

Interviewed by Judy Allen on multiple calls/visits 2021-2023

## **WWII Sgt. connects history with people he has met**

WWII Veteran Gilbert Mike Charleston, known as “Choc” to most people, was born on a ranch east of Duncan, Oklahoma. Choc started school in 1929 in a one-room school house six miles east of Duncan and remembers not being allowed to speak the Choctaw language. He said his teacher had a rubber hose she would use if she heard any student speaking their Native language. “If you said *Halito* (hello), she would beat you with the hose!” said Choc.

His dad had some allotted land, which was leased out to a rancher, and that is when the family moved to Duncan. “My dad was the first full blood Indian elected to public office in 1931 in Stephens County. That is why we moved into Duncan. He was a tax assessor. I was in second grade at the time.”

“The same year my dad was elected tax assessor, his good friend, Alfalfa Bill Murray, was elected governor of Oklahoma.”

“Dad took me to meet the governor in 1933. We went in the office. There was just one woman in the governor’s office. She asked dad what he needed. He said we came to see Governor Murray. Dad told his name and the governor heard, and told him in Chickasaw to come on in. He had four chairs tied up against the wall, none to sit in. Governor told the woman to bring a chair to sit in for my dad. I didn’t have one to sit in. Governor Murray put his feet on the desk. He wasn’t wearing shoes and his socks were so dirty they were black from walking around in them. I could see his long underwear sticking out from his pant leg. He spit tobacco in a spittoon.”

“When I was about fourteen years old, I was working as a newspaper boy delivering papers in Duncan. I met a man names Holmes at church and found out he had a ten-year-old granddaughter named Billie. She was cute, and kinda ornery. I was on the boxing team at school. She and a bunch of her girlfriends would come watch us box. Every time I got in the ring she and her friends would holler for the other fellow and make me mad. I thought, ‘Well, she is just a kid and doesn’t know what she is doing.’”

“When I got older, I started driving for a cleaner as a deliveryman. I had to drive to Marlow twice a week, and brought clothes back to be cleaned. Billie’s folks heard about me doing that job and said, ‘Billie has a grandmother in Marlow. Would you drop her off and pick her up when you go back?’”

Choc agreed to transport Billie from Duncan to Marlow. “I had a radio in the truck and would turn on the music. Billie just loved that. I liked to sing and sang with the school quartet. While in the truck, I would sing with the radio. I was sixteen and she was twelve, so I would sing to entertain her. I drove her back and forth until I graduated from high school.”

“When I graduated, I got a boxing scholarship to Cameron College. I was there a year and got a real nice letter from an uncle and his name was SAM.” Choc laughed at his own joke. Uncle Sam wanted me to join the Army. I was sent to Fort Lewis in Washington and became a tank driver. I trained in the Oregon desert and the California desert. I guess we trained in desert areas because we couldn’t drive tanks in the towns.”

“One time I came home on leave and was walking in Duncan. I heard a sweet voice and turned around and it was Billie. Boy, she had changed! She said, ‘Why don’t you join me for dinner at grandmothers house?’ Her grandmother was the best cook in Duncan, so I couldn’t wait for that! I liked her grandmother a lot, anyway. After dinner, I walked Billie home (all the way across the street!) and stopped her on the back porch to just visit,” said Choc.

“The conversation went like this – *When do you have to go back to the Army?* Tomorrow. We are shipping out real soon. *I wish you didn’t have to go back so soon.* Billie, why don’t we just get married? *Okay.*”

Choc said, “I kissed her – that was the first time. I got her ring size and said I would send her a ring. I got a call from my mother in about a week. She asked when I would have some free time, and wanted me to meet her in Kansas City the next weekend. Lo and behold, she had Billie with her. Billie wanted to get married. We got Billie’s mother on the phone and we got permission and her blessing. Billie went back to Fort Knox, Kentucky with me. That was 1944. I blamed my mother and said, ‘If it doesn’t work out, it will be your fault.’ 79 years so far, it has worked out! After that, I went off to Europe to WWII. That is the early part of my story.”

After a short training in the U.S., Choc shipped out for WWII. “When we left the United States, we couldn’t tell anyone where we were going. We landed in Liverpool, England. We had friends at home who were originally from Liverpool. I wrote a letter home to the family and I told them we landed where Edgar and Alann lived before they lived in the States so my parents knew immediately where I was.”

“They sent the tanks to Wales and I was a tank driver,” said Choc, whose rank was Sergeant. “We were there awhile, and there was a 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Group comprised of the 737th, 738th, and 739th. Ours was the 739th. It was chosen to remain as backup while the 737th went in to D-Day. Within days, we were sent to France where there is a flat beach. We drove out into the water from the landing craft. You drove as fast as you could to get to the beach. We landed. We went on toward Paris. We got halfway, and we turned north toward Luxembourg and toward Belgium and Holland.”

“We cut off Germans wanting to cross the English Channel. We got to the Siegfried Line. We blew those things out of the ground. We got up to Aachen, Germany. No person ought to have to see that damage that was in Aachen. There were bodies lying everywhere, civilians, dogs, cats, horses. I went through several battles, including the Battle of the Bulge, but the carnage there was awful.”

“When we got close to the river I got my tank knocked out, but all my crew got out and no one got damaged. We took out running from the tank. Next day, a couple of us took a jeep and went to Belgium and got a new tank. I chose a guy named Delbert Dearen from my home town to go with me. When we arrived to pick up the tank, we got some really good food to eat.”

Choc said, “That night, I told Delbert that people don’t know how long it takes us to get our tank – maybe we should stay a couple of days and eat good. He was whining about wanting to see the letter he was expecting from his girlfriend, Lou. I was tired of listening to him whine, so we loaded up and started home. We met our group headed toward us before we got back – they were *‘so happy to see us’* they told us.”

“We were told that Germans had come back through Belgium and that the supply depot where we had picked up our tank *‘was no more, it has fallen off the face of the earth.’* We could have been killed if we hadn’t come back for Lou’s letter. That was the beginning of the

Battle of the Bulge, but we didn't know it. We went back and participated in the battle. So, I tell people that love saved my life. I even wrote up an article for our church circular about the incident and they printed it."

Choc said, "One time, my gunner and I were in a German town and someone told us, 'Over there in a basement there are jams and jellies and stuff that have been abandoned.' We went and got an armload of stuff. As we went across the street, bombs and shells started falling. We jumped in a shell hole and threw our jelly everywhere. I don't know if broken glass or part of a shell tore my britches, but my gunner laughed and said he would turn me in for a Purple Heart. I told him not to because I would get in trouble for stealing jelly."

"Bamberg, Germany was home of the tankers for the Nazis. That is where they would take them over and set up." This base was taken over by US Forces at the end of WWII.

"I was called over to the office and told I could be a Sgt. Major if I would stay. 'I wouldn't stay if you gave me Eisenhower's job,' I told them. They sent me to Nuremberg to a hotel to be in charge of the employees for USO troops. I got to meet lots of people like Mickey Rooney, Bob Hope, and other movie stars. I always liked to sing and I liked the music at the opera house there. The man who sang 'Old Man River' was there – Paul Robeson - and I sat in Hitler's former opera box and listened to him. Robeson was so wonderful. It was one of the most thrilling things to listen to him sing."

"I was the only Indian in my outfit. Being the only Indian, everyone knew who I was. I had the honor of guarding the tents of performers. So, when the movie stars were there and wanted something, they would be told, 'You'll have to ask the Indian.' I got all kinds of attention just because I was Choctaw," said Choc.

Medals he received from his time in the military included the WWII Victory; Army of Occupation; European, African, Middle Eastern Campaign Service; Battle of the Bulge; Good Conduct; and the American Defense Service.

"I got home December 4, 1945 and went back to school. I never got my GI Bill money. I was going to school but starving to death," said Choc. "One day, the man that owned the Firestone store said he would give me a job as assistant manager if I would stay and work. It paid \$350 a month and benefits. I said, 'Do you think Monday will be too soon?'"

"They made me manager of another Firestone store, and Goodrich came and stole me, then I went to the oil field because it paid a lot of money. I moved to Oklahoma City as division manager."

"I finally came home and told Billie, 'I have put up with these drunks long enough. I am quitting.' She asked me what I was going to do and I said, 'I am going to join you.' I had put her in the antiques business. She was fine with that!" said Choc.

"We had auctions in Phoenix, Oklahoma City, and other places, and after a few years, I had several trucks to haul to different states. I stopped at a store in Phoenix and a guy asked if I wore Indian jewelry. He had five size-13 Indian rings. He wanted \$75 each for five rings. I talked him into \$100 for all five. I came home and told Billie I was going into the jewelry business. She said, 'Wonderful.'"

Choc said, "I thought it was a great idea because I was really tired of hauling antiques in trucks all over and a lot of jewelry fit into a small case. I opened the Choctaw Trading Post and we began that business. We had seventeen people selling for us at the Trading Post."

Choc said, "Billie has always been a wonderful cook. I bought the other end of the block (at the Trading Post) and opened her a café. She had eight Indian women working for her. We sold January 1, 1989. Been out of work ever since. It took about five minutes to get used to retirement!"

Choc said, "We sold our house and everything. We spent five years traveling. She would pick a place, then I would pick a place. We would go overseas and then we would travel in the United States. I met more Chiefs! I was always looking for tribes!"

Choc has been honored by AARP, received the Goodwill Award for work as Goodwill Ambassador for the Chamber of Commerce and serving statewide as an entertainer with HoHo the Clown.

He enjoyed working in the community and received the Wall of Fame Award from the Better Business Bureau in Oklahoma City and his picture was used in advertising for the state when George Nigh was Governor. Choc served in the discussions to help organize the Red Earth Festival. He was honored by the American Legion in Edmond October of 2023.

"I met Ira Hayes," said Choc. He said that was an honor.

History is very important to Choc, and he connects history with people he has met during his lifetime. "When David Gardner was Chief, there were twenty of us that formed a council. My son and David were good friends," said Choc. "My wife and I felt like we got close to David and Carole Gardner. We wanted to get our choice of Choctaw chief elected. We thought we should make sure we could do it. We knew we needed to file a lawsuit in Muskogee to see if we could get the law changed to elect our own chief. We talked to a lawyer and found it would cost \$400. Tommy Washington, who knew my father and was kinda like my uncle, said, 'We can't come up but with \$200.' Billie and I pitched in the other \$200. We got the money together, went to Muskogee to federal court. A lot of Choctaws came. The judge said, 'You people are just as right as you can be and I am for you 100 percent. There is nothing I can do until the federal government changes the law but don't give up - keep trying.' We kept writing letters and doing whatever we could. I talked to the Congressman, and talked to another person in Oklahoma City. Finally, in 1970, Nixon told the Congress they should listen to Indians and let us elect our own Chiefs. He got that passed for us. We put up David. I have pictures of him being sworn in.

"Oklahoma Governor Henry Bellmon was a good friend. The federal government had sworn Chief Gardner in at Tuskahoma. Not fully trusting of the federal people, I contacted Bellmon and asked if Gardner has any future inaugurations, could Bellmon swear him in?"

"A week after Gardner was made Chief at Tuskahoma, Bellmon went to Durant and swore him in, for a second oath of office. That made me feel really good," said Choc.

"One thing that interested me greatly was meeting Geronimo's cousin. I was In Apache, Oklahoma in an ice cream parlor. This place had tin ceilings and old-fashioned stools. Three Indian people were at the next table. One had crutches. He wacked me with one and said 'come here boy.' I respect my elders, so I went over there. The old Indian with the crutches said, 'I am Jason Betzinez - who are you, and what tribe are you?' I told him who I was and that I was Choctaw. I told him I was from Duncan."

"The old-timer told me, 'I have led soldiers there to pick up prisoners. It was end of railroad track. Buffalo grass was shoulder high. Boy, that was a long time ago.' He went on to tell me, 'Geronimo was my cousin. I cooked for him when I was 15 and fought with him.'"

Choc said, "That was one of the most amazing days of my life. He gave me a copy of his book, *I fought with Geronimo*. We walked a block down the street. He got a book and autographed it and gave to me. He was 90 in 1950." Choc said Mr. Betzinez invited him to return and visit again, which Choc did on several occasions. Betzinez died in 1960.

"I was telling the story to a group of people one time. They wanted to know about any other old people I met. I told them that famous Comanche Chief who had a home west of Lawton, Quanah Cox, grandson of Quanah Parker and I were friends for 30 years or more," said Choc.

Choc and Billie had two sons, Mike and Steven. Mike became a Professor at Penn State before passing away at the age of 46. Steven is a retired Bishop in the Episcopal diocese and academic. "I am very proud that my kids tell me I never lose my temper. I tell them, "Well, if you can be reasonable, it will usually work out.' They tell me, 'Another thing, we have never heard you say a curse word.' You don't have to swear if you have a good vocabulary. Besides that, I had good teachers. I never heard my dad say a curse word. The Choctaws didn't have the same words the white man had."

Choc said, "My father and grandfather were ministers. I think we should always *do under others as you would have them do unto you*. In other words, treat others the way you would like them to treat you. If we would do this the world would be a better place."

"If I could leave a message for my grandchildren it would be a hope for them to be kind to all people and try to put themselves in other's place before offering criticism. Sometimes when Billie will say we have so many good friends, I tell her it is because she tries to be good friends to them. If everyone would do that the world would be a better place. Billie has been a joy to me for over 77 years."

For a treat sometimes, Choc makes beans and cornbread for Billie, and puts a little bit of jalapeno pepper or green chilis in the cornbread and beans. He enjoys adding a little spice to life wherever he can!