



The Short Stories of  
John Joseph Mathews,  
an Osage Writer

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SUSAN KALTER

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*John Joseph Mathews*

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# Contents

Introduction	vii
Westerns	1
The Thinkin' Man	9
Too Small for a Horse	20
Old Bob (Unpublished and unedited version)	33
Old Bob (Manuscript antecedent to the published version)	37
Travel Stories	45
Lady of the Inn	54
Allah's Guest	70
Yellow Hair	87
Only a Blonde	96
Stories from Indian Country	111
The Apache Woman	121
The Talk of the Face	130
The Flower on Cadron Creek	143
Moccasin Prints	160
Bad Medicine	170

Stories of World War II and the Cold War	183
No Time	193
The Liberal View	197
What Thing Is Fairest	202
Natural Science	219
The Meek Shall Inherit?	228
Source Acknowledgments	247
Notes	249
Selected Bibliography	275

## Introduction

John Joseph Mathews's writing career was effectively launched in 1932 when he became a Book-of-the-Month Club author through his first book-length study: *Wah'Kon-Tah: The Osage and the White Man's Road*. That 359-page volume narrated the reservation experiences of members of the Osage tribal nation following their 1872 removal from a reservation in Kansas to their last reservation in Indian Territory (later to become Oklahoma), located just northwest of Tulsa. It traced the period from 1878 through 1931 and also included a 15-page "Notes on the Osages" afterword that scanned Osage history from 1673 to 1878. Mathews's enduring legacy was secured shortly thereafter, in 1934, when *Sundown* was published. The novel forged—among a few compatriots, such as Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* and D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*—the genre of the "mixed-blood" narrative. These novels explored the crises of identity and belonging faced by American Indians with partial European American heritage or—closer—parentage. Three more decades saw three additional Mathews works. All were nonfictions: on living with the earth and within the multispecies earth struggle, on an Oklahoma oil magnate, and on long Osage history in comprehensive perspective. Thus Mathews was known until the second decade of the twenty-first century entirely through his longer works.<sup>1</sup>

To discover in him a prolific short story writer is therefore something of a surprise. Yet he was the author of at least thirty pieces never published prior to his death in 1979 as well as several other works of fiction and creative nonfiction for which publication venues have remained hidden from the view of his contemporary audience.

His short stories for children were published in 2015 as *Old Three Toes and Other Tales of Survival and Extinction*. Our edition presents for the very first time seventeen additional stories, all of which were written for adult audiences. The majority were written in the half-decade following the dropping of the first two atomic bombs, and so might be considered stories for a nuclear age. Their topics range from adulterous murder to Cherokee removal, from the thrill of the hunt to the cultural impasses between U.S. citizens in Mexico and their hosts, from the modern Middle East to the fantastical future. They bear the consciousness of a postwar world: its confusions and regrets, its orthodoxies and hypocrisies. They also bear the mark of a practiced and prolific writer.<sup>2</sup>

We now know Mathews's first publication to have been in high school. As he later wrote, it was an "over-dramatized story about . . . three brave, plucky high school boys in a devastating tornado . . . illustrated with snapshots taken by" his older sister. We also now understand that he began writing as early as 1904, at about the age of nine or ten, through daily diary entries containing scrupulously detailed observations of the lives around him, human and nonhuman. By 1929, three years before his first book was published, Mathews was submitting work to his alumni magazine, the *Sooner*, beginning to reach a wide audience of Oklahomans and setting the foundation for his long career in the blackjack prairies of Osage country.<sup>3</sup>

*Wah'Kon-Tah* and *Sundown* would come next. *Wah'Kon-Tah* was based on the diary of a former Osage reservation agent, a white Quaker from the upper Midwest, born in Ohio, as well as on Mathews's conversations with Osage elders. *Sundown* has been thought to be based upon Mathews's own childhood, college, and military years, and certainly was in part, though the contrasts with his actual life and thoughts are striking when compared to his autobiography. Within two years of *Sundown*, Mathews was beginning to conceive of the book that would become his quiet masterwork—*The Osages*—published in 1961. But his studies and extensive travel for that work led him to Mexico on a Guggenheim fellowship, and the decade leading up to and during World War II saw instead the drafting and publication of *Talking to*

*the Moon*. It was a nonfiction work about his own decision to withdraw from urban life—and the competitive self-centeredness of the human struggle with other humans—to try to live again in harmony with the natural flow of life and within the earth struggle amidst all living beings, eschewing what he called earth-detachment. It was following the publication of this third major work that he seems to have first turned back to shorter genres and more toward the taste for fiction and fictionalization. These stories appear to have emerged during this period. By the early 1960s Mathews had completed two distinct runs of short story writing: the first his production of the 1940s and possibly the early 1950s, collected here; the second his nine-story “boy book,” *Old Three Toes and Other Tales of Survival and Extinction*. But he was also still at work. At his death, he was still trying to craft his autobiography (posthumously published as *Twenty Thousand Mornings*), possibly combing through old diaries to reconstruct events.<sup>4</sup>

Although there is no way definitively to date eight of the seventeen stories collected here, all seventeen appear to have been produced between 1930 and 1951, most after 1945. Those uncertain eight were likely—and in some cases definitely—the work of August 1945 or later. Mathews appears to have recorded every one of his writing endeavors in his diary on the days on which he was writing it, editing it, or otherwise working with it. We know from these records that in August 1946 he wrote “The Apache Woman” and “Yellow Hair,” in November 1948 “The Talk of the Face,” and by the end of December 1949, eleven more. Of those fourteen, only eight appear here. One was published with his children’s stories. The story “Laughter” we leave to other editors, as its plot duplicates in most essentials a different story, “Alfredo and the Jaguar,” also already published with his children’s stories. Four others could not be located (“Dance at Dawn,” “Imported Cheese,” “Echoes among the Junipers,” and “Joy Finds the Old Trail”).<sup>5</sup>

Mathews was motivated in the late 1940s by far different motives from those which animated him in 1963 to produce his children’s book in a few short months. By that stage he wrote for love of his grandchildren or step-grandchildren; in 1946 his impetus was eco-

nomic. Within days of penning those first two stories, they had been mailed off in the hope of publication. A little over two weeks later, he was deciding to cut the second to fit a popular magazine. He had accomplished that task within the next fortnight. The extant diary for the following year is quite incomplete, but there is no mention that either was ever published. However, it would become clear that he was writing for money and not just love. On New Year's Eve 1946 he would write about the dull, disjointed year he had had: "I am ready to live as a gentleman lives once more." We must remember that Mathews and his four sisters had lived more than comfortably during the 1920s, the peak of oil production in the Osage, when Osage tribal members were some of the highest per capita earners in the world. It was a unique history among federally recognized tribes at the time and still is today. Despite his nostalgic statement, Mathews did not fail in his works to examine the dark side of this unique history—the anti-Osage and anti-Indian side. Many Osages were murdered or placed under guardianship (whether minors or not) in order for whites to obtain control over their oil revenues. The father of the central character in *Sundown* dies in a gun battle related to these intrigues and the general influx of money and technology into the Osages' territory.<sup>6</sup>

Each Mathews sibling appears to have had not only his or her own headright in the tribe's collective ownership of the oil beneath the reservation, but a fifth of a share in their deceased father's headright. Still, by early 1948, he felt comparatively poor. While he continued to receive oil royalties and an income from the leasing of his allotment (what he called his "natural income"), he was also still in debt and still putting one of his stepchildren through boarding school and college. In April 1948 he remarked that he was unable to pay his taxes and insurance, and he was still borrowing from friends and patrons to fund the travel he needed to perform research to write *Life and Death of an Oilman*. By September he wrote: "I shall be compelled to write [short stories] while writing the Marland book. A matter of being obvious and rather stupid. One ought to be able to do what others do. I *must* write for money." That day and the next he spent

a total of ten hours researching short stories. Later that month he remarked that he wondered how he was going to make it, since *Life and Death* could not come out until at least spring 1949, “and there is some doubt that the public will want to read my short stories. My agents, Brandt and Brandt have sent back 2 of the 3 I sent them last month. Terrific food prices and Ann’s college and interest keep me broke, so that I have nothing for myself.”<sup>7</sup>

November 1948 sees him composing “The Talk of the Face,” originally “The Talk of Your Robe.” Yet in December of the following year he notes that no short story had sold yet. The country during that time had been in a recession. By the end of 1949, he took inventory. He had written eleven more short stories that year and sent a total of thirteen (two written in 1948) to his agent as part of his story-a-month plan. They were arrayed as follows:

- January—“What Thing Is Fairest”
- February—“The White Sack”
- March—“Only a Blonde”
- April—“Dance at Dawn” as well as “The Apache Woman”
- May—“Imported Cheese”
- June—“The Liberal View”
- July—“Lady of the Inn”
- August—“Echoes Among the Junipers”
- September—“The Flower of Cadron Creek”
- October—“Joy Finds the Old Trail”
- November—“Laughter”
- December—“The Talk of the Face”

“I saw my short stories as liberators, but they didn’t sell though the agent still has four of thirteen. This failure dimmed my confidence quite a bit.” Mathews felt himself to be “a prisoner on the ridge” and blamed himself for having “played the fool the few preceding years.”<sup>8</sup>

After this we cannot trace his thoughts or productivity until January 1952. Given that the diaries are relatively complete from then until his death, and that he never mentions short story writing again until

the spurt in 1963, where he names every story he wrote, it is fair to assume that the eight undated stories here (“The Thinkin’ Man,” “Too Small for a Horse,” “Allah’s Guest,” “Moccasin Prints,” “Bad Medicine,” “No Time,” “Natural Science,” and “The Meek Shall Inherit?”) were written between 1946 and 1951. Not one of them resembles in its first pages the later nine, the children’s stories. Nor do their themes—especially the themes of the latter three—seem to conform to his later production. The typeface used and the faded paper resemble the others here. Possibly they were written earlier, between 1925 and early 1939, another gap in the diary record. But that seems unlikely. For the latter three, it is impossible. He sent one more to the *Wild Catter* magazine in March 1952. “That Day” was pulled from his missing novel *Within Your Dream*, completed in early December 1949. Whether it was published, or where the manuscript resides, we do not yet know. At the time the magazine itself had not yet gone into production. Regardless, these efforts and continuing efforts to date Mathews’s literary endeavors will help us to understand better his development as a writer among writers and the roadblocks he faced in different eras, whether linked or disparate.<sup>9</sup>

Each of these stories is a surprise and a delight for anyone who is already a Mathews aficionado or simply interested in mid-twentieth-century Native American writing. They reveal a dimension of his writing and thinking as yet unrecognized. For those new to Mathews, they give a new angle of insight into what I have elsewhere called his reverse ethnography: his turning of the anthropological lens upon its wielders in the United States who had become complacent consumers of Indian images. In other words, Mathews made great study of non-Indian and particularly white America. Had these stories been published—and perhaps this is one reason why they were not—several would have revealed to that America sides of itself that exposed its foibles and hypocrisies from the subtle standpoint of a French-Welsh-English-Osage American, of predominantly Osage and French cultural heritage and Osage reservation upbringing in a multiracial family. There are aspects that might have made Amer-

icans uncomfortable, even those used to reading or eager to read “insider” critiques.<sup>10</sup>

So, until quite recently, Mathews has instead been known as the author of those five important books already mentioned: *Wah’Kon-Tah*, *Sundown*, *Talking to the Moon*, *Life and Death of an Oilman*, and *The Osages*. Most were groundbreaking, unique in their day, in some cases still unique in ours. In the stories being published here we see an extension and development of his thought as well as greater diversity in his interests. By 1945 he had traveled extensively, including beyond the United States, a fact not at all pronounced, not at all obvious in those five major works. As with many Native American authors of his day, his published—his public—persona remained largely circumscribed by the popular and editorial imaginary of American Indians as localized, parochial, and stationary rather than worldly and far-ranging. In addition to displaying the subtlety of his social critiques and political observations, these shorter narratives help to show the shaping of a Native American intellectual through his thirst for travel and cultural comparison, one who has heretofore been confined in large part to his hometown, reservation identity.<sup>11</sup>

The arrangement of the stories in this volume roughly traces how his experiences shaped his life and writing. Readers may appreciate cues here reminding them of the basic outlines of Mathews’s experiences, which are much more fully fleshed out in his partial autobiography *Twenty Thousand Mornings* and in other sources. After growing up in Pawhuska and enrolling at the University of Oklahoma, Mathews soon joined the war effort and became a pilot and flying instructor during World War I. Despite his yearning for overseas combat, his world travels began only after the war when he enrolled at Oxford University. Spending a brief time in the Rockies in 1920 just prior to this transient four-year expatriation, he was able to launch from Oxford trips to Scotland, several European countries, and Algeria. After living briefly in Switzerland and marrying there, he and his American wife returned to the States, residing first in her home state of New Jersey and then in California.<sup>12</sup>

The onset of the Great Depression saw Mathews leaving his wife and children to return to the Osage. During the first half-dozen years of this traumatic time for the country was when Mathews established himself as one of the handful of pioneering Native American writers who brought to the attention of U.S. citizens the conflicts and contradictions of the centuries of pressure that had culminated in the Reservation Era, the policies of assimilation and allotment, and the affinities and tensions among Natives of mixed and unmixed heritage. Others who took up these subjects or ranged beyond them included Mourning Dove and D'Arcy McNickle, as already mentioned, as well as Zitkala-Ša (e.g., *American Indian Stories*), John Milton Oskison (e.g., *Black Jack Davy*), Ella Cara Deloria (whose ethnographic fiction *Waterlily* would not be published until the 1980s), and Luther Standing Bear (e.g., *My People the Sioux*). They were succeeding several earlier Native writers such as Francis La Flesche (*The Middle Five*), E. Pauline Johnson (*The White Wampum, Flint and Feather*, and others), Charles Alexander Eastman (*Indian Boyhood, Old Indian Days, The Soul of an Indian*, and others), Alexander Posey (poems, stories, and the Fus Fixico letters), and Arthur C. Parker (e.g., *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales*), who themselves had taken up the mantle from earlier writers.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Mathews's most famous work today, *Talking to the Moon* (1945), was partly made possible by his Guggenheim fellowship in Mexico in 1939–40, after which he returned to live outside Pawhuska for the remainder of his life, touring many parts of the United States and Canada both with his second wife and on solo excursions or with parties of fellow hunters. The writing published during his lifetime was bookended by works on his tribe, the Osages, with his vastly underappreciated history of the tribe published in 1961.<sup>14</sup>

Mathews's self-confidence came in part because the Osages were a tribe that—like the Caddos, the Haudenosaunee, the Cherokee, and a number of others—had been able during the colonial period to position themselves advantageously with respect to European colonizers and surrounding tribes. At the height of their postcontact power, they controlled most of the territory now represented by the states of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. In Willard H. Rollings's

ethnohistorical terms, they formed a political, economic, and social hegemony on the prairie-plains. Other researchers have suggested the strong possibility that they had been instrumental in the building and political prominence of Cahokia, a mound-culture settlement of the eleventh through fourteenth centuries near present-day St. Louis. The urban space of Cahokia centers on the largest mound known to have been built north of the Rio Grande. Its multifarious actors shaped exchanges of ideas, ceremonial goods and artwork, foods, minerals, hides, and other wares and raw materials across the continent through trade routes stretching toward Echota in the Appalachian Mountains, toward Florida, toward Mexico, toward the north and northwest, toward the Caddo confederacies of present-day Oklahoma, and toward the Pueblo and Apache regions even before those names became attached to them. Dhegiha Siouan entities such as ancestors of the Osages, Omahas, Poncas, Kansas, and Quapaw are thought likely contributors to Cahokia's development, along with other ancestors to tribal groups among the Algonquian Illinois, the Muskogean Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek, the Caddoans, and the Chiwere Siouan societies.<sup>15</sup>

After writing the "Stories from Indian Country" included here, and perhaps as unconscious historical contextualization for them, Mathews would take this history even further back. He relied upon keepers of Osage tradition like Chief Fred Lookout rather than solely upon written western scholarship to do so. *The Osages* begins with the land itself, the Ice Age, and the people from the stars who descend to earth from the Sky Lodge, search for and join with an earth people indigenous to the sacred planet, and become the Children of the Middle Waters, Ni-U-Ko'n-Ska (rather than "Osage"), "long before the Europeans found them." Robert L. Hall writes that one "Dhegiha tradition describes the lower Ohio valley as the starting point for Dhegiha migrations" and says "Osage-Kansa and Omaha-Ponca traditions move the balance of the Dhegihas through the greater Cahokia area at one time in their histories." While Mathews's story "Moccasin Prints" in this collection suggests there may be something to the Ohio valley connection, he writes later, in this 1961 work:

And no matter where they lived in the beginning of dawn-thought, and no matter what dim tribal memory indicates about their coming from the southeast, their religion reflecting the earth indicates a region of river-abandoned water in general, exactly like the region at the forks of the river now called Osage in modern Bates and Vernon counties, Missouri. If they had lived in the vague prehistoric times at the head of the Mississippi River, where there are lakes—glacial, not river-abandoned—and lazy meandering rivers and marshes and lenses of water, one might expect to find the moose and the loon among their life symbols, and if they had lived in the vague Southeast, they ought to have a word for sea.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps what Mathews is responding to here is the tendency for the intermingling and intermarriage of peoples—across a continent characterized more by sedentary agriculture and widespread trade than the imagined nomadism of savagist theories—and the infusion of stories from beyond a particular group into that group’s consciousness through that trade and intermarriage to be confused for the basis of their self-identity. After all, the western imaginary of precontact North American life is nearly always mixed with an unconscious theory of the migration of static self-isolating groups. In any event, Mathews’s increasing grounding in a long-historical sense of his Osage heritage as distinct from his thorough consciousness of the recent history of the Osage reservation life of his father and grandmother and their Amer-European spouses likely developed more during his U.S. travels in the 1950s, after writing these stories, than beforehand.<sup>17</sup>

During the late 1940s and early 1950s period of writing, however, Mathews focused in any event more on stories reflecting his European heritage and specifically reflecting upon and critiquing the bourgeois aspects of what he called Amer-European life (because it transplanted European culture onto the Americas more than adapting and assimilating into the cultures already here). The fact that he did so from an anticommunist perspective as an American Indian writer may have seemed incongruous or unappealing or unexpected to literary agents or magazine editors unfamiliar with political landscapes

in Indian country; we do not know. One might think instead—given Mathews’s established political connections through his engagement in tribal politics in Washington and his family connections (one sister, Florence, being married to Michael Feighan, a longtime Democratic member of the House of Representatives from Ohio)—that they might have been delighted to tout him and his anticommunism as exemplary of the solidarity of Indians with the cause, however distorting. Yet his very presence in the discourse could have been seen as thrusting the warts of U.S. imperialist sins on its own continent into the prominence of global scrutiny. In any event, these critiques of the middle class are perhaps a unifying trend across these multitextured contributions. Arranged here thematically, the stories include “Westerns,” which display Mathews’s embeddedness in rural working-class vernaculars, and “Travel Stories,” for which he drew upon his tours in Scotland, North Africa, and Mexico. Only one of the seven stories in these first two sections (“Allah’s Guest”) seems obliquely to suggest a mixture of reflection upon his Osage experiences and his colonialist heritage, though “Yellow Hair” and “Only a Blonde” get at familiar themes through explorations of mestizo consciousness. The third section, “Stories from Indian Country,” exhibits a sweep outward toward the Osages’ tribal neighbors as well as a look within at their private challenges. Meanwhile, “Stories of World War II and the Cold War” expose a little known, poorly understood side of Mathews’s personal, political, and ideological formations while offering perhaps the least hint of his Osage identity.<sup>18</sup>

This aspect of the stories may offer insight into why they saw no success in the New York literary magazine market Mathews was aiming for (aiming for perhaps because he both saw it as the most promising of cash returns and associated it with prestige). In the aftermath of World War II, U.S. publishers and intellectuals on the East Coast and in Europe were beginning to engage in a cultural Cold War against forces of totalitarianism. These intellectuals later included Mathews’s own stepson, John Hunt. One might think therefore that Mathews’s sympathies with that Cold War effort and the preceding war effort would have gained him a way in. Who he had already (and recently)

established himself to be, however, may have worked against him. And the onset of the Termination and Relocation Era, which was assailing the very concept of a sovereign Osage nation and a multiplicity of American Indian polities distinct from yet within the larger nation, may also have continued to shape Mathews's successes and failures. These were successes and failures in a publishing industry sensitive to various fluctuations in its public's receptivity, along with the economic and social forces during the late 1940s recession that were his very impetus to write.<sup>19</sup>

Mathews had in many ways come to the public's attention due to interest during the 1930s in folk, vernacular, and regionalist literature. Both *Wah'Kon-Tah* and *Talking to the Moon* defy those strictures while also fitting into them. *Sundown* had broken molds, but Mathews complained that his publisher had not marketed it widely. So the literary modernism that characterizes the work, according to Christopher Schedler, may not have had wide recognition among the public or publishers in its day. At the same time, these works would not have had the widespread popularity of a John Steinbeck or an Ernest Hemingway because most white working- and middle-class readers had no experiences comparable to those in the 1930s works; they also had no ability to withdraw into the rural earth-struggle of *Talking* if they were not already in it, and perhaps feeling trapped there, because of the intensifying economic pull toward the cities. And as Mathews later observes, readers in this nation tend to read not for the beauty of the writing but for the pleasures of the reader in vicarious self-identification with the characters.<sup>20</sup>

So, by the time Mathews directed his stories as entries into the fray of a literary publishing industry in New York, then burgeoning since its slump during the war, not only would he have had greater competition in terms of numbers of authors submitting, but his recent publications may have fixed a particular image of him in the minds of agents and editors. The three Indian- and mestizo-themed stories that he sent first may have reinforced that image at the very time when tastes and moods were taking a turn away from regionalism and ethnic affiliation and toward a sense of unified, global, cosmopolitan identity to face

down the threat of a communism perceived as divisive. By the time he sent those entries more in solidarity with the Cold War effort, perhaps his chances had been sealed or his entries scrutinized on a different level than those of others, and certainly they would not have been seen as “inside” the East Coast version of the national conversation, even if submitted first. Entries from Middle America in general may have had less of a chance regardless of the writer’s ethnicity. John Tebbel notes that “best sellers,” humor, short stories, westerns, and mysteries were in demand by 1945. As the war ended and the decade progressed, literary magazines and book publishers began also to focus on the global implications of the war’s end, the reconstruction of Europe, rivalries with the Soviet Union and China, and an anticommunist, prodemocratic, pro-U.S., antitotalitarian discourse being covertly driven by the CIA. Ideological debate was beginning to dominate American letters, a terrain in which Mathews was certainly familiar and which he had engaged within *Talking to the Moon*. Yet his ideological angles in four of the five “Stories of World War II and the Cold War” poke at the emerging American hegemony and readers’ wishful view of themselves and their leaders even while abetting their racializing views of others and band-wagoning onto the cause.<sup>21</sup>

Shaped by these forces still, readers today may focus on what they perceive as regional, parochial, or workmanlike aspects of Mathews’s short story production. They may tisk-task him for experimenting, on the one hand, or, on the other, for being insufficiently experimental, writing too much in a tradition or traditional style. Yet what writer does not do both at some point in a career? Those judgments are part of the interest of this collection, as we see him fully with the flow of anticommunist, antisocialist, and antitotalitarian sentiment, while at the same time refusing to give up his grounded folk, vernacular, regional identity—his injunction to the reader to know-my-history, know-thy-history, know-the-basic-conditions-of-your-consciousness. His irritation at the privileged pretentiousness of the very eastern literati who might determine the trajectory of his career must have been palpable to them when reading “The Liberal View,” even if its targets were disguised as their ideological enemies. If satirical critiques of

the bourgeoisie were now being typecast as communistic, Mathews refused to be typecast. He refused to soothe. If reminding Americans of the contingency, privilege, danger, and ludicrous chance of their power were grounded in certainty that ethnicity would always play a role, Mathews refused to play the un-self-critical cosmopolitan. He refused to pretend.<sup>22</sup>

Like many writers writing for money, Mathews was well aware of what he was doing, and the audiences to whom he was catering, but also of the limits of his willingness to compromise. The very basis of his artistic skill was grounded in his life experiences and unique epistemological standpoint. It was also grounded in his concept of what a writer was and did, what a writer's function in a society ought to be. To abandon any of those would have run into the ground the very writing career he was trying to fund through the stories. It seems likely that both editors and readers during this time would have typecast even mixed-race American Indians as nonideological; that is, as not having an intellectual or political stake in the global debate despite their massive contribution to the war effort. Ethnicity did not sell anymore, but it still defined and confined. Mathews wrote snidely in his diaries during the 1960s about the New York publishing industry, and one must imagine that the irritation had been building since his disappointing experience with Longmans, Green in the mid-1930s and the failure to place his postwar short stories.<sup>23</sup>

In his 1962 contribution to the *Sooner Magazine* entitled "Author Joseph Mathews Discusses the Limited Impact, Influence and Dollar-Importance in Books of the Indian and the Southwest," he seems to be silently interpreting his failure to place these short fictions as an issue not so much of ideologically minded editors among the East Coast establishment but of the readership to which they catered. He saw U.S. readers as unable, through their Cold War fears and self-centered comforts, to appreciate writers from complex Middle America who were "writing as naturally as the meadowlark sings."

The future of Southwest literature probably depends upon the cold war jitters now, as it was affected for some time in the past

by the extremely clever, insinuating termite action of Communist propaganda . . . to support [the intellectual] in his rebellion against the atmosphere created by the dollar powerful. . . . One expects little . . . because of the jitters over international relations, and any literature which fails to give the reader some comfort for his fears, his obesity, his heart's defects will not produce dollars for the publisher or the author. . . . Even with the jet boost of publicity to get him off the ground, he can't remain airborne [*sic*] long if the jittery reader, the salacious reader, the nascent hypocondriac [*sic*] cannot identify himself with the characters or the themes.

In his argument, the previous era's Communist propaganda had expressed and provoked in the U.S. public "dramatic . . . concern for the . . . underdog," a stance hard not to see as being in contrast to Mathews's depictions of the common man in "A Thinkin' Man" and "Too Small for a Horse." His authoritative, masculinist tone and his self-knowing irony throughout this *Sooner* piece deftly put on display the "mixed-blood" complexity of his and his father's heritage while also pointing to his rejections by and rejections of the dollar consciousness within which he had been forced to write in the decade previous: "Now—what will happen to the very heart of Southwest culture, the literature of the Indian, is impossible to say. One might assume that by the time he becomes, after hundreds of years with European contact, a human being finally, with warm blood and philosophy, and a soul and a pre-God concept which came out of his own earth, the Southwest, it will be too late." Had Mathews become a human being in the eyes of his audience? Probably so. Had his fellow Osages without mixed-race heritage?

Since 2016 Americans of all political persuasions have become quite familiar with why a person might retreat from an elitist culture, even one that believes itself to be upholding democratic virtues. Why might Mathews have retreated? It is clear in these lines that the very structural economic conditions that made his writerly consciousness possible also made him dollar-dependent upon the very site of economic power along the coasts that that consciousness had arisen to critique.<sup>24</sup>

Mathews does not ever appear to have been dismissed, mocked, shunned, or openly made unwelcome by the eastern intelligentsia, and he seems to have networked with relative ease among them. Yet he was always aware of more than they were, always saw more than they saw. Often he conveyed this consciousness to his readers, as in *Wah'Kon-Tah*, *Sundown*, "Only a Blonde," "Yellow Hair," "The Liberal View," "What Thing Is Fairest," "Natural Science," and "The Meek Shall Inherit?" But he did not always do so in a national aesthetic atmosphere welcoming of it. The Cold War period and the aesthetic sensibilities it solidified on the East Coast (distinctive, although allied with those in Middle America, and perhaps still adherent to the previous regionalist and ethnicity-based aesthetics that it was supplanting) proved a cold reception for Mathews's reverse ethnographic observations. These aesthetic sensibilities may still reign today.<sup>25</sup>

For those interested in the fullest landscape of American writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, published contemporaneously or not, the stories are invaluable. Short story writers like Mathews hoped to compete for the attention of the American public with authors like Jessamyn West, Vladimir Nabokov, John Cheever, Shirley Jackson, Kurt Vonnegut, Ray Bradbury, J. D. Salinger, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Robert A. Heinlein, William Faulkner, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and even Jorge Luis Borges and other international figures. Mere talent or skill was far from the determining factor in success or lasting renown. Science fiction and fantasy were on the rise. Thriller, horror, mystery, political, and philosophical genres also had traction. Where regionalism persisted as a national obsession seems to have been in regard to the South, as opposed to Middle America and the Southwest, with continuing attempts to reconcile the former Confederacy with the rest of the country through examinations of southern mentality, culture, and race relations. Younger writers like Salinger, Bradbury, and Vonnegut may have had some advantage among editors due to their recent status as WWII soldiers, a saleable profile. Writers who lived on one of the coasts or in a larger city and could mingle among agents, publishers, and other social influencers probably also fared somewhat better in the competition

for columns. African American, Native American, and other U.S. writers of color, even well-established ones, seem to have received fewer opportunities for publication.<sup>26</sup>

Mathews had been called by Joseph A. Brandt, the first director of the University of Oklahoma Press, “one of the best stylists in America,” yet the immediate postwar years saw him largely forgotten except for *Talking to the Moon*. Ironically, both his attempts to range beyond Osage themes and his attempts to write Native stories may have had something to do with that neglect. Ironically, the writer who had helped to put the “mixed-blood” subject before the attention of the mainstream public was never truly accepted as a mixed-blood writer. His Osage heritage was what was valued, except when it was not. He was only once successful in publishing a major work without a major Osage aspect to it: the biography of oil magnate E. W. Marland, wherein the Osage perspectives allow their Amer-European subject to take the lead and become a vehicle for subtle critique of him. Of his five postwar stories in the present volume that take place in “Indian Country,” only one—“The Talk of the Face”—would likely have appealed to a late forties audience, though the others match or exceed it in quality. As already observed, many of his other stories seem designed to provoke discomfort in their readers’ bourgeois habits and complacencies, something his first three books had never done so directly. Perhaps in hindsight we can appreciate these stories for their nuance, their care, their complexity, and their range. And we may wonder what the world and the field of literary study would have been had Mathews’s luck been better, his agent more persistent, his regional identity more “marketable,” or his talent for seeing through that other Middle America (and letting them know it) more veiled.<sup>27</sup>

The John Joseph Mathews we are coming to know in the beginning of the twenty-first century is a vastly different Mathews from the writer that the twentieth century knew. From novelist and nature writer, historian and biographer, aviator and tribal council member, museum founder and Guggenheim fellow, he has become all these plus a short story writer, a children’s author, an autobiographer, a

diarist, a correspondent, and the author of lost novels, essays, and works of creative nonfiction that we are still trying to track down. And while sometimes flawed by Mathews's lack of access to a caring and careful editor, and by the financial pressures under which he wrote, the stories published here for the first time give us important new insight into his ideologies, his travels, his composing processes, and many other aspects of his life and career.<sup>28</sup>

The Short Stories of  
John Joseph Mathews,  
an Osage Writer



# Westerns



Readers who wish to avoid plot spoilers will prefer to skip to the stories and then return.

John Joseph Mathews's unpublished westerns derive from two sources: his sojourns in the Rockies starting during his young adulthood prior to embarking for Europe, and the peripatetic impulses of his adolescence, delimited for the most part by the outskirts and borderlands of the Osage Nation, later Osage County, Oklahoma.

After he had ended his service in the WWI forerunner to the U.S. Air Force, he returned to the University of Oklahoma to finish his bachelor's degree. However, he felt the university had been forced to rush the veterans through. There were many flooding back all at once, while the school was also trying to maintain its service to students newly graduated from Oklahoma's high schools. So Mathews decided to apply to Merton College in Oxford for a second bachelor's degree, encouraged by his mentor Walter S. Campbell (whose pen name was Stanley Vestal). After being admitted, though, he caught big game hunting fever. He and his mother and three of his four sisters had gone on a road trip through Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, and down the Mississippi River through Samuel Clemens's stomping grounds of Keokuk, Iowa, and Hannibal, Missouri. It was a four-thousand-mile "grand tour of the Rockies and the Plains": they called it "le Grande 'Tower.'"

### **"The Thinkin' Man"**

Having tented with his family for some time in Yellowstone, Mathews decided to fill the time between his return to Pawhuska and the start of Michaelmas term at Oxford (in October 1920) by returning west. The "bull wapiti would be challenging" and the black and grizzly

bears would not yet be in hibernation. “My big game hunting fever had attacked on Mt. Washburn in the Yellowstone when I had ridden into a band of Rocky Mountain bighorn. I remember distinctly when it struck, and I had descended the peak in a sort of trance.” He had spoken with several hunting guides, including one Bill Barron, before leaving, and telegraphed Barron to make arrangements. He and his sister’s husband Henry Caudill and their three companions started their pack-in along the Shoshone River east of the park. With them were Barron, the cook Jim Milstead, the wrangler Wuff, five saddle horses, and fourteen to fifteen pack horses.

Whether one of these men told Mathews the story that takes shape here as “The Thinkin’ Man,” we will probably never know. The location made an impression on him: he wrote about it not only in this unpublished story but also in his children’s story “Ole Three Toes of Buffalo Fork”; at length in his autobiography; and in a story for the *Sooner Magazine* in 1929. Readers will notice that it forms a nice mirror to the upcoming “The Lady of the Inn” in the next section, “Travel Stories”: the paranoid, or narcissistic, or highly perceptive young narrator there is removed here in favor of a man who has had a lot of time to think things over from the point of view of others.

### “Too Small for a Horse”

“Too Small for a Horse” seems to emerge from this same period of life and location. After lighting out for Yellowstone in his “big game hunting fever,” Mathews did not want to return in October 1920 to catch his berth on the *Aquitania* for the start of Michaelmas term at Oxford. So he telegraphed from Cody to the Cunard Lines to cancel his passage. He had “decided to try for bighorn in the Sunlight country” of Yellowstone. One day he caught sight of a cougar playing in the snow, and after literally exhausting his sixty-year-old guide, he went hunting with the Cougar Hunter of Holmes Lodge on the Shoshone River (shooting only a mule deer buck and a late season black bear). The Hunter was really a Trapper, catching the cats for the most part, rather than shooting them. When they got back, the guide, Bill Barron from Cody, Wyoming, introduced him to novelist

Caroline Lockhart, perhaps the model for the “dainty little novelist . . . from New York,” Violet Smythe, in “Too Small for a Horse.” A midwesterner, Lockhart had worked in Boston and Philadelphia before moving to Cody in 1904 on an assignment about the Blackfoot Indians. She never left, and she made a name writing westerns that fed the motion picture industry while managing her ranch and a newspaper she owned.

Perhaps Mathews heard the story of Buff Calvert at the dance Barron threw in his honor, where guests brought their own moonshine because Prohibition was in full swing, and he danced with every woman and spoke with every man and saw his host only once. Perhaps, though—given the setting in the “San Martinez Mountains,” Guerrero, hombres, and the coast cattle wintering in the canyons—“Too Small for a Horse” came instead from his time in Southern California before the Depression or his hunting trips to New Mexico. There are Wild Cat Canyons or Wild Cat Mesas in California and in Utah, but not obviously in Wyoming or New Mexico, nor can White Skull or Balsam Tank be located readily on any map. The story’s beginning must have amused him, as Mathews was quite a tall man, so he was perhaps making fun of himself. And why not make fun too of his reputation from *Talking to the Moon* for shooting innocent, unarmed poultry? A white Plymouth Rock chicken is the model of the domesticated breeds, the picture in every schoolboy’s and schoolgirl’s mind of what a chicken should be. With perfectly white body, and perfectly red face and comb, and perfectly plump and perky struttitude in perfect front-to-back and side-to-side symmetry, they make the perfect enemy and epitomize the perfectly invasive species with the perfectly symbolic name. If you aren’t guffawing by the time the shooting ends, Mathews *would’uv had to give up on yu*.

### “Old Bob”

Despite some impulses to do so, however, Mathews rarely gave up on himself and his own writing. We conclude this section with two never-published versions of the same story, “Old Bob,” that in revised form appeared in print during the Depression: one an unedited