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Cates Remembered as Early Pioneer

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HISTORY

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CLARK COUNTY CHRONICLE

Cates remembered as early pioneer

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

Few people were privileged to witness the spread of settlement into the virtually untouched wilderness of Arkansas following the arrival of European explorers. Even by the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, only two places in what is now Arkansas could truly be called settlements, and both were near the Mississippi River.

The story of pioneer hunter Isaac Cates offers a glimpse into life at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the virtually untouched wilderness of the upper Ouachita River valley. Cates epitomized nineteenth-century adventurers seeking a life of freedom and opportunity in a new frontier. He found that frontier in the upper Ouachita River valley.

Many people traveled the Southwest Trail (also known as Military Road) on their way to establish farms along the river valleys of central and southwest Arkansas. In the first years of the nineteenth century, the sparsely-settled area remained largely wilderness.

In 1804, American Army officer James Wilkinson reported the presence of thousands of buffalo, elk, deer, and other large game in the region, along with a few French hunters. Explorers William Dunbar and George Hunter, who traveled up the Ouachita River that same year, made many mentions of hunters in their reports.

One note described hunters' use of a creek along the upper Ouachita: "This is a creek of considerable length and tolerably good navigation for small boats, the hunters ascend it to an extent of a hundred of their leagues in pursuing their game. They all agree that none of the springs which feed this creek are salt; it has obtained its name from many buffalo salt licks which have been discovered near to the creek." Deer skins, furs, and bear fat remained important commodities.

Isaac Cates, best known as a hunter, was among the upper Ouachita River valley's earliest pioneers, and traveled to Arkansas from Tennessee in a small party of adventurers. Others in the group included men named Hignight,

Blaylock, Kellogg, Kelsey, Ferrell, Stanley, and Perciful. The son of adventurer Abner Hignight later told of the men's arrival in the area: "They camped on what is known as Watermelon Island on the Ouachita River, above Arkadelphia, where they lived for some time without bread, subsisting solely on wild meat of which the forest abounded."

Isaac Cates likely considered the Arkansas area to be a virtual paradise, rich with wild game. After his arrival, he hunted and moved around a lot. When the New Madrid Earthquakes occurred in 1811 and 1812, Arkansas suffered severe physical damage. With such a sparse population though, there was relatively little loss of life and few residents recorded what happened.

However, Cates' story is one that survived: "In December of 1811, with two companions, he left his home on the Little Missouri for a buffalo hunt in the hot springs area where they expected to remain until they had killed enough meat for the season. Their camp was twelve miles south of the springs. Finding signs of buffalo in the area, they

planned to hunt the next day.

After supper they lay down on the ground to sleep, but he awoke about 9:00 o'clock to a severe shock and felt himself moving back and forth on the ground. He arose and, finding it impossible to walk, threw himself on the roots of a tree."

After that memorable buffalo hunt, Cates moved from his place on the Little Missouri River to the Hot Springs area in 1812. Moving around even more, he later tried to establish a settlement further south, this time on the Little (West) Tulip Creek in what would later become the Manchester community of Clark County.

According to long-time Clark County resident and sheriff, Dr. Willis S. Smith, the area must have been very attractive to hunters such as Isaac Cates: "The whole country abounded in wild game of all kinds. The hunter had nothing to do but slay and such as suited his taste, only to keep a sharp lookout for the panther." But, it seems the backwoods nature of the place resulted in Cates not being able to entice others to live near him there. After Cates' failed

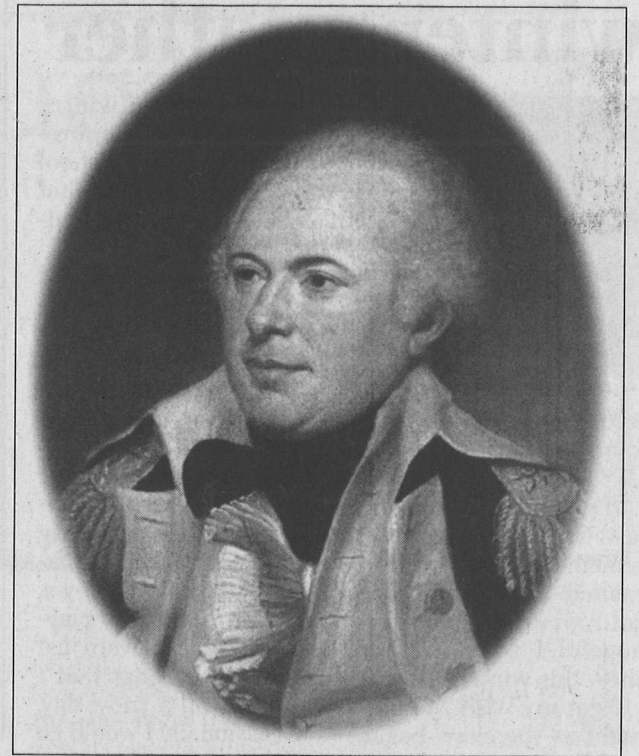


IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
James Wilkinson noted an abundance of game in the upper Ouachita River valley soon after the Louisiana Purchase.

attempt at a settlement at Manchester, wilderness conditions persisted in the area for almost two decades, even after the establishment of Arkansas Territory and its five counties (including Clark) in 1819 began to attract people into the surrounding countryside.

For additional informa-

tion about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum www.clark-countyhistory.org or (870) 230-1360 or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library www.obu.edu/archives or (870) 245-5332.