

The JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

VOLUME XII

JUNE 1949

NUMBER 2

GO AHEAD, DAVY CROCKETT!

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OUT in the canebrake section of Tennessee, where Davy came from, the squash vines grew so fast they'd chase a drove of hogs half a mile. As for Davy himself, he could with equal ease grin a coon dead, back out of a cave with a rattlesnake in his mouth, or twist the tail off a comet. To such a critter from such a place it probably seemed all in the line of duty that ten years after he was butchered by the Mexicans he was still merrily publishing the famous *Crockett Almanacs*.

A delightful document in the case has just been acquired by the Library: *Crockett's Almanac: Scenes in River Life, Feats on the Lakes, Manners in the Back Woods, Adventures in Texas, &c, &c.*, Philadelphia and New York, 1846.¹ In thirty-four slightly tattered pages of evidence we get eighteen walloping adventures, broad enough to stretch from Mexico to Canada and on out to Oregon, tall enough to take in lightning. And by way of first-hand proof that all of them really happened, Davy gives us fifteen candid woodcuts no

¹ Some fifty different issues of the *Crockett Almanacs* have been identified for the period 1835-1856, of which the best collection is probably the one at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. For a bibliography which includes the almanac we are describing, see Constance Rourke, *Davy Crockett* (New York, 1934), pp. 251-258. Copies of any of these issues are rather rare, simply because most of them were thumbed out of existence.

"I LEAVE THIS RULE FOR OTHERS, WHEN I'M DEAD,
BE ALWAYS SURE YOU'RE RIGHT, THEN GO-AHEAD."

CROCKETT'S 18 ALMANAC. 46

Scenes in River Life, Feats on the Lakes, Manners in the Back
Woods, Adventures in Texas, &c. &c.



Crockett's wonderful escape up the Niagara Falls, on his Pet Alligator.

PUBLISHED BY TURNER & FISHER:
No. 15 NORTH SIXTH STREET, PHILADELPHIA;
AND 74 CHATHAM STREET, NEW YORK.
Toy Books, Song Books, Almanacs, Colored Prints, Juvenile Works, Valentines, &c.

doubt made on the spot by the very man who had died ten years before.

Perhaps it is only fair to note that there were two Davy Crocketts, the one of history and the one of myth. The historical Crockett (1786-1836), after a backwoods boyhood that Poor Richard would certainly have described as shiftless, turned up in the Tennessee Legislature and then, with somewhat explosive effect, moved right on into Washington as the most famous coonskin Congressman of all times. After a falling out with that other ring-tailed roarer, President Andy Jackson, and an abortive alliance with the Whigs, Crockett, by now nationally known through several "autobiographical" works which he probably did not write, set out for Texas and the kind of trouble he knew how to deal with. Davy hit Texas in 1836, just in time to get in on that memorable last-ditch stand at the Alamo; he went down in the violent kind of annihilation which breeds apotheosis.

The *real* Crockett, the one that counts, is the Crockett of the Almanacs: a magnificent creature of comic myth born of the tall talk and the yarns and the restless fantasies of backwoodsmen. The myth began soon after the Battle of New Orleans (1815) when the Hunters of Kentucky emerged from the American forest and the man with the long rifle became a hero. As a folk hero this strange critter of the New World grew irrepressibly into a distinct type.² Ruthless in action, a doer of impossible deeds, he was symbol of the violence and the space of an unconquered, gigantic America. He lived mostly with Indians and animals and the elements. As he forgot the ways of men, he took on the subtle and brutal skills of his three enemies. Merely to keep alive he had to be able to outsmart a savage, outguess a panther, outlast a hurricane. What was novel about this old, old adventure of mankind, however, was that somehow this whole straining for survival struck him as funny. Coming back from lonely weeks in the wilderness, he turned up in a canebrake clearing for a turkey shoot and a corn-likker spree, his imagination bursting with what it had felt like. There he drank and danced and sang, and above all, talked it out *loud*:

² The development of early American folk types is superbly treated in Constance Rourke, *American Humor*, New York, 1931.

I'm David Crockett, fresh from the backwoods, half horse, half alligator, a little touched with snapping turtle. I can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride a streak of lightning, slip without a scratch down a honey locust, whip my weight in wildcats, hug a bear too close for comfort and eat any man opposed to Jackson!

After all, Davy had been cradled in the shell of a snapping turtle, raised on whiskey and bear meat, and could lame a caterpillar with a rifle ball. Apotheosis started two years before he died at the Alamo, when the first Crockett Almanac came out, an ascent that faltered only as the Civil War came on. He became *the* backwoodsman, top specimen of the "gamecock of the wilderness," as complete a symbol of the lusty crudeness and power rising out of the American heartland as Washington was of the moral restraints of an east coast culture that faced toward Europe.

Crockett's Almanac: 1846 is open, ready to let the old screamer speak for himself. As Davy might put it: poke the fire, loosen your britches, *and listen* to "Crockett Walking Off With Two Buffalo Bulls":

Thar war a couple o'Mammoth he Buffaloes in the wilds o'Oregon, so etarnal ferocious that they used to snort blue fire, an beller small thunder; an when they got into a particular passion, they used to butt trees down, an bore a hole in the arth, 20 feet deep afore they could cool off thar disposition. They war the terrification o' the hull o' that country, an the people a hundred mile off, war dyin out o' curiosity to get a safe sight o' the critters; . . . but saw me up, if any one believed I could go nigh 'em; so I put right off for the spot, an got thar jist as the reglar hurrycane o' thar temper was up, an they rushed out at me, spitten a hull sea o' soap suds, snortin young lightnin, and roarin all kinds o' bass music; an they jist tossed up a tree or two by the roots, by way o' practice, flourished thar tails, an sprung up to play toss with my body, when I jist slipped round, tied thar two tails fast together, got right between 'em, with thar tails round my front like traces, an when I got 'em a hundred miles, they war tame as sucken sheep.

There are five more equally modest accounts of Davy's battles with animals: taming a Wild Horse on the prairie in a forty-eight hour ride, fishing a Critter out of the Atlantic that "war half dog, half frog, an t'other half human natur," capturing a Mexican Tigress by paring her nails, exterminating the Texas rattlesnakes barehanded, and splitting open the great Snag Alligator of the Mississippi "slick as a fence rail."

But if Davy was “a leetle the savagest crittur you ever did see,” he was also “the yaller blossom of the forest.” There is a comradely note in this American bestiary. In the memorable thumb-to-nose frontispiece, reprinted as our first illustration, Davy’s rescue from the British during a Canadian boundary dispute is engineered by his pet alligator, Mississippi. Another woodcut shows Davy getting away from a party of Mexican scouts by riding up a tree on the back of his pet bear, Death Hug, who then “ran out the limb on to another tree, an another, an down again, an then made off clar, jist as they war shooting into No. 1.” The pastoral note sounds in our second illustration: here the yaller blossom of the forest engagingly minces through a polka for Death Hug and Mississippi, his adoring pupils, while sailor Ben Hardin, Davy’s old crony, lolls against a tree as he whittles away and whistles.

In another dance yarn we see the yaller blossom transferred back to the gamecock in the story of “Crockett Dancing Fire Out Of A Rock, And Burning The Indians.” The contest occurred on a big rock after a feast of “roasted buffalo, with painter blood gravy” washed down with “wild cat liquor.” The Chief swung into a war dance, and Davy stood by as long as he could:

. . . so thinks I, it’s nearly time I should let ’em have it, and show ’em a fair sample o’ my heels an toes in a state o’ convulsions, so I jist spirted a gallon or two o’ tobacco gravy on the rock, an went at it, savage an beautiful; dreckly the old rock begun to smoke an snap like a hemlock back log; arter that, the fire begun to fly about, an the tarnal big stone ware so all baken hot, that the red Chief’s feet begin to singe, but haven on a parr o’ fireproof shoes, I didn’t begin to feel it, but kep on dancin, till the Chief fell down half cooked, an his party run off whoopin with thar blankets all in a light blaze.

That treatment Davy gave “with nothin but the all heaten power o’ my legs and feet in a Kentucky breakdown,” but his four other redskin yarns are packed with more vicious retribution. Take, for example, the grotesque ruthlessness of “Crockett Mowing Down The Indians For Stealing His Hay, With A Twelve-Foot Scythe”:

. . . I scented injuns as distinctly as a fryin beefsteak; so I opened my peepers about as wide as a full moon, an thar I seed about twenty tarnal sneakin red niggers walken out from among the bushes like so many hogs into a cornfield . . . so gettin round to the big hickory, I pulled my scythe down, gin it a good sly whettin, till it war sharp enough to cut down a



CROCKETT, THE PET BEAR, AND ALLIGATOR, DANCING THE POLKA.

CROCKETT SNOWBALLING THE MEXICAN SOLDIERS INTO THE RIVER.

A good an sartin rifle or musket, are all death dealin articles to do a little war gougien with; in fact, thar quite the thing in dry weather, but on a foggy day when the rain falls upwards, or on a rainy day when the rain falls downwards, give me a tall bank o' snow, and take me for an ice cake, if I can't turn it into goas an ammunishin, an use up any sort o' fightin critters with the best kind o' shootin clubs in creation. You see, while in Texas, I war out one day on a scouten party by myself; thar war about three feet o' snow on the ground, an the clouds war sweatin out a kind o' a must that



made the snow a kind o' soft an greasy. Well, jist as I got nigh a river, an war reconoiterin, I war surprised by a tarnal whiskered Mexican Captain, an four o' his feathered bull-dog slaves; they all levelled an pulled trigger at me, but thar guns all burnt prime an only flashed tantilization at 'em. They primed agin, an jist as thar Captain opened his mouth to give the word "Fire!" I sent a four pounder snowball into his mouth, that stopped his speech instanter. I then give the corpral one in his ear, that give him the rough-shod earache, an I didn't stop my patent snow-ball battery till I pelted every tarnal Mexican, heels forrid, and head backwards into the river, if I didn't, then melt me into snow water.

black oak at one sweep . . . an then walked among 'em like twenty corn cutters among cornstalks, an the way I made their heads an legs fly about . . . war never seen afore; some o' the injuns hid in the hay cocks, and as soon as they popped out thar heads, whiz went my scythe, an off went his head, rollen like a pumpkin, an he arter it. . . .

This is humor that is wild and low; it has the sensational immediacy of a nightmare; and like Davy's dance, in a way it is "savage and beautiful."

The Go-Ahead Davy of the Almanacs is probably the nearest thing to a folk epic that Americans have created. Davy is more interesting than Mike Fink, the plug-ugly of the Mississippi boatmen, more complex than the merely grandiose Paul Bunyan, and less sectional than either. And through the Almanacs enough of his sayings and doings have been preserved to suggest at least the essential shape of a former cultural hero.³ It is clear that this backwoods Odysseus is both like and unlike the heroes of ages past. When in the midst of a Mississippi hurricane he seizes a bolt of lightning one recognizes an ancient mythological gesture. But this American Jove has a twist of his own:

. . . a stray streak o' lightnin came passen along, so jist as it cum, I grabbed it by the fork, and sprung on it; Ben follered, an held on to my hair; I greased it a leetle with a bottle o' rattlesnake taller [tallow], an the way we streaked it, an left the tornado behind, was astonishen to all natur.

It is the comic flare which is the American difference.

The Crockett myth would seem to be gone now, but perhaps it is not so much gone as altered. The voice of the gamecock still sounds in the writings of Twain, Melville, Whitman, and Faulkner; and his doings have permanently colored the people's image of Dan'l Boone, Andy Jackson, and Abe Lincoln. Some of Davy romps through the folklore of our own mechanized society—on the radio (Superman), in the press (comic strips), and in the movies (animal cartoons). One of the latest folk types, the American GI, has certainly a touch of the old ring-tailed roarer in some of his guises, if only in the astonishing mixture of illiteracy and furious tropes.

And after all, who *is* that, in our third illustration, snowballing the Mexican soldiers into the river, if it isn't Harpo Marx?

³ For a reader's collection of yarns from the Crockett Almanacs, see *Davy Crockett, American Legend*, edited by R. M. Dorson, New York, 1939.