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Smith's accounts give look into Clark County's early history

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CLARK COUNTY CHRONICLES

Smith's accounts give look into Clark County's early history

By Wendy Richter
For the Times

One of Clark County's pioneer citizens was Willis S. Smith — a sheriff, teacher, doctor, farmer, and writer. Arriving in the county in 1833, Smith witnessed the area's transformation from frontier wilderness to a typical, rural Arkansas region.

And, significantly for us today, his accounts of those early days offer glimpses into the past not available elsewhere. We owe much of our knowledge about Clark County's beginnings to Smith.

Willis S. Smith was born in Kentucky in 1810. In about 1830 he traveled

See CCC, Page 5

COURTESY OF THE CLARK
COUNTY HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

Willis Smith wrote several accounts of the early history of Clark County. On the back, a handwritten caption reads, "Though his beard and mustache turned white with age, his hair remained black, producing an unnatural effect."



CCC

Continued from Page 1

to Illinois to attend Rock Springs Theological Seminary while also farming and teaching. While at the Seminary, one of his students told him about a place called Okolona, in Arkansas Territory. So in 1833, he and his brother headed to Clark County, Arkansas, on horseback. There, he continued teaching school, but quickly transitioned into other activities in the newly-settled area.

Smith was elected to the office of Clark County Sheriff/Assessor/Collector in 1836 and held the post until 1844. Some of his writings recount tales from that period, when he journeyed into the

wilderness to assess property and collect taxes and tracked criminals across the countryside. He also began to study medicine, and in 1845 began practicing in the Okolona area. He practiced in Whelen Springs and briefly at Mount Ida before going to medical school in Memphis in the late 1850s.

During the Civil War, Willis Smith opposed secession and remained loyal to the Union. After the war was over, he lived on his farm in southern Clark County, practiced medicine, and then began writing his memoirs in 1883. Those recollections have been preserved in the form of newspaper articles that appeared in the *Gurdon Advocate*, a newspaper which existed for a brief time in Gurdon, Arkansas.

Dr. Smith also wrote articles for *Arkadelphia's Southern Standard*.

Some of Smith's recollections detail his encounters with wild animals, and also tell of Clark County's natural beauty. It is easy to get a sense of his appreciation for his surroundings: "Could we who are here now just have a bird's eye view of the scenery that presented itself to DeSoto, it would be a beautiful country inhabited by the red man, deer, bear, wolf, wild cats, panthers, and roving buffalo, together with the beautiful wild turkey, now so often hunted by the sportsman for their delicious meat; and fair looking faces of the country; beautiful forests open and free from undergrowth. A person could see as far as

the tall pines and oaks would let him. The ever green grass on the level uplands, the tall cane brakes in the bottoms of creeks and rivers, seemed to be inexhaustible."

Today, Smith's writings are preserved in scrapbook form at the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at OBU's Riley-Hickingbotham Library. Certainly, the reminiscences present colorful, eyewitness accounts of Clark County's earliest days. Here's how he summarized his time in the area: "The year 1833 was the first vote I ever cast in Clark County, and have shared the trials and hardships incidental to all new countries, from a beardless boy, now nearing 73, but I feel no way like getting tired."

Willis S. Smith died in 1891, and was buried on his old farm near Highway 53.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical

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

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