

DAVY CROCKETT



**FAMOUS
FIGURES
• OF THE •
AMERICAN
FRONTIER**

Daniel E. Harmon

FAMOUS FIGURES OF



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THE AMERICAN FRONTIER





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THE AMERICAN FRONTIER**



BILLY THE KID
BUFFALO BILL CODY
CRAZY HORSE
DAVY CROCKETT
GEORGE CUSTER

WYATT EARP
GERONIMO
JESSE JAMES
ANNIE OAKLEY
SITTING BULL

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DANIEL E. HARMON

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A painting of Davy Crockett waving farewell, carrying his long rifle and accompanied by his hunting hounds. Although most people think of Crockett as a great woodsman, he was also an important political leader during the 1820s and 1830s.



BOY OF THE WOODS

Don't believe everything you hear about Davy Crockett. Yes, he was indeed a bold, wise, and skillful *buckskin*-clad American pioneer. He also was a courageous United States congressman who stood up for the rights of poor settlers and Native Americans alike. This was during the 1820s and 1830s—a period when most Americans were interested in claiming more western

territories, not in being good neighbors to the people who had lived there for centuries.

But did Davy really kill a bear when he was just three years old? Did he “grin down” savage animals, armed only with his strong grip and irresistible charm? Did he never fail to hit the bulls-eye with “Ol’ Betsy,” his long rifle? Battle swamp ’gators? Teach a pet bear named “Death Hug” to smoke a pipe? Catch and wrestle a panther that had stolen his belongings?

Not likely. He became forever famous for such feats, though. And there may even have been a grain of truth at the heart of some of the fantastic stories that have been told about him.

Davy’s ancestors were Irish immigrants who arrived in North Carolina before the American Revolution. His grandfather, David Crockett, moved into the frontier in the 1770s, settling in eastern Tennessee, where he and his wife were killed by warring Indians.

John and Rebecca Crockett, Davy’s parents, built a farm on Big Limestone Creek in Greene County. Davy was born there on August 17, 1786. Large families were common in America’s early years; Davy had eight brothers and sisters.

After failing as a hog farmer and miller, John Crockett opened a tavern on the wagon road between Knoxville, Tennessee, and Abingdon, Virginia. In those times, taverns functioned not only as places to buy food and drink but also as public meetinghouses and crude inns. Passing wagon drivers who craved a night's rest willingly slept three or four in a bed, with half a dozen or more to a room. As a boy, Davy began developing his storytelling skills while listening to the news and tall tales of travelers who ate and slept at the tavern.

He grew to be a skillful woodsman and hunter, and he was a strong, capable farm worker. In those



This .58-caliber long rifle may have belonged to Davy Crockett; it was found in the ruins of the Alamo. Although muzzle-loading rifles of the early 19th century could be very inaccurate, Davy was renowned as a crack shot. He was said to be able to shoot the wick off a candle at 300 feet, and once killed 47 bears in a single month.

days, Tennessee was a wild land. Relations with the Indians were uncertain; some Native Americans were quite friendly, but others were openly hostile. The forests were alive with panthers, bears, wolves, and other animals that raided farmyards and sometimes threatened the farmers themselves.

At 12, Davy helped a farmer drive a herd of cattle to Virginia. He earned \$5 for his work—money badly needed by his struggling family. The farmer, though, tried to force him to remain in Virginia to

In part, Davy learned his hunting skills through trial and error—and near tragedy. Once as a child, he fired his father's musket at what he thought was a deer moving through the brush. The musket ball found its mark—but to Davy's horror, it was no deer. It was a neighbor, picking berries in the forest. The man, shot through the lungs, lay feverishly near death for a long time, but to Davy's great relief, he survived.

work. At first, Davy agreed. But he was growing terribly homesick. Luckily, he soon met a neighbor from back home in Tennessee who agreed to smuggle him away in a wagon.

Davy arrived home safe, but he didn't remain there long. When Davy was 13, his father insisted he go to school. Davy soon

made a powerful enemy: the school bully. The boy was older and larger, but Davy was much bolder. Davy vowed to “give him salt and vinegar”; he planned to punish the bully for pushing around the younger students.

He confronted the boy in the woods after school one day. “I scratched his face all to a flitter jig,” Davy wrote later in his autobiography, “and soon made him cry out for quarters in good earnest.”

When the schoolmaster learned of the fight, Davy knew, a whipping would be his own punishment. So he stayed away from school almost a week, spending each day roaming the woods. At last, however, the schoolmaster wrote a note to his father, inquiring where Davy was.

Davy’s father was angrier than the schoolmaster and declared “he would whip me an eternal sight worse than the master,” Davy recounted.

He figured his only option was to run away . . . but to where? The answer came to him almost immediately: he would head up the road to Virginia! This would take him far enough away to escape his father’s wrath, but not so far that he couldn’t return easily after the trouble had passed. He made his way to Virginia and found a job and a

place to stay as a farmhand.

The lad was a hard worker and was thrifty with his meager earnings. He soon saved \$7—a noteworthy sum 200 years ago. If he kept at his work, in a few years he might be able to buy his own farm or start a small business.

An unbridled spirit of adventure had already captivated the youth, though. At the moment, what he really wanted to do was see the ocean, perhaps even go to sea as a cabin boy. He went to Baltimore, one of the young nation's most important ports.

As things turned out, Davy never sailed the ocean. For about two years, he worked at various shore jobs. At last, in 1802, his yearning to see his family overcame his desire for independence—for the time being, at least. He made the long trip through Maryland and Virginia back to Crockett's Tavern.

He arrived late one evening. His family did not even recognize him because he'd grown so much. He said little, watching his relatives serve their *wagoner* guests and waiting to see if any of them would realize who he was. Finally, as everyone sat at the big table for supper, one of his sisters came around to him, overjoyed with amazement, and gave him a great hug.
