

The Tour Continues

Pottawatomie County

November 1- 3, 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

Pottawatomie County, November 1, 1832

Cross Timbers begin again—Ouch!

Washington Irving of Sleepy Hollow camped near the North Canadian River south of Shawnee, east of Tecumseh, north of Seminole. His fellow travelers included singularly romantic Albert-Alexandre Pourtalès, Comte de Pourtalès; scholarly gentleman Charles Joseph Latrobe; and rectitudinous Henry Leavitt Ellsworth. They were happy traveling companions, yet their individual personalities caused some strain. 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 friends and headed across the Grand River and then the Verdigris. It was a long, long tour west and now they were headed back east. Guides traveled with them to help with all the tasks. There was Tonish.



. . . the squire, the groom, the cook, the tent man, in a word the factotum, and a notorious braggart and a liar of the first water.

There was Beatte who caused the friends knew his worth.

. . . he would be true to you in a strait, and stand by you either in a bear-fight or and Indian skirmish; and that was not to be undervalued.

Antoine hardly lives up to the work of Tonish or the character of Beatte.

. . . an incredibly handsome and lazy young man who . . . For an hour together would stand at the camp-fire and gaze upon nothing with a fixed glance, in which there was neither life nor speculation.

When the Tourists headed out on November 1 they were leaving the prairies where they had a grand buffalo hunt. They were led and protected by rangers. Rangers were mounted soldiers, both young and grizzled who were expected to bring their own clothing, gun, and horse to the job. They thought they had left the Cross Timbers behind. The many days on the immense grasslands had helped them forget those vile forests.

. . . the vexations of flesh and spirit traveling through the Cross Timbers. It was like struggling through forests of cast iron.

The day started well. Irving and his fellow Tourists were optimistic that they were nearing their return to the Three Forks and Fort Gibson.

We had a beautiful daybreak. The camp again resounded with cheerful voices; everyone was animated with the thoughts of soon being at the fort, and revelling on bread and vegetables. Even Beatte seemed inspired on this occasion; and as he drove up the horses for the march, I heard him singing. All this transient gayety soon died away amidst the fatigues of our march, which lay through the same kind of rough, hilly, thicketed country as that of yesterday. . . . We ascended among broken hills and rugged, ragged forests, equally harassing to horse and rider.

The Little River was flooded.

. . . it was deep and miry, with abrupt crumbling banks. We wandered for some time among the links made by this winding stream, in what appeared to us as a trackless labyrinth of swamps, thickets, and standing pools. Sometimes our jaded horses dragged their limbs forward with the utmost difficulty, having to toil for a great distance, with the water up to the stirrups, and beset at the bottom with roots and creeping plants. At length we succeeded in finding a fording place, where we all crossed Little River, with the water and mire to the saddle- girths, and then halted for an hour and a half, to overhaul the wet baggage, and give the horses time to rest.

The travelers passed a meadow. It offered something wonderful.

. . . pleasant little meadow, surrounded by groves of elms and cotton-wood trees, in the midst of which was a fine black horse. The noble course of the prairie gazed for a time, snuffed the air, neighed, pricked up his ears. It was admirable to the lofty and airy carriage of his head; the freedom of every movement; the elasticity with which he trod the meadow.'

The rangers were tired of hunting after twenty-one days on the trail. They were tired of meat, meat, meat, especially now that the flour was running out. They were also tired of traveling and riding for miles and hours every day.

We ascended among broken hills and rugged, ragged forests, equally harassing to horse and rider. The ravines were of red clay, and often so steep that, in descending, the horses would put their feet together and fairly slide down, and then scramble up the opposite side like cats. Here and there among the thickets in the valleys, we met with sloes and persimmon, and the eagerness with which our men broke from the line of march, and ran to gather these poor fruits, showed how much they craved some vegetable condiment, after living so long exclusively on animal food.

Then the day of travel was over and they found an acceptable place to camp.

About half past three we encamped near a brook in a meadow where there was some scanty herbage for our half-famished hoses. As Beatte had killed a fat doe in the course of the day, and one of our company a fine turkey, we did not lack for provisions.

They ate and then it was evening. To Irving it seemed one of the best times on the trail. It was maybe even the very best.

It was a splendid autumnal evening. The horizon, after sunset, was of a clear apple green, rising into a delicate lake which gradually lost itself in a deep purple blue. One narrow streak of cloud, of a mahogany color, edged with amber and gold, floated in the west, and just beneath it was the evening star, shining with

the pure brilliancy of a diamond. In unison with this scene, there was an evening concert of insects of various kinds, all blended and harmonized. The night that succeeded was calm and beautiful. There was a faint light from the moon, now in its second quarter, and after it had set, a fine starlight, with shooting meteors. The wearied rangers, after a little murmuring conversation round their fires, sank to rest at an early hour, and I seemed to have the whole scene to myself. It is delightful to lie awake and gaze at the stars. One realizes, in such lonely scenes, that companionship with these beautiful luminaries which made astronomers of the eastern shepherds, as they watched their flocks by night. I felt this night unusually affected by the solemn magnificence of the firmament; and seemed, as I lay thus under the open vault of heaven, to inhale with the pure untainted air, an exhilarating buoyancy of spirit, and, as it were, an ecstasy of mind. I slept and waked alternately.

Pottawatomie County, November 2, 1832

Early in the morning on November 2, 1832 Irving visited with Old Sawyer, the oldest man in the troop and a favorite ranger.

. . . a comical old fellow, one of those strange mixtures of simplicity and shrewdness that you sometimes meet with. He was used as a 'cat's-paw' by the men, whenever they wished to pry into the plans and designs of the officers.

He had promised that the hoot of the owl would welcome daylight just as the crow of the rooster did. The owl hooted and he saw a faint streak of light in the east. And then they began the twenty-third day of their western tour.

Toward morning, one of the sentinels, the oldest man in the troop, came and took a seat near me; he was weary and sleepy, and impatient to be relieved. I found he had been gazing at the heavens also, but with different feelings. 'If the stars don't deceive me,' said he, 'it is near daybreak.'

And then it was daybreak and the sentinel was relieved by another ranger before the party started again toward the east. They could not know that they were six days from a marvelous feast of beef and turnips; seven days from Fort Gibson. It had been a wonderful tour with many sparkling days and star filled nights. Now nearing the second crossing of the North Canadian there were signs that things were getting dire. Even earlier there were problems. They had discussed this before the grand buffalo hunt when they decided to cut the tour short and turn away from the west.

The season was so far advanced that the grass was withered, and the prairies yielded no pasturage. The Indian fires on the prairies were approaching us from north, and south, and west; they might spread also from the east, and leave a scorched desert between us and the frontier, in which our horses might be famished . . . The army were all tired and looked much depressed, for they were generally out of provisions. We have entered a range where the prairies had just been burnt to make the hunting more easy – so both game & forage was scarce.

The fires had many positive effects, but for the travelers, they were terrible.

We saw that fires were burning all around us, and that the large prairies in the front were all black – Food is not only enter rely cut off, where the conflagration rages, but the stubble left is very painful, for the horses feet – not only thatch, but small bushes, are burnt even with the ground; and as soon as the horse presses his weight upon them, they too frequently into the fray and make him lame.

Each day the horses get thinner. They are traveling fast and there is little time to let the horses graze sufficiently.

They were traveling long distances each day; once twenty-eight miles was mentioned. The flour, salt, and sugar are nearly gone. Still when the rangers can get up the energy, game is still possible to be had. Irving and his friends will make the same number of miles they made on the way in fourteen days less. When Latrobe reports on the entire trip to the east, he gives it short shift.

I shall compress the history of the following eight days' uninterrupted march to the N. N. E. The greater part of the first four were employed in breaking a painful pathway with many a tear, scratch, and grumble through the Cross Timbers. We had to cross the Grand Bayou, though much lower down than before.

All the tourists used various names for the Oklahoma rivers. Here Latrobe is talking about the North Canadian which they had crossed at a big bend which went far to the north.

Irving was really mixed up about the river. It was not the Arkansas, but the Canadian.

The country through which we passed this morning was less rugged, and of more agreeable aspect than that we had lately traversed. At eleven o'clock, we came out upon an extensive prairie, and about six miles to our left beheld a long line of green forest, marking the course of the north fork of the Arkansas. On the edge of the prairie, and in a spacious grove of noble trees which overshadowed a small brook, were the traces of an old Creek hunting camp. On the bark of the trees were rude delineations of hunters and squaws, scrawled with charcoal; together with various signs and hieroglyphics, which our guides interpreted as indicating that from this encampment the hunters had returned home.

The Commissioner Ellsworth with his straight back and virtue gave a graphic and appalled view of the signs and hieroglyphics on the trees at the noon camp. Creek Indians are more accurately Muscogee.

Here was a recent Creek encampment – a plenty of grapes & persimmons; also Hawes – The Creek Indians have a very indecent manner of making pictures on the trees. The wood is first cut off, and with paints they represent the warrior in such attitudes of amorous feeling in going or returning as may be indicative of their true sensations, but very abhorrent to every principle of modesty or virtue—I forbear giving details.

The spot though was beautiful. Even Ellsworth admitted that was true. Billett is Ellsworth's special way of spelling Beatte.

In this beautiful camping ground we made our mid-day halt.

All who arrived early rested and greeted members of the party who had stayed behind to search for lost horses. They tended to the horses they had with them.

While we stopped at noon my horse appeared unwell and lay down with me upon his back, to the no small amusement of the Rangers, who thought my horse was going to play camel. Tomorrow I will hire Billetts racer and let mine follow without any load.

All continued on and on.

We resumed our march about one o'clock, keeping easterly, and approaching the north fork obliquely; it was late before we found a good camping-place; the beds of the streams were dry, the prairies too, had been burnt in various places, by Indian hunting parties. At length we found water in a small alluvial bottom, where there was tolerable pasturage.

November 3, 1832

The next morning was threatening.

There were flashes of lightning in the east, with low, rumbling thunder, and clouds began to gather about the horizon.

Irving described the crossing of the North Canadian. There was an excellent ford so there was none of the drama of the earlier crossings of Oklahoma's Rivers.

About half past nine o'clock, we forded the north fork of the Canadian.

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.