

The Tour Continues

Payne County

October 19-22, 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



NatureWorks Tishomingo Canadas

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Dedicated to James W. Pielsticker

During the night, wild geese flew overhead and announced with their cries that both their flocks and cold weather were on their way from the boreal regions.

Payne County, October 19, 1832

On October 19, 1832, Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped in or near Yale. He was on the way west to hunt buffalo and was camping with a party of rangers, early cavalry, and with three friends. They had been on the trail since they left Fort Gibson on October 10. Irving was the superstar of his time. Henry Leavitt Ellsworth was in Oklahoma as a Commissioner to the Indians Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès was a Swiss Count. Charles Joseph Latrobe was Pourtalès' teacher and companion. Rangers were mostly young with a sprinkling of grizzled veterans. Guides hired by the four friends were frontier to the bone. All had followed Auguste Pierre Chouteau from Saint Louis to his post at the Three Forks.

Early in the morning on October 19 Irving traded his mount for a strong and active horse. It was tolerable, not yet the perfect mount. Trading or swopping was a great pastime for the young rangers who had now been on the trail since October 10. By the time the Tour was over horses, rifles, powder horn, and blankets traded owners over and over. Irving himself would trade until he got the horse of his dreams, one that would read books over his shoulder.

The party headed out late. The day started poorly.

... lowering and sultry, with low muttering of distant thunder.

The camp was subdued. The farmyard cackling and crowing the rangers loved to trade back and forth was not heard. The thunder growled and there was a short shower. It was gloomy weather and the travelers were just as gloomy.

As the travelers entered the Cross Timber forests in Payne County, they became more concerned about an encounter with the Pawnees.

Our march for a part of the day lay a little to the south of west, through straggling forests of the kind of low scrubbed trees already mentioned, called post-oaks and black-jacks.

While the Pawnees were dreaded, the Osages were always a pleasure. They were perfectly happy to tell stories, sing songs, and drink coffee – drink lots of coffee with Irving and the others. The travelers were perfectly happy to host them.

A day of wet began.

The soil in the oak barrens is loose, in rainy weather, the horse's hoof slips from side to side, and now and then sinks in a rotten, spongy turf, to the fetlock. At one time, we passed the bones and horns of a buffalo, and at another time a buffalo track. These signed of the vicinity of this grand game of the prairies, had a reviving effect on the spirits of our huntsmen; but it was of transient duration. We were overtaken by a violent thunder-gust. The rain came rattling upon us in torrents, and spattered up like stem along the ground; the whole landscape was suddenly wrapped in gloom that gave a vivid effect to the intense sheets of lightning, while the thunder seemed to burst over our very heads, and was reverberated by the groves and forests that checkered and skirted the prairie. Man and beast were so pelted, drenched, and confounded, that the line was of complete confusion; some of the horses were so frightened as to be almost unmanageable, and our scattered cavalcade looked like a tempest-tossed fleet, driven hither and thither, at the mercy of the wind and wave.

Travel was halted at half past two o'clock. Irving, his friends, the guides, and the rangers encamped in an open and lofty grove, with a prairie on one side and a stream on the other. Maybe it might have been Council Creek, maybe Salt Creek, maybe another. First the axes were used and then the fires were begun. As to how fires can be started in such weather – with no matches, the good and efficient Commissioner explained,

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[!]y got up.

The talents of the rangers and the guides soon had huge fires blazing. There were tents of skin and blankets, horses were brought close, and sentries watched at the edges of the camp.

Lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and the sky was full of fire and water. As the night thickened, the huge fires became more and more luminous; lighting up masses of the overhanging foliage, and leaving other parts of the grove in deep gloom. Every fire had its goblin group around it, while the tethered horses were dimly seen, like specters, among the thickets. The grove, thus fitfully lighted up by the ruddy glare of the fires, resembled a vast leafy dome, walled in by opaque darkness; but every now and then two or three quivering flashes of lightning in quick succession, would suddenly reveal a vast champaign country, where fields and forests, and running streams, would start, as it were, into existence for a few brief seconds, and, before the eye could ascertain them, vanish again into gloom.

The young Count loved his experiences in the west better than anyone else.

At long last we found a delightful campsite. After some time and effort, we succeeded in lighting a fire and we pitched our tent. Dry clothing followed by a good supper of fritters, moose, deer, and bear finally restored our good humor. The crackling fires threw shadows and light over groups of Rangers who were

drying themselves near the brilliant flames. During the night, wild geese flew overhead and announced with their cries that both their flocks and cold weather were on their way from the boreal regions.

There were no moose in Oklahoma, but Pourtalès always saw and ate moose.

So as Irving slept that night, things seemed pretty grim to everyone except Pourtalès. The horses were losing flesh and strength and were increasingly way-worn. There was though still plenty of game. There was still coffee, sugar, flour, and salt. So all was tolerable that day.

Payne County, October 20, 1832

. . . 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. Our horses, scattered about, and grazing under them, gave to the whole the air of a noble park.



On October 20, 1832, Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped just east of Stillwater on his way to the buffalo prairies. 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. The three included an excitable, teenaged Swiss nobleman named Pourtalès, a brilliant scholar named Latrobe, and a nearly perfect Commissioner to the Indians named Ellsworth. Early morning on the 20th of October, the rangers had to scour the surrounding country for horses lost over night. The horse that galloped so noisily the night before was found quietly grazing near a brook. All were found and would now be watched over very carefully. They were headed to see the buffalo, the country of the Pawnee. They guarded against these fierce Indians.

The pack-horses were placed in the centre of the line . . . guard in the rear.

Of course in 1832 there was no Stillwater or Yale, but as Irving traveled on October 20, he saw much you can still see today.

One of the characteristic scenes of the Far West broke upon us. An immense extent of grassy, undulating, or, as it is termed, rolling country, with here and there a clump of trees, dimly seen in the distance like a ship at sea; the landscape deriving sublimely from its vastness and simplicity.

After a day and night of shivering in the dripping water, Irving's morning on the way to Stillwater was lovely. In fact everything was agreeable on October 20 all those years ago.

A glorious sunrise transformed the whole landscape, as if by magic.

In fact the only question was whether Payne County was as Irving suggested a noble park or as Commissioner Ellsworth would prefer like heaven.

The prairies are smooth – the streams frequent . . . so as to present a vigorous growth of stately trees on every side. The autumnal blossoms mixed with the prairie grass never fail to attract the eye with delight, or refresh the lungs by their sweet odours . . . Doct O Dwyer says, 'Eden was here, and not on the Euphrates – Adams paradise was in these prairies.

Nearly to Stillwater, Irving saw a castle, a landmark still here today.

On the summit of a hill was a singular crest of broken rocks, resembling a ruined fortress. It reminded me of the ruin of some Moorish castle, crowning a height in the midst of a lonely Spanish landscape. To this hill we gave the name Cliff Castle.

It would though acquire the name Ellsworth gave it, Irving's Castle. In 1978, the castle was named a National Historic Place. This is the entry from the National Park Service: Irving's Castle (added 1978 - Site - #78002257), also known as Washington Irving Point of Interest 2.5 mi. (4 km) S of Ingalls, Ingalls.

The day continued beautifully even though it was autumn, the time of Indian fires.

The weather was verging into that serene but somewhat arid season called the Indian Summer. There was a smoky haze in the atmosphere that tempered the brightness of the sunshine into a golden tint, softening the features of the landscape, and giving a vagueness to the outlines of distant objects. This haziness was daily increasing, and was attributed to the burning of distant prairies by the Indian hunting parties.

They followed deeply-worn footpaths across the county said to be made by buffaloes. They saw the tracks of horses that seemed to be from a hunting party of Pawnees.

In traversing these perilous wastes, every foot-print and dint of hoof becomes matter of cautious inspection and shrewd surmise; and the question continually is, whether it be the trace of friend or foe, whether of recent or ancient date, and whether the being that made it be out of reach, or liable to be encountered.

Game was everywhere in this noble park; in this Eden.

A pack of seven black wolves and one white one were in full chase of a buck, when they had nearly tired down. They were leaping on his haunches when he plunged down a ravine.

This time it was wolves that got the deer, often rangers were the hunters and deer was for dinner.

Irving continued to love Payne County.

We now came once more in sight of the Red Fork (Cimarron), winding its turbid course between well-wooded hills, and through a vast and magnificent landscape. The prairies bordering on the rivers are always varied in this way with woodland, so beautifully interspersed as to appear to have been laid out by the hand of taste; and they only want here and there a village spire, the battlements of a castle, or the turrets of an old family mansion rising from among the trees, to rival the most ornamented scenery of Europe.

It was near Stillwater that the Tourists began to see traces of what they came west to see.

Our ride was made more cheering by the fresh signs of Buffalo. Tracks and recent dung (resembling entirely that of our oxen & cows) assured us we should soon meet these terrific animals.

On the afternoon of October 20, they passed a deserted Pawnee camp. They camped near a beautiful crystal clear spring. The beautiful water was awful.

At a few steps from our camp there was a very pretty little spring in the rock, which formed a natural staircase down to the little pond. Although the water was not sufficient for our needs and it upset everyone's stomach, the camp took its name from it and was called Fountain Camp.

The Washington Irving Trail Museum is at 3918 South Mehan Road just south of Stillwater. The museum was created and by Dale and Carla Chlouber and now is curated by Dale. It offers Oklahoma History that is Off the Beaten Path and Out of the Ordinary.

Payne County, October 21, 1832

As they traveled west the next morning the relationships of the four tourists continued. Irving was kind and courteous to everyone, in particular he thought highly of the Count's companion Henry Joseph Latrobe. Commissioner Ellsworth approved of Irving and Latrobe, but disapproved of Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalès. Latrobe enjoyed collecting his plants and his bugs and was tolerant of just about everybody. Pourtalès thought Irving was great, depended on Latrobe, and thought Commissioner Henry Leavitt Ellsworth was out of touch with reality.

Nearly every night on the trail, the rangers who protected and led, the guides who cooked and hunted and saw to the horses, and the tourists who watched and recorded, spent time trading or in frontier language, swopping. Irving replaced his injured horse that way.

The most decided appetite of barter, or as it was termed swopping, had descended. Horses, saddles, rifles, clothes of every kind changed masters, and you could never be certain of an individual till you saw his face. There was a notable green blanket-coat which as borne forth from the garrison on the back of a man named Guess, whom I had hired as orderly, to take charge of my spare horse, and which, before we reached the Fort on our return, had clothed the shoulders of half the Rangers in succession.

The travelers left their camp beside the beautiful putrid spring of the night of October 20 and headed west the next morning.

. . . the camp was in a bustle at an early hour: the expectation of falling with buffalo in the course of the day roused everyone's spirits. Tonish though was dreaming of wild horses and at least his wish came true.

The march that day became difficult and the soil red.

We were checked by a deep stream, running along the bottom of a thickly- wooded ravine. Hurried over the bank by those behind me, I was interrupted by a grape-vine, as thick as a cable, which hung in a festoon as low as the saddle- bow, and, dragging me from the saddle, threw me among the feet of the trampling horses. Fortunately, I escaped without injury, regained my steed, crossed the stream without further difficulty, and was enabled to join in the merriment occasioned by the ludicrous disasters of the fording.

Irving worried each time they entered one of Oklahoma's thickets, yet they never met any hostile Indians.

A party of savages well placed among the tickets might have made sad havoc among our men, while entangled in the ravine.

A grand prairie can be seen where OK 177 meets OK 33.

We now came out upon a vast and glorious prairie, spreading out beneath the golden beams of an autumnal sun. The deep and frequent traces of buffalo, showed it to be one of their favorite grazing grounds; yet none were to be seen.

It would be three days before they saw their first buffalo, but today they would see a wild horse. Excitement grew as they saw more and more signs of wild horses. Everyone wanted one or more than one.

Tracks of wild horses were frequent, and from their pyramids of manure, we expected soon to fall in with them also – The capture of wild horses was uppermost in our minds – I have mentioned the pyramids of manure – this needs explanation – the horses have a custom of depositing manure, one after another, in the same heap, so as to leave the pile often 2 or 3 feet high.

Traveling west toward the creek where they would camp, it was lovely. It still is.

The prairies bordering on the rivers are always varied with woodland, so beautifully interspersed as to appear to have been laid out by the hand of taste; and they only want here and there a village spire, the battlements of a castle, or the turrets of an old family mansion rising from among the trees to rival.

As afternoon approached, Irving saw an actual wild horse.

. . . emerging out of a small valley, on a brisk trot. He stopped short, gazed at us for an instant with surprise, then tossing up his head, trotted off in fine style, glancing first over one shoulder, then over the other, his ample mane and tail streaming in the wind. He paused in the open field beyond, glanced back at us again, with a beautiful bend of the neck, snuffed the air, then tossing his head again, broke into a gallop, and took refuge in a wood. It was the first time I had ever seen a horse scouring his native wilderness in all the pride and freedom of his nature. How different from the poor, mutilated, harnessed, checked reined-up victim of luxury, caprice, and avarice in our cities.

The campsite on October 21, 1832 was on or near Wild Horse Creek, a place that has kept the name of the event so long ago.

After travelling about fifteen miles, we encamped about one o'clock, that our hunters might have time to procure a supply of provisions. Our encampment was in a spacious grove of lofty oaks and walnuts, free from underwood, on the border of a brook.



The metal horse has been stolen from Wild Horse Camp.

Wild Horse Creek still flows. The plaque has been saved by the Washington Irving Trail and Museum.

Beatte had brought in a wild horse.

The whole camp crowded to see a colt about two years old, well grown, finely limbed, with bright prominent eyes, and a spirited yet gentle demeanor. For the remainder of the evening, the camp remained in a high state of excitement; nothing was talked of but the capture of wild horses.



The camp remained in a high state of excitement; nothing was talked of but the capture of wild horses. The next morning the wild horse was gentle and tractable. He looked for protection from the very horse and rider who had captured him.

Yet when Beatte strapped a light pack on the colt's back, his gentleness was gone. The native pride and independence of the animal took fire. He reared, and plunged, and kicked, and tried in every way to get rid of the degrading burden. The poor animal driven to despair, threw himself prostrate on the ground and lay motionless, as if acknowledging himself vanquished. A stage hero, representing the despair of a captive prince, could not have played his part more dramatically. There was absolutely a moral grandeur in it . . . Still he was forced to take a pack. . . One day, a prince of the prairies—the next day, a pack-horse.

Payne County, October 22, 1832

The next morning the travelers left the Wild Horse Camp and headed toward the Cimarron River.

We left the camp of the wild horse about a quarter before eight, and arrived on the banks of the Red Fork, Cimarron, about seventy-five miles above its mouth.

They crossed the river and that night they slept on low ground. Alarms sounded all night. Later they slept under mystic mistletoe. Three miserable nights they slept in mud in the rain. On one glorious day they hunted buffalo. On another, Creek Indians helped them across the Arkansas. Then they were home.

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.