

SHE WANTS TO STOP, GET OUT, THROW ROCKS AT 'ROARING RIVER' SIGN

By CALLIE MELTON
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Rivers and creeks played a very important role in the lives of the pioneers in the Upper Cumberland as well as other parts of what is now Tennessee.

If the river was large enough, it was a way in and out of the area. Even the smaller creeks could be dammed up and furnish the power for grist mills and carding mills as well as furnish fish and turtles for food when game was scarce.

Having grown up on Roaring River in Overton County and hearing all my life of Wolf River and its importance to the people along its length, I deeply appreciate the stories of the rivers.

As interesting as the history of Roaring River is, the history of its headwaters is even more so, to me at least. To get off on the right foot, let's make sure that we know what the headwaters of a river is. So, in my school teacher-ish way, I'll explain. The headwaters of a river is the streams that join or converge to make the river.

The headwaters of Roaring River is made up of two creeks, which we speak of as the right prong and the left prong.

The left prong was first called Town Creek because it rose in what is now the town of Livingston from a number of springs in the area. It left town by the way of the Bohannon Springs, meandered down by Aunt Beadie Dale's place, or down by Uncle Tom Carr's, then by Billy Crawfords before it joined the right prong.

When Col. Stephen Copeland came into the Wilderness to what is now Overton County around 1799, he settled about two and one-half miles above the head of the river on this left prong. He settled on the wrong side of the Cherokee Line, but he made friends with Chief Nettle Carrier and no harm came of it.

After many years, people started calling this little creek 'Carr Creek' instead of Town Creek because Uncle Tom Carr had lived on its banks for so many years.

Now, the right prong rose from two big springs in the Oak Hill area. From there, it meanders down past Okalona, down through Sulphur where it picks up Sulphur Branch, on down past what we now call the Walter Qualls place, then a little farther down it joins Town Creek. Where the two creeks converge is the head of Roaring River, the exact spot where Roaring River begins.

Now, the right prong has colorful history. Around the year 1769, a group of hunters -- who were later called the 'Long Hunters' because they were gone from home for so long,

two or more years -- left their homes in North Carolina and Virginia on a hunting trip to the Wilderness, the Wilderness being what is now Middle Tennessee.

They made their station camps in Kentucky, then split up into small parties for their hunting expeditions. One group wound up at a place now called Waterloo in Putnam County. This group discovered and named the Roaring River.

Another group, which included Robert Crockett, Davey's uncle, wound up at the place we now call Oak Hill. Here they made camp and hunted all up and down the creek that ran through the area.

Davey Crockett's brother

One day the men were out hunting when they encountered some Indians who were just passing through on their way to what is now East Tennessee. They just happened upon Robert Crockett who was hunting by himself. They killed Crockett and left his body where it fell.

When the other hunters got back to the camp at the end of the day, they could not find their friend. The next day they went out hunting for him again. They found his body near the creek where the Indians had left it. The men were frightened -- they did not know what Indians, how many, or if they were still in the area.

So they quickly buried Crockett somewhere near the creek, rushed back to camp, broke camp and took off toward Kentucky and the station camp.

When the Long Hunters finally got back to their home in North Carolina and Virginia, they not only told of the rich soil, plenty of water and abundant game, but they also told of how Robert Crockett was killed by Indians and how they had buried their friend on the banks of the creek on which he was killed. They named the creek that they had discovered 'Crockett's Creek' in memory of their friend.

James Matthews

Then, about 1800, James Matthews moved into the area and settled on Crockett's Creek, somewhere down from where it rose at the big springs. James raised a family, two sons in particular, John and Lawrence.

When Lawrence grew to manhood, he married Agnes Poston, daughter of Richard Poston and the granddaughter of Col. Copeland. Lawrence moved on down the creek a-ways and built a big log house and all the outbuildings. We now call Lawrence's old place the Walter Qualls place.

Lawrence and Agnes raised a big family. When their oldest son, William Jasper, grew to manhood, he married Polly Engles and moved on down the creek. He settled on the east side of the creek near what is now called 'Windle' there at the head of Roaring River.

Bill built a big log house and all the out-buildings, just as his father and his grandfather had done.

Bill and Polly had five daughters -- Aggie who married Billy Crawford, Rhonda who married George Howard, Pluma who married Fowler Johnson, Ellie who married George Talley and Matt who married Ben Crawford, Billy's brother.

Old Bill Matthews, so called because he had a nephew named William Jennings Matthews who was called Little Bill, died in 1909. But by this time the people in the area had forgotten the story of the Long Hunters and Robert Crockett. By 1858, they were calling Crockett's Creek instead of Matthews Creek because the Matthews family had lived along the creek for so long.

There are references to the story of the Long Hunters and the death of Robert Crockett in various old history books -- Haywood and Goodspeed are two of the historians. But you have to know what you are reading when you read these accounts.

I have in my possession today an old deed made to my grandfather, Luther Bigelow Myers, dated 1858. In one line, the deed reads: "... along Crockett's Creek which we now call Matthews Creek."

Some of Old Bill's great-great grandchildren own Old Bill's place, and Old Bill and Polly and many others of the Matthews family sleep in the family graveyard nearby where the old log house stood.

Matthews Creek

Those of us who care resent the fact that the State of Tennessee had the gall to put up a sign on Matthews Creek at the bridge over the creek on Highway 42 near Okalona that reads 'Roaring River.'

Asa Crawford, a grandson of Old Bill's, lived to be around 100, dying not too many years ago. He lamented the fact to his dying day that people didn't know where Roaring River was because of this misplaced sign.

I resent so strongly the fact that the state feels free to come in to the Upper Cumberland area -- Overton County, in particular -- and try to change history. I don't travel Highway 42 too often now, but when I do, I want to stop at the bridge, get out of the car and throw rocks at that Roaring River sign!

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