

The Tour Continues

Okfuskee County

November 3-4, 1832

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



Tishomingo Canadas, NatureWorks

Bronze by Geoffrey C. Smith

Dedicated to James W. Pielsticker

In the course of our march, a flock of brant were seen overhead, flying from the north.

Okfuskee County, November 3, 1832

On November 3, 1832 Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped north of Canadian River near Paden and Boley. After a difficult day, Irving slept cold and wet. He was camping with a party of rangers, early cavalry, and with three friends. They were traveling back to Fort Gibson after a tour to see the West of their imagination. In doing so they had grand buffalo hunt. Irving was the superstar of his time. The friends with him would make their own marks on the world. Henry Leavitt Ellsworth was in Oklahoma as a Commissioner to the Indians. Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès was a Swiss Count whose traveling companion was Charles Joseph Latrobe the virtuoso. Rangers who led the party were mostly young with a sprinkling of grizzled veterans. Guides hired by the four friends, especially stalwart Beatte and Tonish the braggadocios, were frontier to the bone. All the friends had followed Auguste Pierre Chouteau, great trader from a famous family, from Saint Louis to his post at the Three Forks.

On November 3, Irving was entering a long difficult slog, traveling twenty-five miles and more a day when the horses could only stay in top form traveling ten. The day started with flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder.

Beatte prognosticated rain . . . and that the wind would veer to the north. 'There comes the wind!' said Beatte; and in fact, it began to blow from that quarter almost immediately, with occasional flurries of rain.

The Tourists and their companions crossed the North Canadian River at mid-morning.

About half past nine o'clock, we forded the north fork of the Canadian and encamped about one, that our hunters might have time to beat up the neighborhood for game; for a serious scarcity began to prevail in the camp. Turkeys were far from plentiful, and deer became extremely scarce.

From the day they crossed the Canadian, they saw no more buffalo. If they only could have prevailed on the rangers to think about tomorrow scarcity would not be so pressing. The grand buffalo hunt of October 29 could have sustained them all the way back to Fort Gibson.

Most of the rangers were young, heedless, and inexperienced, and could not be prevailed upon, while provisions abounded to provide for the future, by jerking meat, or carry away any on their horses. On leaving an encampment, they would leave quantities of meat lying about, trusting to Providence and their rifles for a future supply. The consequence was, that any temporary scarcity of game, or ill luck in hunting, produced almost a famine in the camp. In the present instance, they had left loads of buffalo meat at the camp on the great prairie; and, having ever since been on a forced march, leaving no time for hunting, they were now destitute of supplies, and pinched with hunger. Some had not eaten anything since the morning of the preceding day. Nothing would have persuaded them, when reveling in the abundance of the buffalo encampment, that they would so soon be in such famishing plight.

Hunters kept going out from the camp . . . returned with indifferent success.

The game had been frightened away from this part of the country by Indian hunting parties which had preceded us. Ten or a dozen wild turkeys were brought in, but not a deer had been seen. The rangers began to think turkeys and even prairie hens deserving of attention; game which they had hitherto considered unworthy of their rifles.

The situation was dire and would become worse, not in kind but in severity.

Divers of the horses were irrecoverable lost, and the greater part of the Rangers were on foot, their steeds being unable to carry them. In fact, the poor animals had nothing to eat, -- the grass was dead or burnt, and we met with no cane before we reached the Arkansas.

The rangers not only did not jerk meat nor carry it; they had thrown away their provisions to avoid the trouble of carrying them.

And it was getting on toward winter. Nights thrilled the soul back on the banks of the Arkansas in October.

A beautiful pale light gradually sprang up in the east, a precursor of the rising moon. A bear-skin spread at the foot of a tree was my bed, with a pair of saddle-bags for a pillow. Wrapping myself in blankets, I stretched myself on this couch, and soon fell into a sound and sweet sleep, from which I did not awake until the bugle sounded at daybreak.

Now the nights were cold and the bearskin was likely wrapped around Irving for warmth and even it was full of a lingering damp from recurring rain. And there would be more rain tonight.

The night was cold and windy, with occasional sprinklings of rain; but we had roaring fires to keep us comfortable. In the night, a flight of wild geese passed over the camp, making a great cackling in the air; symptoms of approaching winter.

The Commissioner described land they crossed to the north of the Canadian and the camp that night.

— very cold rainy day. The land had now become much better and good for cultivation – post oak up land & large bottoms. All the meat in our camp was two Turkeys – we boiled one & made soup (hot water) – this was our meat & drink – Doct Holt gave us a mess of coffee from the hospital stores and Tonish burnt the same and having pounded it (after camp recipie) between two pieces of leather, threw it into the tin kettle our common boiler and placed the kettle over the fire – Tonish[’s] method of settling coffee was quite simple, a gill of cold water. Was all that he used – this did well so far as we discovered – I have repeatedly seen venison cut from the carcass all covered with blood, and thrown into the boiler – the scum would rise, and purify the remainder if taken off – as skimmers are scarce in the woods, it customary to fill up and let the froth run over.

The Commissioner always shared a bit more than the reader wanted to know.

Okfuskee County November 4, 1832

Irving and the Commissioner, their friends, the guides, and the rangers set out at an early hour the next morning. Everything looked better on November 4, 1832.

From a rising ground we had a noble prospect, over extensive prairies, finely diversified by groves and tracts of woodland, and bounded by long lines of distant hills, all clothed with the rich mellow tints of autumn. Game too, was more plenty.

Plenteous game would not continue. They will be down to licking turkey bones in a few days. Horses will drop like flies at the pace they were subjected to. They will be saved by the first Creek and settler farms along the Arkansas River. A black housewife will serve them the best beef and turnips there ever were on the last day on the trail. They will straggle back to the Three Forks and then to Fort Gibson.

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.