

Rebecca Barkman has fascinating story

By Wendy Richter

For the Sitings

Jacob and Rebecca Barkman were among Clark County's earliest residents, arriving about 1811 and constructing a cabin near the Caddo River on land acquired from the Indians. Jacob Barkman is quite well-known in the annals of Clark County history, and many have even called him the "Father of Clark County." However, his wife's life story is equally fascinating.

Some of the earliest descriptions of Arkansas's pioneer settlers came from travelers. One visitor whose work was widely read was geologist George William Featherstonhaugh (pronounced fan-shaw), who came to Arkansas and Clark County in the 1830s. His book about the trip, "Excursion Through the Slave States," was published in 1844. As Featherstonhaugh traveled down the Military Road, he made his way to the home of Jacob and Rebecca Barkman.

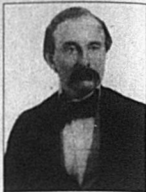
Rebecca was the daughter of legendary bear hunter, Zachariah Davis. Davis built a reputation hunting, later became a trader, and became quite

successful. He was said to have raised his children in frontier conditions, "without any other schoolmaster than the rifle." Featherstonhaugh met one of Mrs. Barkman's brothers and described him this way: "A genuine hunter, dressed in leather prepared by himself from the skins of animals he had killed, as he was going with his rifle on his shoulder, and his dogs, some twenty miles off to hunt bears."

And, it appeared that Rebecca Davis Barkman continued to live in a manner consistent with a primitive environment, even though the Barkmans were among the wealthiest people in Arkansas at the time. According to Featherstonhaugh, Mrs. Barkman "chewed tobacco, she smoked a pipe, she drank whiskey, and cursed and swore as heartily as any backwoodsman, all at the same time . . . with as much ease as if she had been an automaton set to do it with clockwork machinery. She must have been a person of surprising powers in her youth, for I was informed that she was now comparatively refined to what she had been be-

fore her marriage." However, Featherstonhaugh found her hospitality to be top-notch: "Mrs. Barkman, notwithstanding her habits, was not deficient in good nature to us: they had killed a young steer the day before our arrival, and a dish of fat boiled ribs was set before us, with good bread, of which we made an excellent meal."

Hiram Whittington, who came to Arkansas in 1826 and lived in Little Rock before moving to Hot Springs in 1832, also knew Rebecca Barkman. He mentioned Mrs. Barkman in a letter to his family in Massachusetts and echoed Featherstonhaugh's comments: "She is a woman about fifty, weighing along in the latitude of 200. She is ill-bred, or rather not bred at all, smokes a dirty pipe, talks all manner of nonsense, and never had a bonnet on her head in her life." He noted that when she traveled to Little Rock, she wore a "handkerchief tied round her head, and a bearskin shawl over her shoulders." Another source states that on one occasion when Jacob Barkman was embroiled in an argument with a fellow businessman, Rebecca



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Jacob Barkman is known as the "Father of Clark County" and was the husband of Rebecca Barkman. No known image of Rebecca Barkman is known to exist.

stepped in and said, "Stand back and let me whip the rascal."

The legendary Rebecca Davis Barkman died in 1837. After her death, Jacob married again and lived until 1852.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum at the train depot (www.clarkcounty-history.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).