

The Tour Begins and Ends at Fort Gibson

Muskogee County

October 9-10, 1832 & November 7, 8, 9, 1832

Wagoner County

November 8, 1832 Overnight

Today's Names for Yesterday's Places

A Tour on the Prairies by Washington Irving

Washington Irving on the Prairie by Henry Leavitt Ellsworth

The Rambler in Oklahoma by Charles Joseph Latrobe

On the Western Tour with Washington Irving by Albert Alexandre de Pourtalès



Muskogee County, October 9, 1832

The frontier Fort Gibson is now surrounded by the town of Fort Gibson. Fort Gibson is a town in Muskogee County which has expanded into Cherokee County as it grew in the U.S. state of Oklahoma.

On October 9, 1832 Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow slept at Fort Gibson. Irving was to leave in the morning with a small party of rangers an early cavalry without uniforms, army ammunition, or army horses. They would meet up with a larger party of rangers who were two or three days ahead. For the rangers the goal was to meet and parley with the plains Indians. For Irving it was a chance to see the west of his imagination. Irving was the superstar of his time who gave his readers the world of Sleepy Hollow and characters like the Headless Horseman and Ichabod Crane. He wrote about his trip to Oklahoma in *A Tour on the Prairies*, a book in print continuously since 1835. The friends who had traveled with him since the Great Lakes wanted to see the grand prairies and hunt buffalo. All four would write their own books about that autumn of 1832. These friends were also stars.

Henry Leavitt Ellsworth was in Oklahoma as a Commissioner to the Indians, but would one day be called the Father of the Department of Agriculture. Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès was a Swiss Count who would serve in the Prussian Diplomatic Corps. Charles Joseph Latrobe was Pourtalès' teacher and companion and would become an important figure in Australia taking Melbourne from primitive to civilized. Rangers who led and protected the travelers were mostly young with a sprinkling of grizzled veterans. Guides hired by the four friends, especially stalwart Beatte and Tonish the braggadocios, were as good as could be and frontier to the bone. All the friends had followed Auguste Pierre Chouteau, great trader from a famous family, from Saint Louis to his trading establishment at the Three Forks. Leaving Pourtalès and Latrobe at Three Forks, Commissioner Ellsworth and Irving arrived and examined Fort Gibson. Ellsworth described the Fort as he first saw it.

We reached the north side of Neosho or Grand River; and came in site of the numerous little log buildings, that compose Fort Gibson lying on the opposite side of the river – the barracks were erected in a square form 700 by 800 feet; In some instances the walls of the building & in others the stockades with port holes for musketry, form the exterior.

Today the trip across the Grand River is courtesy of a lovely old iron bridge with stone feet. In October of 1832, a ferry facilitated the trip.

We hailed the boat to carry us over – The officer on 'ferry detachment' soon brought us the flat owned by Gov, and we were safely landed without any pay for ferriage. . . . beyond . . . are erected mess houses, stores . . . houses for officer[s] who are married – a hospital . . . Theatre . . . billiard room.

Everyone wanted to hunt buffalo, to actually have a grand buffalo hunt.

Mr Latrobe & Pourteles had stopped at the Verdegris about 4 miles from Fort Gibson, having determined to follow the trail of the Osage hunters, who had gone toward the Red River, on their fall hunt.

The Cimarron was called the Red River by all the tourists in 1832. The actual *Tour on the Prairies* traveled somewhat parallel to the Arkansas River on the east until it met the Cimarron. The chance to go with the Osage hunters didn't work out, but the Commissioner worked out something equally felicitous.

I asked Col Arbuckle if he could provide me an escort of 20 men to overtake th[e] rangers – finding it practicable to get an escort, and supposing the army not more than 60 or 70 miles in advance, I immediately determined to dispatch 2 cheerokee Indians on the trail of the troops, with order to halt until my arrival.

Irving described the frenzy of preparations on October 9, 1832.

Our baggage had hitherto been transported on a light wagon, but we were now to break our way through an untraveled country, cut up by rivers, ravines, and thickets, where a vehicle of the kind would be a complete impediment. . . . We were to travel on horseback . . . Each one had a bear-skin and . . . blankets for bedding . . . a tent to shelter us in case of sickness or bad weather.

Commissioner Ellsworth described the packing.

The commissary, agreed to fix the pack horse, with provision & for 15 days which made together with the tent and blankets & camping furniture about 175 pounds – my pistol was a rifle pistol, & so heavy, as to make my holsters side unbalanced & I took a very large ear of corn to preserve the balance.

Wagons would have been impossible. As to the thickets, they got to experience the Cross Timbers, those "dwarf forests of cast iron." Flour was wildly appreciated and was mourned when it ran out. The coffee was just this side of heaven even though it was made in rather strange ways and tasted like the soil of each and every camp. No matter, when the smell of coffee filled the air, they might even expect visitors. At first the rangers were superior hunters, though the passion for the chase palled by the end. The bearskin was just about perfect and was a welcome refuge. The tent, for a Tour with a surplus of drizzle, rain, and storm, was invaluable. All had knives. Bowls were purchased by the second day and were used without mishap.

On the tenth of October the young Count and his friend Latrobe joined the rangers, headed across the Verdigris and traveled along the east bank of the Arkansas toward the west and the buffalo plains. Pourtalès was ecstatic.

I am overjoyed at the prospect of realizing all I have hoped for on this trip: visiting the Indians, seeing them in their meetings and assemblies, watching them dance, joining them in buffalo hunts, killing bears with a carbine. I am about to die of excitement.

The buffalo hunt would take place and it would be as exciting and heart stopping as even Pourtalès wished. Osages and Creeks would enlighten and entertain. The fierce Pawnees were never part of their firesides, never part of their parleys. The Indians they worried and worried about were never seen; never.

Returned to Muskogee County after 28 Days on the Prairies and the River Forests and the Cross Timbers; camping, cooking, cleaning, hunting, telling tales.

Muskogee County, November 7, 1832

On November 7, 1832 Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped on a creek near Taft, just west of Muskogee. By that night the travelers had been on the trail twenty-eight days. They had days that made spirits sing.

A glorious sunrise transformed the whole landscape, as if by magic. The late dreary wilderness brightened into a fine open country, with stately groves and clumps of oaks of a gigantic size, some of which stood singly, as if planted for ornament and shade, in the middle of rich meadows, while our horses, scattered about, and grazing under them, gave to the whole the air of a noble park.

Some time on November 7, the guide Beatte climbed a tree at the crest of a hill and looked ahead. He saw forest stretching across the county. He knew it was the Arkansas River. They were getting close.

We soon saw smoke rising from a woody glen at a distance. It was joyfully hailed as a harbinger of man. Our hungry rangers trudged forward with reviving spirit, regaling themselves with savory anticipations of farm-house luxuries.



That would not happen until November 8.

A hungry night, however, closed in upon a toilsome day. We encamped on the border of one of the tributary streams of the Arkansas . . . We had soon immense fires blazing and sparkling in the frost air: . . . but alas! . . . The scarcity in the camp almost amounted to famine. . . . one of our men . . . shot a turkey. We had no . . . salt to season it. We were fain to rub each morsel of the turkey on the empty salt-bag . . . The night was biting cold; the brilliant moonlight sparkled on the frosty crystals which covered every object around us. The water froze and in the morning I found the blanket in which I was wrapped covered with a hoar frost; yet I had never slept more comfortably.

And as light dawned, circumstances did not get better.

Every step became a labor; every now and then a miserable horse would give out and lie down.

Muskogee County, November 8, 1832

Taft is a historic black community. It is poetic and gratifying that Irving's savior on the morning of November 8, 1832, was Mrs. Bradley's, a black farmer's wife. Mr. Irving was at the end of his energy as was his beautiful horse.

My once fleet and generous steed faltered under me, and was just able to drag one foot after the other, yet I was too weary to spare him. A frontier farm-house suddenly presented itself to view overshadowed by great forest trees a stable and barn, and granaries teeming with abundance, while legions of grunting swine, gobbling turkeys, cackling hens and strutting roosters swarmed. The mistress of the house lugged from the fire a huge iron pot. Placing a brown earthen dish on the floor, she inclined the corpulent caldron on one side, and out leaped sundry morsels of beef, with a regiment of turnips tumbling after them, and a rich cascade of broth overflowing the whole. This she handed me, apologizing for our humble fare . . . Humble fare! . . . To think of apologizing for such a treat to a half-starved man from the prairies; and then such magnificent slices of bread and butter!

Not only did the Tourists eat in full, the horses raided the corncribs. Henry Leavitt Ellsworth was ecstatic. His meal was somehow pork, not beef, but both remembered the turnips.

On November 8, Irving left Mrs. Bradley's farm well fed and crossed the Arkansas River for the second time.

A ride of about a mile brought me to the banks of the Arkansas. A number of Creek Indians in their brightly colored dresses were busy aiding our men. We embarked in the canoe, and swam our horses across the river. I was fearful, lest in their enfeebled state, they should not be able to stem the current; but their banquet of Indian corn had already infused fresh life and spirit into them. The horses were quick to take off when they crossed the Arkansas River. . . . No sooner had we landed than they set off on a hard-gallop, and continued so for a great part of seven miles.

Short Stay in Wagoner County, a Night Inside, November 8, 1832

After the crossing of the Arkansas the Tourists stayed at Colonel Chouteau's place at the Three Forks in Wagoner County that night. Irving was back in Muskogee County with Commissioner Ellsworth the morning of November 9. When Irving arrived at the Three Forks, the worst of the misery was over. He and his friends slept that night inside. Under roof was not perfect to be sure.

When I woke in the night and gazed about me upon complete darkness, I missed the glorious companionship of the stars.

Only a few miles until Irving and Ellsworth reached Fort Gibson on his way back to use his notes, add filigree, and write his book.

November 9 Back at Fort Gibson Back in Muscogee County

Pourtalès and Latrobe left Colonel Chouteau's the morning of November 9, 1832. Irving and Ellsworth crossed the Grand River to Fort Gibson on November 9, 1832. That night On November 9, 1832, Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow slept in the small log cabin at Fort Gibson assigned to Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, Commissioner to the Indians. All were back from a month long Tour.

They finally slept back at Fort Gibson. . . . In the night the sound of steam was heard a steam boat had arrived! The first this season – the water was falling and she must return tomorrow – The opportunity was too good to be lost – M Irving must go.

Poor Commissioner Ellsworth lost his friend; Washington Irving the star.



Mr. Irving has gone, and I am left quite alone in my neat little log cabin, with two rooms only . . . I embrace the first leisure—to fill up a few large sheets with extracts from my journal.

He also described the just completed tour very well.

. . . we often recalled those days of adventure and light-heartedness in the midst of the great wilderness, we lay down at night, and rose in the morning in peace turning our faces towards the West with the assurance that, please God we should find another place of repose in the day's decline. I look back with peculiar delight to our mode of life, and our

intercourse with a few trusty friends, breathing the free air of the open prairie, or the scented brake of mint and sumac, to watch the fleet course of the startled deer, to choose our new abode in the tall deep forest by the river side, or where the forest merges into the prairie. Was not all this delightful?

Irving also described the tour at its end. His words have lasted.

The next morning, after breakfast, I again set forward, in company with the worthy Commissioner, for Fort Gibson, where we arrived much tattered, travel-stained, and weather-beaten, but in high health and spirits; -- and thus ended my foray into the Pawnee Hunting Ground.

Fort Gibson changed in time. The rangers became dragoons with regular uniforms and training in cavalry tactics. The dragoons became cavalry. The cavalry's story would not end until the bitter beginning of World War II. The Cherokee Nation, Muscogee Creek Nation, Osage Nation, and Pawnee Nation are still in Oklahoma.

Irving returned to New York to write *A Tour on the Prairies* from his notes. It was published in 1835 and has been in print continuously since then. To find out the reason that Irving came to Oklahoma; to find out more about the time he came; to learn more about the people who were here and the people who came with him; read *A Tour on the Prairies* by Washington Irving.