

David Crockett



CROCKETT, DAVID (1786-1836). David (Davy) Crockett, frontiersman, congressman, and defender of the Alamo, son of John and Rebecca (Hawkins) Crockett, was born in Greene County, East Tennessee, on August 17, 1786. In 1798, two years after the Crocketts opened a tavern on the road from Knoxville to Abingdon, Virginia, John Crockett hired his son out to Jacob Siler to help drive a herd of cattle to Rockbridge County, Virginia. Siler tried to detain David by force after the job was completed, but the boy escaped at night by walking seven miles in two hours through knee-deep snow. He eventually made his way home in late 1798 or early 1799. Soon afterward he started school, but preferred playing hooky and ran away to escape his father's punishment. This "strategic withdrawal," as Crockett called it, lasted 2½ years while he worked as a wagoner and day-laborer and at odd jobs to support himself. When he returned

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home in 1802 he had grown so much that his family did not recognize him at first. When they did, he found that all was forgiven. Crockett reciprocated their generosity by working for about a year to discharge his father's debts, which totaled seventy-six dollars, and subsequently returned to school for six months.

On October 21, 1805, Crockett took out a license to marry Margaret Elder of Dandridge, Tennessee, but was jilted by her, perhaps justly, since local legend intimated that he was a less than constant suitor. He recovered quickly from the experience, courted Mary (Polly) Finley, and married her on August 14, 1806, in Jefferson County; they remained in the mountains of East Tennessee for just over five years. Sometime after September 11, 1811, David, Polly, and their two sons, John Wesley and William, settled on the Mulberry Fork of Elk River in Lincoln County, Tennessee; they moved again in 1813, to the Rattlesnake Spring branch of Bean's Creek in Franklin County, Tennessee, near what is now the Alabama border. Crockett named his homestead Kentuck.

He began his military career in September of that year, when he enlisted in the militia as a scout under Major Gibson in Winchester, Tennessee, to avenge an Indian attack on Fort Mimms, Alabama. On November 3, under Andrew Jackson, Crockett participated in the retributive massacre of the Indian town of Tallussahatchee. He returned home when his ninety-day enlistment for the Creek Indian War expired on the day before Christmas, and reenlisted on September 28, 1814, as a third sergeant in Capt. John Cowan's company. He arrived on November 7, the day after Jackson

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took Pensacola, and spent his time trying to ferret out the British-trained Indians from the Florida swamps. After his discharge in 1815 as a fourth sergeant Crockett arrived home and found himself again a father. Polly died the summer after Margaret's birth, although she had been in good health when David returned.

On May 21, 1815, Crockett was elected a lieutenant in the Thirty-second Militia regiment of Franklin County. Before summer's end he married Elizabeth Patton, a widow with two children (George and Margaret Ann), and he explored Alabama in the fall with an eye towards settlement. He nearly died from malaria-was reported dead-and astonished his family with his "resurrection." By about September of the next year the Crocketts had moved to the territory soon to become Lawrence County, Tennessee, rather than Alabama. They settled at the head of Shoal Creek, and David continued his political and military career. He became a justice of the peace on November 17, 1817, a post he resigned in 1819. He became the town commissioner of Lawrenceburg before April 1, 1818, and was elected colonel of the Fifty-seventh Militia regiment in the county that same year.

New Year's Day 1821 marked a turning point in Crockett's career. He resigned as commissioner to run for a seat in the Tennessee legislature as the representative of Lawrence and Hickman counties. He won the August election and, from the beginning, took an active interest in public land policy regarding the West. After the session concluded he moved his family to what is now Gibson County in West Tennessee. He was reelected in 1823,

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defeating Dr. William E. Butler, but was in turn defeated in August 1825 in his first bid for a seat in Congress. In 1826, after returning to private business, Crockett nearly died when his boats carrying barrel staves were wrecked in the Mississippi River. When he was brought to Memphis he was encouraged to run again for Congress by Maj. M. B. Winchester and won election over Gen. William Arnold and Col. Adam Alexander to the United States House of Representatives in 1827. He was reelected to a second term in 1829 and split with President Andrew Jackson and the Tennessee delegation on several issues, including land reform and the Indian removal bill. In his 1831 campaign for a third term, Crockett openly and vehemently attacked Jackson's policies and was defeated in a close election by William Fitzgerald.

By this time Crockett's reputation as a sharpshooter, hunter, and yarn-spinner had brought him into national prominence. He was the model for Nimrod Wildfire, the hero of James Kirke Paulding's play *The Lion of the West*, which opened in New York City on April 25, 1831. *Life and Adventures of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee* was published in 1833 and reprinted the same year under the more accurate title of *Sketches and Eccentricities of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee*. Much of the same material spilled over into the first few issues of a series of comic almanacs published under Crockett's name from 1835 to 1856 that, as a whole, constituted a body of outrageous tall tales about the adventures of the legendary Davy rather than the historical David Crockett.

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Building in part upon his growing notoriety, Crockett defeated the incumbent Fitzgerald in 1833 to return to Congress. The following year he published his autobiography, written with the help of Thomas Chilton, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee*, the only work that he actually authored. It was intended to correct the portrayal given by Mathew St. Clair Clarke in *Sketches and Eccentricities* and to deny Crockett's authorship of that account, which did not bear Clarke's name. The Narrative was also a campaign biography of sorts, for Whig politicians were touting Crockett as an anti-Jackson candidate for the presidency in 1836. On April 25, 1834, he began a three-week triumphal tour of the eastern states, and his "campaign swing" was recorded in the first of two Whig books published the next year under his name, *An Account of Colonel Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East*. The second, a negative *Life of Martin Van Buren*, was issued less than three months later.

Crockett apparently thought himself a serious candidate, but he was likely only a convenient political tool to the Whigs, an independent frontiersman with a national reputation perhaps the equal of Jackson's who opposed Jackson on key political issues. The point became academic, however, when Crockett lost his 1835 congressional campaign to Adam Huntsman, a peg-legged lawyer supported by Jackson and by Governor Carroll of Tennessee, by 252 votes.

Disenchanted with the political process and his former constituents, Crockett decided to do what he had threatened to do-to

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explore Texas and to move his family there if the prospects were pleasing. On November 1, 1835, with William Patton, Abner Burgin, and Lindsey K. Tinkle, he set out to the West, as he wrote on the eve of his departure, "to explore the Texes well before I return." At this point he had no intention of joining the fight for Texas independence.

The foursome reached Memphis the first evening and, in company with some friends congregated in the bar of the Union Hotel for a farewell drinking party, Crockett offered his now famous remark: "Since you have chosen to elect a man with a timber toe to succeed me, you may all go to hell and I will go to Texas." They set off the next day. Their route was down the Mississippi River to the Arkansas and then up that river to Little Rock; overland to Fulton, Arkansas, and up the Red River along the northern boundary of Texas; across the Red River, through Clarksville, to Nacogdoches and San Augustine; and on to San Antonio.

At San Augustine the party evidently divided. Burgin and Tinkle went home; Crockett and Patton signed the oath of allegiance, but only after Crockett insisted upon the insertion of the word "republican" in the document. They thus swore their allegiance to the "Provisional Government of Texas or any future republican Government that may be hereafter declared." Crockett had balked at the possibility that he would be obliged to support some future government that might prove despotic.

That Texas had changed his plans was indisputable. His last extant letter, written on January 9, 1836, was quite clear:

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I must say as to what I have seen of Texas it is the garden spot of the world. The best land and the best prospects for health I ever saw, and I do believe it is a fortune to any man to come here. There is a world of country here to settle. . . . I have taken the oath of government and have enrolled my name as a volunteer and will set out for the Rio Grand in a few days with the volunteers from the United States. But all volunteers is entitled to vote for a member of the convention or to be voted for, and I have but little doubt of being elected a member to form a constitution for this province. I am rejoiced at my fate. I had rather be in my present situation than to be elected to a seat in Congress for life. I am in hopes of making a fortune yet for myself and family, bad as my prospect has been.

Government service in Texas would rejuvenate his political career and, as he stated elsewhere, provide the source of the affluence he had unsuccessfully sought all his life. He intended to become land agent for the new territory.

In early February Crockett arrived at San Antonio de Béxar; Antonio López de Santa Anna arrived on February 20. On the one hand Crockett was still fighting Jackson. The Americans in Texas were split into two political factions that divided roughly into those supporting a conservative Whig philosophy and those supporting the administration. Crockett chose to join Col. William B. Travis, who had deliberately disregarded Sam Houston's orders to withdraw from the Alamo, rather than support Houston, a Jackson sympathizer. What was more, he saw the future of an independent Texas as his future, and he loved a good fight.

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Crockett died in battle of the Alamo on March 6, 1836. The manner of his death was uncertain, however, until the publication in 1975 of the diary of Lt. José Enrique de la Peña. Susanna Dickinson, wife of Almaron Dickinson, an officer at the Alamo, said Crockett died on the outside, one of the earliest to fall. Joe Travis's slave and the only male Texan to survive the battle, reported seeing Crockett lying dead with slain Mexicans around him and stated that only one man, named Warner, surrendered to the Mexicans (Warner was taken to Santa Anna and promptly shot). When Peña's eyewitness account was placed together with other corroborating documents, Crockett's central part in the defense became clear. Travis had previously written that during the first bombardment Crockett was everywhere in the Alamo "animating the men to do their duty." Other reports told of the deadly fire of his rifle that killed five Mexican gunners in succession, as they each attempted to fire a cannon bearing on the fort, and that he may have just missed Santa Anna, who thought himself out of range of all the defenders' rifles. Crockett and five or six others were captured when the Mexican troops took the Alamo at about six o'clock that morning, even though Santa Anna had ordered that no prisoners be taken. The general, infuriated when some of his officers brought the Americans before him to try to intercede for their lives, ordered them executed immediately. They were bayoneted and then shot. Crockett's reputation and that of the other survivors was not, as some have suggested, sullied by their capture. Their dignity and bravery was, in fact, further underscored by Peña's recounting that "these

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unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers."

Coincidentally, a work mostly of fiction masquerading as fact had put the truth of Crockett's death before the American public in the summer of 1836. Despite its many falsifications and plagiarisms, Richard Penn Smith's *Col. Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas...Written by Himself* had a reasonably accurate account of Crockett's capture and execution. Many thought the legendary Davy deserved better, and they provided it, from thrilling tales of his clubbing Mexicans with his empty rifle and holding his section of the wall of the Alamo until cut down by bullets and bayonets, to his survival as a slave in a Mexican salt mine.

In the final analysis, however, no matter how fascinating or outrageous the fabrications were that gathered around him, the historical David Crockett proved a formidable hero in his own right and succeeded Daniel Boone as the rough-hewn representative of frontier independence and virtue. In this regard, the motto he adopted and made famous epitomized his spirit: "Be always sure you're right-then go a-head!"

Source: The Handbook of Texas Online.

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