

# The Tour Continues

## Okmulgee County

*November 4-7, 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



### Okmulgee County, November 4, 1832— Nayaka Creek

*About three o'clock we encamped in a grove after a forced march of twenty-five miles that had proved a hard trial for the horses.*

On November 4, 1832 Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped near Okmulgee, probably on Nuyaka Creek. He was camping with a party of rangers, early cavalry, and with three friends. They had traveled from Fort Gibson to reconnoiter the western lands, parlay with Plains Indians, and to hunt buffalo. Irving was the superstar of his time. The three with him would make their own marks on the world. 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 the party were mostly young with a sprinkling of grizzled veterans. Guides hired by the four friends 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 post at the Three Forks. Two friends got to Fort Gibson and left again with rangers to hunt buffalo. They picked up the other two and headed across the Grand and then the Verdigris. It was a long, long tour. By the time Irving reached Okmulgee County he was tired, hungry, and cold. After the buffalo hunt out on the buffalo plains, the travelers had left dead buffalo laying everywhere, taking care only with the tongues and the humps. Meat had been left recklessly at nearly ever one of the many campsites the travelers had left. They were now wishing they

had taken the time to jerk more meat.

Autumn was leaving, giving way to winter on the night at or near Boley on November 3.

*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.*

On the morning of November 4, the travelers left at an early hour. Today, champaign country, pleasant and open, is just what you see as you leave Boley on Highway 62.

*We set forward at an early hour the next morning, in a northeast course. . We entered upon a fine champaign country. 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.*

The variety and number of game in Okmulgee County, in all of Oklahoma in 1832, would impress the most passionate nature lover of today. For the travelers then, deer were beautiful and they were also dinner.

*A fine buck sprang up and dashed off at full speed; but a young ranger discharged a ball that broke the neck of the bounding deer, and sent him tumbling head over heels forward. Another buck and a doe, besides several turkeys, were killed before we came to a halt, so that the hungry mouths of the troop were once again supplied.*

The buck, the doe, and the turkeys would roast on sticks by many of the fourteen campfires that night.

All day on November 4, Irving and his fellow travelers marched. Way back in October and early in the Tour, they would often stop in the morning for a coffee break which meant making a fire, finding water, and boiling the coffee. Now they were in trouble and coffee breaks, even the coffee was a pleasure of the past. The hunger and weariness were bad enough for the people; they were terrible for the horses.

*All who had weak horses were paraded before Capt's Camp but without knowing the object of the summons – the adjutant then told them 'The owners of those horses must walk', and many were seen footing it all day.*

They found a camp site.

*About three o'clock we encamped in a grove after a forced march of twenty-five miles that had proved a hard trial for the horses. For a long time after the head of the line had encamped, the rest kept straggling in, two and three at a time; one of our pack-horses had given out about nine miles back. Many of the other horses looked so gaunt and feeble, that doubts were entertained of their being able to reach the fort.*

It really looked bleak there in Okmulgee County. Though they were getting closer to their homecoming, there were still many miles to Fort Gibson.

Today they had brought down plenty of game. Deer lay across their pack-horses and had been with them since morning. There was more than enough meat for dinner.

*The camp resounded with something of its former gayety. The rangers had supped well, and were renovated in spirits, anticipating a speedy arrival at the garrison.*

It then got worse during the night and the next morning was no better. In the night there was a heavy rain, and the morning dawned cloudy and dismal. . . . pack-horse was completely knocked up and had to be abandoned. Knocked up in 1832 meant exhausted and starved to the point that no more travel is possible.

*The wild mare had cast her foal and was not in a state to go forward. She and the pony, therefore, were left at this encampment, where there was water and good pasturage; and where there would e a change of their reviving, and being afterward sought out and brought to the garrison.*

## **Okmulgee County, November 5, 1832**

Washington Irving and his fellow travelers set out toward the Deep Fork on the morning of November 5 sadly diminished. Horses had been left to recover on their own since they turned back east toward Fort Gibson.

*We set off about eight o'clock and a day of weary and harassing travel; part of the time over rough hills, and part over rolling prairies." Highway 56 between Nuyaka and the Deep Fork looks just so today. In fact as far as this traveler is concerned, it is one of the loveliest sights Irving saw. He couldn't really enjoy it though because of hunger, weariness, and other circumstances. The travelers were cold, weary, and very hungry. The horses were worn out and dropping from hunger and sickness. . . . The rain had rendered the soil slippery and plashy, so as to afford unsteady foothold. Some of the rangers dismounted, their horses having no longer strength to bear them. We made a halt in the course of the morning, but the horses were too tired to graze. Several of them lay down, and there was some difficulty in getting them on their feet again. Our troop presented a forlorn appearance straggling slowly along, in a broken and scattered line, that extended over hill and dale, for three miles and upward, in groups of three and four, widely apart; some on horseback, some on foot, with a few laggards far in the rear.*

Irving and his friends, the rangers, and the guides who had started out so happily, who continued so happily that they crowed like cocks in the each morning for a long time were now at a very low point. At this time the excitement of the buffalo hunt, the charm of the Osage rappers, the strategy of ringing wild horses, the fear of the night of alarms, the enjoyment of the lazy days on the beautiful peninsula, the tension of the night of fire and water were forgotten. Now all they thought about was the question, "Would they reach Fort Gibson?" And of course finally they did and each of the four friends told us the story.

*. . . preparations were made for crossing the river, which had risen several feet during the night; and it was determined to fell trees for the purpose, to serve as bridges. The Captain and the Doctor, and one or two other leaders of the camp, versed in woodcraft, examined, with learned eye, the trees growing on the river bank, until they singled out a couple of the largest size, and most suitable inclination. The axe was then vigorously applied to their roots, in such a way as to insure their falling directly across the stream.*

On November 5, 1832, Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped on the western bank of the Deep Fork near Okmulgee. He was camping with a party of rangers, early cavalry, from Fort Gibson, and with three friends who had traveled with him since New York.

For a number of the days the men and horses had been in dire condition due to hunger, weariness, and cold. Tonight would be no better. After a day with little to recommend it, they camped.



*About four o'clock, we halted for the night in a spacious forest, beside a deep narrow river, called the Little North Fork, or Deep Creek. It was late before the main part of the troop straggled into the encampment, many of the horses having giving out. As the stream was too deep to be forded, we waited until the next day to devise means to cross it. That night was cold and unruly; the wind sounding hoarsely through the forest and whirling about the dry leaves. We made long fires of great trunks of trees, which diffused something of consolation if not cheerfulness around.*

One rainy night after another, the excellent rangers and guides got a fire to start. Commissioner Ellsworth described how these first were started in the rain

*Once I was wet "through & through. My excellent servants looked for an old dry tree – the outer bark was wet – but they cut into the tree, and found some light decayed wood, that was dry – with the help of dry roots which have been protected from the rains by the inclination of the tree a fire was slow(l)y got up." And they would slowly build the fires into huge undertakings illuminating huge areas of prairie or forest.*

### **Okmulgee County November 6, 1832**

The next morning there was general permission given to hunt until twelve o'clock when they would cross the river. Irving described the crossing of the Deep Fork.

*The rich woody bottom in which we were encamped abounded with wild turkeys, of which a considerable number were killed. The turkeys went with them to the camp that night of November 6. In the meantime, preparations were made for crossing the river, which had risen several feet during the night; and it was determined to fell trees for the purpose, to serve as bridges. The Captain and he Doctor, and one or two other leaders of the camp, versed in woodcraft, examined, with learned eye, the trees growing on the river bank, until they singled out a couple of the largest size, and most suitable inclination. The axe was then vigorously applied to their roots, in such a way as to insure their falling directly across the stream. As they did not reach to the opposite bank, it was necessary for some of the men to swim across and fell trees on the other side to meet them. They at length succeeded in making a precarious footway across the deep and rapid current, by which the baggage could be carried over; but it was necessary to grope our way, step by step, along the trunks and main branches of the trees, which for a part of the distance were completely submerged, so that we were to our waists in water."*

The estimable Latrobe also told the story of the crossing near Okmulgee.

*The North Fork, and the Deep Creek, which seems to identify itself with the Little North Fork of the Canadian. It was by far the most serious impediment in our course as its great depth and swiftness precluded all idea of fording. With a few hours' delay however, this obstacle was also overcome – a temporary bridge contrived by felling two tall gigantic trees on either side, in such a manner, that when they fell across the stream their top branches interlocked upon and below the surface; so that you might, with a little care, scramble along the trunk, and from the boughs of the one into the other.*

The precise and perfect Commissioner Ellsworth, not one to worry about spelling correctness, told the story of the crossing.

*The Captain had much difficulty making a bridge, as the trees he cut on either side would not fall as he wished them – Billet (Beatte, the guide) came to our camp, said the water was rising very fast and we had better cross on a log under water 3 ½ feet – we went to examine it – a part of the log was out of water at one end and 3 ½ feet under in the middle and at the other end – the stream ran 5 knots an hour*

*over it – I told Billet to stretch 2 lariats over the creek – by the help of these to guide my hands, I would attempt it – I pulled of my clothes except shirt and stockings – I entered the water, oh! How cold! I was forced to walk slow and circumspectly as my foundation was a teetering log 3 ½ feet under the water – a few inches misstep would inevitable throw me into the current.*

Still, they and the horses who could continue to travel made it over the raging, swollen Deep Fork safely.

*Most of the horses were then swam across, but some of them were too weak to brave the current, and evidently too much knocked up to bear further travel. Twelve men, therefore, were left at the encampment to guard these horses, until, by repose and good pasturage, they should be sufficiently recovered to complete their journey.”*

The travelers continued at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Everyone headed on in the direction of Fort Gibson. It had become serious. Hunger and weariness stalked everyone. More horses gave out. Latrobe and Ellsworth had to leave their horses behind. Many were sick in one way or another it seemed. Guides were sick.

*Tonish was quite unwell since his goading and swimming in the watter – and Billet was attacked with violent pains in his side – so much so that he requested the Doct to bleed him.” Rangers were sick. “The Doct compained of his eye sight at night and Capt Beans bled him very well.*

Irving wrote nothing about the November 6, 1832 encampment. After they all crossed the river, they again traveled.

*It was a little after one 'oclock when we again resumed our wear wayfaring. The residue of that day and the whole of the next were spent in toilsome travel. Once the Arkansas River was spied.*

*At one time, in crossing a hill, Beatte climbed a high tree, commanding a wide prospect. He came down with cheering tidings. He beheld a line of forest stretching across the country, which he knew to be the woody border of the Arkansas.” They were really nearing the end of what had become a slog.*

So they must have camped with little pleasure or enjoyment on November 6, 1832. Still they had to camp somewhere. Perhaps the campsite was on the very grounds of the old Muscogee Creek Capital. More likely the campsite was farther along toward the fort.

## **Okmulgee to Muskogee County November 7, 1832**

The next morning was no better. It would be better today; much, much better and the Tourists could happily look back on this month long Tour. When he went home to write *A Tour on the Prairies* from his notes, he wrote only about Oklahoma. Irving left Fort Gibson for the east within one day. He published his book in 1835. He was the friend of Presidents. He would soon become the Minister to Spain. He died after a happy retirement at his New York home Sunnyside. He was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. People still read his books in the 21st Century.

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.