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DAVID CROCKETT’S VISIT TO THE RED RIVER VALLEY

by Skipper Steely

The Red River Valley west of the Great Bend saw basically three waves of American Anglo settlers arriving between 1815 and 1836. Those who came during the five years before the Mississippi Choctaw Treaty of Doak’s Stand (1820) were the first. Many of this group moved to southeast Texas. About eighty other families joined Stephen F. Austin when their land claims north of the Red River were given to the incoming Indians.

The second wave of Americans arrived at the American settlements during the next decade, joining relatives and former friends who remained in what was called Miller County, Arkansas Territory. This governmental entity, once a part of the large Hempstead County, was after 1828 located south of the Red River, stretching from the Great Bend as far west as civilization expanded, or basically to what is now Fannin County. Land claims were not valid in this region because both Mexico and the United States claimed ownership, an argument that continued until about 1838.

Not many Red River pioneers became “famous” in Texas history though some, such as Ben Milam, Richard Ellis, and Collin McKinney, were highly instrumental in the creation of the Republic.¹ Most remaining along the Red River during the 1830s had a greater loyalty to Arkansas than to Texas, sending delegates to legislative meetings in Little Rock and performing county governmental duties at Jonesborough, Arkansas, a town in what is now Red River County, Texas.

A third wave of pioneers began to arrive in Texas during the mid-1830s. These were not necessarily hard-core farmers and plantation owners. They were businessmen, lawyers, and traders who were looking for a new way of life, trying to drown out memories of past deeds. Some were quite talented. Some were popular in the states. Some were trying to leave their former wives or lovers. Robert Potter, William B. Travis, and Sam Houston were in this category. Jim Bowie, who also at times operated in southwest Arkansas, was still recovering from the loss of his wife, Ursula Veramendi. Whether this was true or not for one Tennessean who arrived at Fort Towson late in November 1835, does not matter much. He was there to hunt and explore, and he was destined to fight for Anglo American Texas. His name was David Crockett, and like Red River residents Samuel Price Carson and Potter, he was a former United States congressman.¹

Crockett was a noted hunter, and he had a gift for relating tall tales about life in the wild. People pestered him along the way to southwestern Arkansas. Everyone wished to meet him, all claiming in years afterward that they were good friends, that he spent a night at their home, or that he performed the marriage of their great grandpappy. As Gibbons Poteet of Lamar County later told Paris News writer A.W. Neville, Crockett left many smoke signals designating his trail across Arkansas and Texas. Sifting through the legends

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and pulling out the real story is difficult.

Crockett departed Weakley County, Tennessee, and the Western District on November 1, 1835, according to a letter written the day before to his brother-in-law, George Patton, in Swannanoa, North Carolina. It is feasible that Carson had influenced Crockett to follow him down the Southwest Trail, which cut diagonally across Arkansas into the Red River area. Crockett left in the company of Abner Burgin, Lindsay K. Tinkle, and William Patton, a nephew from the “lower country,” meaning Alabama or Mississippi. Patton was the son of James Patton, Mrs. Crockett’s brother. William Patton’s first chance to meet Crockett came when he went to the Gibson County courthouse to settle his portion of the estate of his grandfather, Robert, formerly of North Carolina. Traveling with William was his sister’s husband, George W. Harper, who later returned to the Muscle Shoals area. Patton was single and about thirty years of age. When informed of the trip to Texas, Patton also decided to explore the west. He agreed to travel for a portion of the distance, possibly to see kinfolks and friends living near the Red River.

Burgin was Crockett’s brother-in-law, having married Margaret Patton. Tinkle was a close friend of the family. According to the Lamar County, Texas, Skidmore family legend, Henry Skidmore was supposed to rendezvous with the group in Memphis but was late, resulting in a quick trip down the trail to catch his friends. Another story told in the Red River Valley is that Crockett and his group, before arriving in Memphis, had ridden a short time with a caravan headed to northeast Texas. Dr. Mansel W. Matthews and Lynn D’Spain were a part of this large group of Disciples of Christ. Crockett may have passed others moving to Texas (southwestern Arkansas) that Fall. One group that claimed it met Crockett was the large Guest contingent from Fayette County, Tennessee, formerly from a northern Alabama home near the Pattons. Word of military troubles in Texas did little to slow the migration to the Red River country.

Crockett and his three companions took a boat down the Obion River, then walked to Mills Point on the Mississippi, where they boarded a steamer. Niles Register reported a few weeks later that when he was in Memphis, Crockett wore a coonskin cap. This is the first mention that he actually carried such a cap along with him. Perhaps he covered his head with this type cap to spoof a New York City theatrical play done in 1831 that rather crudely depicted his frontier ways. He may have been simply playing along with the concocted image northerners had of him.

With Haley’s Comet in the sky, the group left Memphis, going by steamer to the mouth of the White River, cut over to the Arkansas, and arrived in Little Rock on November 12. Hundreds turned out to see Crockett. A supper was held at Jeffries’ Hotel, followed by a shooting match in his honor. The group continued their journey along the Ouachita River within a few days. In Washington, Arkansas, Crockett and his now six to eight companions stopped at the Black Bear Tavern. Another banquet was held in his honor. More tales of frontier exploits filled the evening. Crockett made his usual negative
comments about President Andrew Jackson but had to lend an ear to an equal number of stories about the escapades of Jim Bowie and Sam Houston, as well as a few reminiscences of local lore.

After three days in Hempstead County, Crockett either struck out over the military road to the public landing near Fort Towson or crossed into Texas at Levi Davis’ place in present Sevier County. However, stories in the DeKalb, Texas, area say he crossed into Texas at Mill Creek Landing near Spring Hill, then traveled south to a small village. Here the group spent the night. Crockett supposedly named the site DeKalb.

Crockett and his friends rode farther west into the heart of the Miller County settlement, visiting at Bryanly’s Landing and also talking to people near Bason’s Mill Creek. He apparently spent one of his first nights in Texas at the home of John Stiles. The next day they moved southwest, planning to hunt on the prairies and visit at Matt Click’s place located south of present-day Paris. It was later called Mount Vernon and eventually was known as Limekiln Community. Click apparently had a cabin there and worked some of the acreage, although evidence suggests that his family probably still lived in Hempstead County, Arkansas Territory.

The group consisted of more men now, with probably Stiles, John Robbins, Sherrod Roland, and Henry Stout as the main guides. It is possible that a cousin of William Patton already was living west of William Becknell’s place. The group took its time, passing one mile north of present Sively Hill on what is now Highway 5 east of Clarksville and less than a mile east of Madras. They moved northwest of Clark’s land, crossed north of the corner of James Latimer’s field, and spent the night at Becknell’s home in Royston Township, located four miles west of the new Clarksville community. Becknell was almost as well known as Crockett, and once had lived in Greene County, Tennessee near the Crockett family. He was a new resident of the Red River region. Becknell had gained fame when he created the Santa Fe Trail out of Franklin, Missouri, in the Winter of 1821-1822.

When William Brinton brought word that Crockett was coming to the southwest, Isabella Clark and two Latimer girls, thirteen-year-old Betsy and sixteen-year-old Jane, rode out to tell the men that they were facing possible danger if they moved too far south. Mrs. Clark later said, “We overtook Crockett and his party at the house of Edward Bean,” some ten miles west of the Clark residence. It was early morning when the women rode up and greeted Mrs. Dean. They ate breakfast together. Then Crockett, nicely dressed in the women’s estimation, rode west, heeding Isabella Clark’s warning not to take the old Fort Towson-Nacogdoches Road or any other southern route. She, too, mentioned that Crockett had on a coonskin cap.

From Dean’s the group rode toward Click’s. That evening they stopped on a hill which would later be called Crockett Circle in Paris. Finally they moved on five more miles south to Click’s place, located east of the Baker’s Branch of Aud’s Creek.

While there Crockett carved a Bois d’Arc slide to haul water and game.
It was called a "lizard" and remained at Click's place for sixty years until it was donated to the Texas State Fair, or burned in the Lamar County Courthouse fire of 1877, depending upon which story is accurate.16

Here Skidmore apparently caught up with Crockett's contingent.17 After about a week the group, now numbering twelve, left Click's and possibly explored near Cumby, then turned northwest to the edge of Jernigan's Thicket, a tangled mess of woods in southwestern Fannin County. From there they moved through Honey Grove, Bonham, and the Choctaw Creek area in Grayson county, turning soon afterward a bit south to near the headwaters of the Trinity River before circling back.

On the return toward Click's the group camped near Honey Creek. Ironically, James Mallory bought this land in 1856, thirty-one years after Crockett had visited his Dover, Tennessee, store to borrow a box to use as a platform. From it Crockett had spoken to the people while campaigning for the United States Congress. The Mallory clan claims it was from this box that Crockett first said, "If I am not elected, I'll either go to hell or to Texas."18

Since it was not advisable to take a direct southern land route to San Antonio from the Red River settlements, the group headed back to the Clarksville area. Local participants left Crockett at this point to remain at their homes. Crockett and at least Patton traveled east for a few days, but kept south of the Red River, visiting as they rode.19 They stopped overnight at the Collin McKinney home. Near there Crockett traded Isaac N. Jones a gold watch for a cheaper silver one and $30.20 At Fulton the travelers boarded a small steamboat and set out late in December through the Great Raft for Natchitoches.

Some believe that William Patton left Crockett at this point and returned to Alabama with plans to come back to the Red River as soon as possible. A William Black "Billie" Patton did arrive in the Lamar County area sometime prior to November 1836.21 This Patton later claimed land east of current Paris, then apparently went back to procure his Alabama family. According to that family's notes, they arrived on Blossom Prairie late in September 1837. Here Billie Patton started a store and blacksmith shop.22

All the family lore is suspect. It claims that Billie Patton was Crockett's nephew, but genealogical study does not prove this to be true. Evidence reveals that the William Patton who was Crockett's nephew did not leave his uncle but continued into Texas with him, signed an oath of allegiance in Nacogdoches on January 14, 1836, and then perhaps escaped death at both the Alamo and San Jacinto before returning to Alabama. Or did he? Some believe he perished at the Alamo.

After leaving the Red River settlements, Crockett, his nephew, and other followers had arrived in Nacogdoches by January 5, 1836. A few days later Crockett was in San Augustine, where he penned a letter to his daughter, Margaret, and her husband, Wiley Flowers, who lived in Gibson County, Tennessee. He told them he hoped to settle permanently in what would become the Fannin-Grayson County area. He made no mention of Patton and Burgin.23 Crockett signed his oath on January 12.
Through the last three weeks of January Crockett roamed deep eastern Texas. Just who was with him is unclear. If any Red River inhabitants were there, they are not revealed to history. Former Red River resident Jonathan C. Poole relates in his memoirs that after helping interpret at a conference in February with the Cherokee Indians, he was on his way back to the Texas army when he ran into Crockett. Poole traveled three or four days with him. He also later wrote that Crockett "...wore a coon skin cap and buck skin breeches," but gives no times or places in his ramblings about Crockett and other events.

Crockett was held in high esteem by Red River residents for another reason: his background was so similar to theirs. His great-grandfather was born in Ireland. The Crocketts lived in Pennsylvania, in the New River area of Virginia, and eventually spread out in southwestern Virginia and western North Carolina. His grandparents, early settlers in eastern Tennessee, were killed by Indians near Rogersville. David Crockett was born in Greene County, Tennessee, and moved west with the settlement of the state. Crockett worked in the Shenandoah Valley for a short period, associated with Jesse Cheek's brother. Jesse Cheek moved to the Red River Valley a decade before Crockett's visit. In addition, Crockett was kin to the Elliott family; his brother, William, married a Rebecca Elliott. The Elliotts were related to Moses Austin's family. Though some disagreed with Crockett's political battle with Andrew Jackson, most admired his honesty in thought and actions.

Interestingly enough, Crockett left a "trail of smoke" in the form of family legends. They stretch across Arkansas and into northeast Texas, but some works about him never mention, and even question, his presence west of the Red River's Great Bend. Though no official documents or newspaper accounts reveal that he visited Jonesborough and Clarksville, the memoirs of Isabella Clark prove he was there. The existence of so many family claims that he visited their ancestor's homes swells the evidence. Certainly, he left his mark on the history of northeast Texas and southwestern Arkansas. Most important for Red River settlers undetermined about their stand on the Texas-Arkansas boundary issue, his visit more than likely turned even more thoughts toward an alliance with Texas. It also made it easier to recruit help for the Texian cause when word arrived that Crockett had perished at the Alamo.

NOTES

1E.R. "Pop" Lindley, ed., *Biographical Directory Of The Texas Convention And Congress 1832-1845*. (Austin, 1986), p. 22. Ellis was president of the Convention of 1836, the first Texan meeting any Red River residents attended. He, Samuel Price Carson, Robert Hamilton, A.H. Latimer, and McKinney were the representatives. McKinney is given credit for assisting George Childress in the construction of the Republic of Texas constitution. Once a member of the Alabama state constitutional convention, Ellis then served in the Texas Congress as a senator from 1836-1840. He died tragically in a house fire. Ellis County carries on his name. As a result of his congressional service as a member of the House of Representatives three times, McKinney had a town and county named for him. Milam died at the Battle of Bexar in San Antonio. He was on a return trip from Mexico where he had been attempting to solidify land claims in northeast Texas.

While on a visit to Swannanoa, North Carolina, Crockett was present at a duel between Samuel Carson and Dr. Robert B. Vance on November 6, 1827. Burgin was also a friend of Carson. See also Shackford, "David Crockett And North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVIII, pp. 298-315. Also, Steely Collection, Patton File, at James G. Gee Library, Commerce, Texas. Carson's wife formerly had lived near the Pattons in McDowell County, North Carolina, in Pleasant Garden. Three Carson brothers married three Wilson sisters. It is possible that the Wilsons were kin to James Jordon Ward, another Red River settler.

After his wife Rebecca died, Robert Patton apparently was urged to move from North Carolina to Gibson County, Tennessee.

Shackford, *Crockett*, p. 84. While on a visit to Swannanoa, North Carolina, Crockett was present at a duel between Samuel Carson and Dr. Robert B. Vance on November 6, 1827. Burgin was also a friend of Carson. See also Shackford, "David Crockett And North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVIII, pp. 298-315. Also, Steely Collection, Patton File, at James G. Gee Library, Commerce, Texas. Carson's wife formerly had lived near the Pattons in McDowell County, North Carolina, in Pleasant Garden. Three Carson brothers married three Wilson sisters. It is possible that the Wilsons were kin to James Jordon Ward, another Red River settler.

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Steely Collection, A.W. Neville Papers, p. 34. There is a strong possibility that a Robert Patton already lived in northeast Texas in 1835. Many northeast Texans came from the northern Alabama region near Somerville.

Steely Collection, Neville Papers, p. 212. See also Bertha Gable, ed., *Red River Collections* (Dallas, 1986), p. 42. Crockett arrived at the Red River settlements a month before the Matthews wagon train.

N. Niles, ed., *Niles Weekly Register*, XLIX, p. 225, and by conversation with Eric Schmidt, an artist commissioned in 1986 to paint a mural based upon the fall of the Alamo. Schmidt says that he printed 500 copies of the gigantic painting, only to be then told by Steely and another source that there are several mentions of Crockett wearing the cap. Other than those references to the coonskin cap after he started toward Texas, Schmidt could not find other evidence that Crockett habitually wore such a cap.


Steely Collection, Miller County Papers, p. 653. Click voted in Jonesborough, Washington Township, in 1835. Records in Hempstead County show that he did not sell his Arkansas land until 1839.


*Red River County Deed Book D*, p. 320; and the *Dallas Morning News*, January 6, 1894.

Rourke, *Davy Crockett*, p. 163.

A marker stood for years under a tree at 1954 Clarksville Street, in the northeast corner of the front yard, supposedly marking the spot where Crockett camped one evening. The current location of the marker is next door at 1970 Clarksville Street, and was set below an oak in 1997. This is not the tree believed to be used by the Crockett contingent.

Aud's Creek was called Crockett's Creek on a Lamar County Headright map prepared in 1878.

A.W. Neville, *Paris News*, "Backward Glances," March 16, 1934; December 7, 1934; and December 24, 1934. The "lizard" was cut from the forks of a tree limb. Apparently it was on the John Click place south of Paris for many years. See also Scott, *Honey Grove Signal-Citizen*, March 20, 1931.

Steely Collection, John Black File, see the brown scrapbook, p. 126. Black's papers were prepared by his widow and given to the James G. Gee Library archives in Commerce, Texas.

Steely Collection, Black File, p. 125. Some say Crockett uttered, "...they can go to hell but I'm going to Texas." Andy Thomas may have been with the group. He supposedly swapped rifles with Crockett. Thomas did not go south later. He came back to the Red River area with his
family in September 1837, then later moved west to Whitewright. See also Bob Mallory, Some Mallorys And Bells (Greenville, 1950), p. 16. Some accounts say that at the headwaters of the Trinity, Crockett's men ran into a group led by James Clark. However, Clark should have been near Nacogdoches at this time.

They may have returned to Jonesborough and boarded a boat. Why the trail from Jonesborough to Nacogdoches was not considered safe is unclear. By 1835 few Indian problems are recorded that far east, and no stories of travelers being murdered along the trail are reported until the Ripley family massacre in 1841.

Rourke, Davy Crockett, p. 169; Shackford, Crockett, p 214; Steely Collection, McKinney-Sayford File. Dr. Jones was a North Carolinian who may have lived near the Clarks. He may have moved eventually to Washington, Arkansas, from the Red River region.

Steely Collection, Patton File and Neville Papers, p. 1145. 1222.

Paris News. September 25, 1986. William B. Patton's son wrote a diary which in 1986 was placed in the Aikin Archives at Paris Junior College. Initial research placed Billie Patton as a brother to Mrs. David Crockett. However, genealogical study by Sandra McDaniel of Rockport, Alabama, updates and changes information. The fate of William Patton, Crockett's nephew, remains unknown. The Billie Patton family likely is linked closely to William Patton's family.

Rourke, Davy Crockett, p. 174. It is not clear why Crockett was in Nacogdoches on January 5, then visited San Augustine on January 9. See biographical sketches at the San Jacinto Museum and Archives, under William Patton, for the oath.

Steely Collection, Chumley Notebook, p. 89; Webb, Handbook Of Texas I, p. 334; Chronicles Of Oklahoma, XXXII, No. 1, p. 34. Houston, John Forbes, and John Cameron were the commissioners at the conference. The treaty was completed on February 23, 1836, and promised the Cherokee their right of domicile. In return, the tribe would not actively oppose the Anglos in their conflict against the Mexicans.

Steely Collection, Chumley Notebook, p. 89.

Steely Collection, Crockett File; Shackford, Crockett, p. 9; and Steely, Six Months From Tennessee (Wolfe City, 1981), p. 137. Jesse Cheek was in the Red River Valley during the 1820s and perhaps earlier. Also, on the trip to Rockbridge County, Virginia, when Crockett was young, the wagon train master was Benjamin Kitchen, perhaps a relative of Pharaoh Kitchens, another early Red River land owner.

Steely Collection, Austin Colony Research Notebook, p. 99. Other families also are frustrated that no mention of them is in popular Crockett accounts. One is the Elijah Gossett family of Crockett, Texas.