

HAZARDOUS JOURNEYS

Contrary to the Hollywood portrayal, the greatest dangers to frontiersmen weren't hostile Indians but rather issues involving disease and multiple dangers involving nature. Although there were some hostilities, disease, wounds, starvation or dehydration and attacks by wild animals far and away trumped the numbers of incidents involving tribesmen. And death frequently was self-inflicted. For example, ignorance regarding the effects of contaminated water was a potent killer. After surviving battles with Peruvian Indians in South America then trekking over 1,000 miles from Florida to near the confluence of the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand rivers in 1542, explorer Hernando De Soto died of yellow fever. The lack of understanding about the origins of disease and the necessity for cleanliness continued for centuries. Even during the latter part of the Civil War, it was not unusual for armies to encamp and tether horses upstream or for grimy soldiers to bathe in a lake from which they also drew water to drink or cook. Soldiers more frequently died from infection than the wounds they received. Wounds were bound without any thought of washing them or the bandages. On the frontier, inadequate preparation for lengthy westbound excursions occasionally resulted in starvation or even cannibalism. The lack of water on the semi-arid plains sometimes called for extreme measures. One frontiersman searching for water killed a buffalo instead and "drank large draughts of blood," which he reported "tasted like milk." Some cures were available, but would not be recognized for generations. For example, frontiersmen were intrigued by the healing powers of an Indian remedy, mold from bread or other substances that could be mixed into a poultice and spread over a wound. The forerunner of penicillin, mold would not be perfected for medicinal purposes until the early stages of World War II.

There are countless stories of undaunted explorers and pioneers pushing on to seek freedom or wealth in spite of the dangers, and the setting for the fate of at least one, Lewis Dawson, involves our northeast territory. Commerce with Spanish outposts in New Mexico had been sought since early in the Eighteenth Century. In 1719, French Captain Claude du Tisne, seeking a trade route, traveled across Northeastern Oklahoma as far as today's Chelsea where he met with Pani (Pawnee) Indians. Du Tisne was advised that the arduous journey would take a month over arid plains and he would encounter hostile tribes, discouraged, he turned back. During the next century, others did eventually make the journey, but trade was still inconsistent. And so it occurred that on September 25th, 1821 an expedition bound for Santa Fe and led by Captain Nathaniel Pryor and Colonel Hugh Glenn left Three Forks in Cherokee territory would soon provide the background for Dawson's story.

Those who organized expeditions into the wilderness attempted to plan for any contingency, but a sudden attack by a wild animal, another of Mother Nature's dangers, could only be anticipated. Jacob Fowler, a member of the Pryor-Glenn expedition, kept a personal journal in which he described the tragic death of Dawson, fatally mauled by a grizzly bear. "We made 11 miles west this day. We stopped here about one o'clock and sent back for one horse that was not able to keep up. We found some grapes among the brush and while some were hunting and some picking grapes, a gun fired off and the cry of

a White Bear (grizzly) was raised. The brush in which we camped contained from 10 to 20 acres into which the bear had run for shelter." Several men searched the thick brush for the grizzly. "Suddenly, it sprung up and caught Lewis Dawson and pulled him down in an instant. Colonel Glenn's gun misfired or he would have relieved the man. But a large dog, which belongs to the party, attacked the bear with such fury that it left the man and pursued the dog a few steps in which the man got up and run but was overtaken by the bear." Colonel Glenn apparently tried to fire his gun two more times, but without success. Fowler continues, "The wounded man ran up a tree, but the bear pulled him down by the leg. The bear soon rose again but was shot by several other men who had got to the place of action." After the bear was killed, Fowler reports the extent of Dawson's injuries. "It appears his head was in the bear's mouth at least twice and when the monster give the crush that was to mash the man's head in, the head slipped out only the teeth cutting the skin to the bone wherever they touched it." "The skin of the head was cut from above the ears to the top in several directions. All of the wounds were sewed up as well as could be done by men in our situation having no surgeon or surgical instruments...on examining a hole in the upper part of his right temple we found the brains working out." Dawson died three days later and was buried at the camp site near the Arkansas River.

The tragedies involving disease and the vagaries of nature that pioneers were forced to overcome far exceeded problems with hostile tribes. Whether on the trail or at home numerous dangers were confronted, resolved and dismissed, most never documented. The details of the death of Lewis Dawson reflect the small percent of those incidents that were recorded, a snapshot of an Echo From The Past.

