force, Second World War. They were getting ready to go overseas, and when they took off they just took so far, and it crashed and killed them all that was in the plane. He was just eighteen years old when he was killed. Daniel, I call him Daniel. What’s his Indian name?

**Janene** Ti-'Ke-Wa-Koo, Tike Alford Danson Chapman.

**Alford** Oh, there are so many stories.

**Little Thunder** *And a lot of family who’ve served.*

**Alford** We were married forty-nine years, four months, and four days.

**Little Thunder** *Well thank you for coming in to talk about him Davene, and sharing your experiences at Chilocco.*

**Alford** I still miss him.

**Little Thunder** *I’m sure.*

**------- *End of interview*** *-------*