***The Bone War of McCurtain County***

(Please contact me for complete manuscript)

An amazing true story – part scholarship, part mystery, and part epic adventure – Indiana Jones Okie style.  Buried Treasure, quartz crystals, dinosaurs, moonshine, pot fields, and an unauthorized version of the American Dream.

Near the river’s edge in 1983, two grizzled naturalists on a leisurely hunt for rocks and crystals discovered a cache of buried treasure lodged inside the wall of a corporate waste-holding pit near the banks of the Mountain Fork River. The unearthing of this mysterious cluster of riches enveloped the men in a drawn out and bitter conflict with powerful institutions over ownership rights. The hillbilly Cephis Hall and his friend, Sid Love, a Choctaw Indian, faced a whirlwind of controversy as they battled the largest landowner in the world and its friends in government and academia over ownership rights to the treasure. Their discovery would change their lives forever – and also change McCurtain County.

In the spring of 1983, Cephis Hall, an Arkansas hillbilly, and Sid Love, a Choctaw Indian, discovered a valuable cache of buried treasure along a mysterious bend of the Mountain Fork River in southeastern Oklahoma. They dug the prize from the raw earth and the discovery set in motion a chain of events that would alter their lives forever. The two men could not foresee the obstacles, the turmoil, and the controversies they would ultimately face as they embarked upon an epic journey and conflict against mighty foes in a David versus Goliath scenario.

 Discoveries of rare antiquities and exotic treasure do not always bring fame and riches. Sometimes they bring trouble, conflict, and heartbreak.  A perennial kernel of truth was inherent in their conflict, one which exists in all battles: the underdog is expected to lose, and usually does. Only in rare instances in history is this forlorn fixture of normalcy repealed and the tables turned. Throughout humanity’s story, wars have been fought over riches and territory. It is still so today, albeit disguised in a bureaucratic and ideological cloak. In ancient times as well as modern, the antagonist with the greatest arsenal and resources usually wins.

The two Okies became embroiled in a titanic struggle for ownership rights to the treasure they uncovered – a cache of cryptic bones encapsulated in mystery. To protect their vested interest, they were propelled into a “bone war” over the rights to the paleontological stash buried in the sediments and crust of an ancient mud slab laid down in the Age of Dinosaurs. Their war would become “The Bone War of McCurtain County.”

Cephis and Sid’s war reverberates back to an earlier bone war – the bitter conflict between two eccentric and aristocratic scientists of Gilded Age America (1880 – 1910) a century earlier. The Gilded fossil plunderers Othniel Marsh and Edward D. Cope, two of America’s earliest paleontologists, battled for the rights to the spoils of Mother Earth and every dinosaur fossil that they could lay their hands on. Two antagonistic factions from the fledgling science of paleontology coalesced around these two central figures of dinosaurian iconography.

The rival scientific camps traded countless barbs while venturing out into the badlands of western America in an invidious attempt to outdo the opposition and bring heraldry to their cadre. America’s first fossil war interjected a torrent of egos and eccentrics into a brew of controversy and animosity.

 Cope and Marsh were in a contest to find, identify, and count their specimens and tally their scores. Comparatively, Hall and Love became ensnared in an odious struggle to retain ownership rights to the fruits of their toils. The obsession of Cope and Marsh to uncover fossilized riches in the West mirrored Hall and Love’s quest to unlock mysteries along the Mountain Fork some 100 years later. A latent lust to gather the spoils of nature propelled both sets of antagonists forward into divisive confrontations. The Bone War of McCurtain County, however, had a different twist. This was a war over ownership rights to one of the single greatest dinosaur specimens in the history of paleontology, and the opposing factions were not equally matched. Hall and Love’s war over fossils occurred during a time that might also be aptly called a Gilded Age.

A close parallel between the first Gilded Age war between Cope and Marsh and the second Gilded Age war staging Hall and Love against their institutional enemies cannot easily be ascertained. This is due in large part to the fact that the circumstances surrounding the two wars are quite different – even though the social, economic, and political settings of the two ages are somewhat similar. The Cope-Marsh war was waged across the vast national and panoramic venue of the Great American West, whereas Hall and Love’s battle was parochial, with an obscure view. But a bone war is still a war, and the constitutional makeup of the antagonists always colors the story.

The two Okies of McCurtain County did not battle peer competitors or rival camps of scientific explorers, but an intact system – an institutional and bureaucratic milieu at the apex of the American Empire. Their venue of battle was in the rural South rather than the great American west and in the wetlands of southeastern Oklahoma rather than the dry lands of the western outback. Unlike aristocrats Marsh and Cope, who were locked in peer combat, these men were of modest means and under-financed, and they faced off against people and institutions with much greater resources in wealth and power. They did not stand a chance, but they were sufficiently naïve and infused with ample visceral and moral conviction to attempt the impossible.

The social, economic, and political setting of their struggle (1980-2010) was much like that earlier Gilded Age (1880-1910) of the robber barons and, in both eras, a dinosaurian craze of sorts – a Jurassic and Cretaceous fixation – had pervaded the media realm. Sensationalism and dinosaurian hype became ensconced in the minds of the masses while people and great institutions made money from society’s fascination with dinosaurs.

The dinosaurian mania of the two Gilded Ages entertained and inspired great wonder and awe in the consciousness of Americans. Pictures and stories about the alluring monsters of a more primitive, pristine, and beastly age were etched as indelible images in the beguiled minds of the modern mammalian rulers.

During these two prolific eras of dinosaurian discovery – of bounteous Jurassic and Cretaceous treasure – new names in science and paleontology emerged, both professionals and amateurs. In the modern Gilded era, among the amateur ranks, two bucolic naturalists from the rural hinterland of the southern US, Cephis Hall and Sid Love, would ascend and make their mark. The fireworks from the Bone War of McCurtain County brought their names into the limelight as the world learned snippets about their struggles and accomplishments. This is their real story – a tale of two men’s meteoric rise from obscurity to the pinnacle of amateur acclaim.

Hall and Love, as small-time entrepreneurs, battled both oligarchy and oligopoly. Their struggle provoked the ire of the modern timber barons and helped bring about a reactive policy of corporate retrenchment in southeastern Oklahoma. Corporate openness toward public egress and liberal use of their pervasive timber estates soon hardened into a rigid, distrustful, and intolerant attitude toward recreationists. Rockhounds and naturalists like Hall and Love were locked outside and put under surveillance.

Where once open roads had been freely traversed, gates were erected. The open timberlands became fully privatized. Fishing, cattle grazing, rockhounding, hiking, crystal digging, bird watching, fossil collecting, etc., were denied to the general public. Frontier customs and practices passed down from an earlier era were thus altered forever.

Sparse, clandestine patches of cannabis weed that had been cultivated in forest clearings as late as 2006 became a distant memory as methamphetamine and other addictive drugs supplanted pot; and virtually all the timber roads through Weyerhaeuser lands had, by then, been gated. Treasure hunting and harvesting had been banned for perpetuity. The open frontier ended. Easy access to the forests was denied.

Cephis and Sid are real-life American heroes whose story played out in the land of Okies and Arkies on both sides of the Mountain Fork River. A landscape riffled with backwoods banality, archaic frontier mentality, religious zealotry, Ouachita foothills melodrama, and “corporate bestiality” set the tone and tenor for the tale that unfolded. This book is a true account of two men’s quest for treasure and self-respect while in pursuit of their own unconventional and unauthorized piece of the American Dream.