

James Burns Gowen and David Crockett

A Sketch of their relationship

by Don Lee Gowen- a 5th Generation Great-Grandson

As with many stories passed down through generations there can be many versions and unintentional information conveyed to succeeding generations, some of which may be embellished to flavor the content for the listener. Both David Crockett and James Burns Gowen were story tellers who enjoyed sitting by the fireplace in their pioneer log cabins or around a campfire in the deep wilderness sharing a tale with their friends and long gun fellow hunters.

There have been many articles and books published about the life of David Crockett, even an autobiography by David himself entitled the "Narrative." This brief sketch does not endeavor to cover all the historical details of the lives of either David Crockett or James Burns Gowen but is intended to present as "snap-shot" of their contact and relationship in pioneer life while living at the head of the East Fork of Mulberry Creek in Bedford County, then Lincoln County, and now Moore County, TN during the short period of October, 1811 to late 1812 or early 1813. To get to this period, short summaries of David's JBG's early years are provided to tell us a little more about James Burns Gowen ("JBG") and David Crockett before he moved to "Hungry Hill" or "Hungry Ridge" adjoining JBG's farm.

**James Burns Gowen ("JBG") was born on November 22, 1785 near Lynchburg, Virginia – the son of William Gowen, Jr. and Jaminma (Burns) Gowen. When he (5) years of age he and his brother William Davis Gowen were bound out to his uncle James Burns. (There are two different versions of what happened to his father which will not be covered here). It is believed that Jamima Burns Gowen and her two sons accompanied her brother, James Burns, to the Williamson County area of Middle Tennessee. At the age of 16, "JBG" was set free from the apprenticeship from uncle Burns. While much more happened in the life of James Burns Gowen in the next (7) years, on February 19, 1808 "JBG" married Annie Price (born June 22, 1888), the daughter o Matthew Price and Elizabeth (Eskridge) Price.*

Settlers started moving into the Middle Tennessee region in 1800. The treaty between the Cherokee and Chickasaw Indian tribes of January 7, 1806 opened the area along what is now the Alabama State Line for settlement. Between 1800 and 1810 the State of Tennessee began issuing land grants. In 1807 a portion of Rutherford County was cut out and the County of Bedford was organized. In 1809 the County of Lincoln was formed from portions of Bedford and Williamson Counties. It was not until December 14, 1871 that Moore County was created from portions of Bedford and Lincoln Counties.

The key here is that a young couple moved from Williamson County (influenced by the relocation of his father-in-law) into southern area of then Bedford County (formed in 1807) on the east fork of Mulberry Creek in 1809. It was at this time that the County of Lincoln was formed the same year – 1809 and JBG and Annie found themselves not in Bedford but in Lincoln County – about (6) months after having established their homestead. With the formation of Moore County on December 14, 1871 from portions of Lincoln and Bedford Counties, they found themselves in Moore County (the County Line having been moved about 1.5 miles) before JBG passed away in 1880. Therefore, JBG already had his homestead established when David Crockett arrived in October 1811 to settle behind him on what David described as "Hungry Ridge".

**David Crockett was born on Thursday August 17, 1786 to John and Rebecca Crockett an the junction of Nolichucky River and Limestone Creek in the State of Franklin, N.C. (Washington and then Green Counties) (this would make him a little less than a year younger than JBG). David was the 6th of 9 children of John and Rebecca. Much happened in the life of David Crockett from his birth in 1786, but on Saturday, August 16, 1806 David married Polly Finley the daughter of Billy and Jean Finley one day shy of his 20th birthday, at Finley Gap on Bays Mountain, Jefferson County, N.C. He lived there for 6 years as a tenant farmer with two children being born to David and Polly: John Wesley Crockett – July 10, 1807 and William Wesley Crockett – Nov.25, 1808.*

In the autumn of 1811, David at the age of 25 found that tenant farming was not a “way to get ahead” decided to “cut for new country” because he was obsessed to stay out of debt and wanted to improve the opportunities for his family and his fortune. His life was an endless search for the right place to settle. In October, 1811 David, accompanied with his father-in-law Billy Finley to help, David, Polly, John Wesley, and William Wesley set out for a (5) acre track of land (on the ridge behind JBG’s property) which had been granted to him in Lincoln County, Tn at the headwaters of the East Fork of Mulberry Creek (this area originally was included in Bedford County, Tn when formed in 1807; became a part of Lincoln County when it was formed in 1809; and later was included in the County of Moore in 1871). Billy Finley helped David build a cabin, dig a well for the family, and build fences for the horses, and clear the Sassafras and brush from what David would come to refer as “Hungry Ridge, or Hungry Hill”. After these tasks were completed, Billy Finley returned to his home in Finley Gap. David found that farming the ridge hill land did not produce enough to support his family and he and James Burns Gowen would engage in hunting trips for days and weeks for bear, deer, and anything with a fur pelt which could increase their income. David had already developed hunting skills before coming to Lincoln County but the once abundant game of the area provided was to provide ample opportunity, especially for black bears which could provide:

- *saturated bear fat would protect the body from colds*
- *bear skins could be utilized to make rugs, bed robes, coats, hats, etc.*
- *the bear’s meat could be butchered for food, fat, and oil*
- *the bear’s bladder could be used to make an oilcloth for rapping packages*
- *the cooking oil derived from bear fat and meat could also be utilized for home remedies, insect repellent, etc.*

One must understand that the area at the head of the East Fork of the Mulberry Creek was still a wilderness during the time frame of 1809 – 1813 when James Burns Gowen and David Crockett were climbing the hills and roaming the valleys for game and food – with just survival the major concern. Some of the dangers and trials they faced were:

- *Indians*
- *Bear Mauling*
- *Gun Shots*
- *Rabid skunks and coons*
- *Poisonous snakes*
- *Bad food*
- *Disease*
- *Primitive child birth*
- *Barbaric and primitive cures*
- *Doctors could be of dubious character, knowledge and experience – and were few and far between*
- *Home remedies that required a knowledge of herbs, roots, tree bark, and berries (which mostly came from the Indians)*
- *Very limited or non-existence of law enforcement protection*
- *Weather with lack of warning – droughts and floods*
- *Priorities included food, pure fresh water, adequate shelter, etc. (Bread was the staff of life – especially corn bread)*

On November 25, 1812 Polly gave birth to their third child while living on the ridge behind JBG – a daughter named Mary Margaret - named after David’s oldest sister – and nicknamed “Polly” after her mother.

**David Crockett lived as a neighbor to James Burns Gowen for about 2 years, according to William Floyd, son-in-law to James Burns Gowen in 1904. JBG described Crockett to William Floyd as an “itch-footed sort of fellow who went bear hunting with a knife, bagged a covey of wild turkey with a single shot, went Indian hunting with Andrew Jackson and finally got himself elected to Congress.” According to Floyd, Davey Crockett lived on the east prong of Mulberry Creek about a mile from County Line. Billie Crockett, brother to Davey, also lived on this water course. Research conducted by Arlee Gowen of Gowen Research Foundation of Lubbock, Texas has stated that the farm cleared by David Crockett in the 24th District was later owned by George Gowen, grandson of James Burns Gowen. This was also stated in a letter of Thomas Kindred Gowen, the Mayor of Fullerton, California, and a great-grandson*

of JBG, in the early 1970's. Thomas Kindred Gowen stated he returned to Moore County in 1931 and bought the old farm containing the homestead site of David Crockett which he later sold to his brother.

Also in the "Notes and reminiscences from Uncle William Floyd given to Charles E. Gowen in the summer of 1904 in his 84th year, William Floyd discusses the neighbors of the Floyds and Gowans, including the Crocketts. It starts:

"We begin with this old pioneer whose name will add historic interest to the following sketches. We are reminded that Crockett once lived on the east proxy of Mulberry about one and one half miles from County Line, Moore County, Tennessee. There is some dispute as to the exact location of the Crockett cabin, some claiming that it was on the AMOS GORE farm, where JIM BIRD now lives – but what gave use to this opinion is that Billy Crockett (David's brother) once lived there – while David lived further down the branch near the present home of JIM BROWN. My grandfather, James B. Gowan, pointed out the exact location of the cabin to Uncle William, and to the best recollection, it stood near the BROWN place and on the same side of the road. This is now the most authentic account that can be had. Gowan and Crockett were companions and neighbors and with their dogs and rifles had visited frequently." Later, "It is said that Crockett cleared a field on a parcel of land on the farm now owned by George Gowan in the 24th District of Bedford County, Tennessee."

**James Burns Gowen died on May 14, 1880 at his home on the East Fork of Mulberry Creek and the "Lynchburg Sentinel" carried a 21-inch obituary in its May 21, 1880 edition. The "Lynchburg Falcon" reprinted the obituary some 21 years later in its July 26, 1901 edition. It was reprinted Sept 1, 1958 "at the request of George Grady Clark of Taft, California, one of three surviving grandsons." The obituary, written by his grandson George E. Gowen, as it relates to his relationship with David Crockett read:*

"In their hunting days he ("JBG") and Davy Crockett were boon companions and many times they have pulled bones together from roasted bear ribs, seated over their campfires, with no other covering save the branches of some forest oak and no other companions except their trusty rifles and faithful dogs. He was doubtless with Davy when the latter performed his great feat of splitting a limb with his only bullet and thereby catching so many turkeys by their toes.

They have in common with each other shouldered up the fruits of a heavy day's hunting, consisting of some two or three deer and small game, and with the march of conquerors—lords of the forest, as they were—carried their more than glittering trophies home to their little cabins, snugly ensconced between surrounding hills, to receive the smiles and caresses of their brave wives and hardy robust children. Truly these were their golden days." (Note" JBG kept up his relationship with David Crockett fishing and hunting for years after David moved from the area, and until Crockett's death at the Alamo in February of 1836. Crockett's death was a shock to JBG and he never forgot his memories of earlier days with Davy.).

**The Introduction by Paul Andrew Hutton to the book entitled "A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee" written by himself, dated February 7, 1834 (originally 12 copies printed for .65 cents each) stated (Page ix): "In 1811 David and his family moved west in search of new land, settling on the Mulberry Fork of the Elk River near the Alabama border. "In this time," David relates in his autobiography, "we had two sons, and I found I was better at increasing my family than my fortune." Crockett proved more adept at hunting than farming, for deer and bear were plentiful in the forest and canebrakes of Tennessee. Not only did these beasts provide essential food to subsistence farm families like the Crocketts, their skins also were a marketable cash crop.*

In his Autobiography (page 68) David stated: "The Duck and Elk river country was just beginning to settle and I determined to try that. I had now one old horse, and a couple of two year old colts. They were both broke to the halter, and my father-in-law proposed, that, if I went, he would go with me, and take one horse to help me move. So we all fixed up, and packed my two colts with as many of my things as they could bear; and away we went across the mountains. We got well enough along, and arrived safely in Lincoln County, on the head of Mulberry Fork of the Elk River. I found this a very rich country, and so new, that game, of different sorts, was very plenty. It was here that I began to distinguish myself as a hunter, and to lay the foundation for all my future greatness; but mighty little did I know of what sort it was going to be. Of deer and smaller game I killed in abundance; but the bear had been much hunted in those parts before, and were not so plenty as I could have wished."

**Less than two years of becoming a neighbor to James Burns Gowen on the East Fork of Mulberry Creek David found he was not making it as a farmer. He put in a claim for another 15 acres but could not make a living off the land and his hunting revenue. In late 1812 or early 1813 David and his family moved to land in Franklin County (formed in 1807), 10 miles southwest of Winchester, TN near the Alabama State Line. Here he cleared land and built a cabin on the Rattlesnake Branch of Bean's Creek. It is not known if he owned or simply "squatted" on these 200 acres he referred to a "Kentuck". The (5) acre and (15) acre track in Lincoln Count was sold for taxes after David left. He and JBG continued to hunt and fish together.*

**In October 1813, James Burns Gowen, David Crockett and another Mulberry Creek neighbor by the name of Sam Houston joined up with General Andrew Jackson's troops to travel south to fight the Creek Indians. On November 3, 1813 the battle of Tallushatchee was fought at Horseshoe Bend, and on November 7, the battle of Talladega took place. Among the dead were a few commissioned officers and a young man by the name of James Patton.*

**In March of 1815 Polly Crockett died leaving David with (3) small children. His brother and sister-in-law moved in to help with the kids.*

**In the Summer of 1815 David found him a new bride and married Elizabeth Patton, the widow with two small children of James Patton, who had died at Talladega and who lived less than mile from Crockett's "Kentuck" home.*

**In 1817 David visited Polly's grave and moved with his new family to Shoal Creek in Lawrence County, TN.*

Notes:

**Walt Disney caused the modern media image of David Crockett in the 1950's*

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**David Indian Fighter" 12-15-1954*

**David Crockett Goes to Congress 01-16-1955*

**David Crockett at the Alamo 02-23-1955*

**Actor: Fess Parker*

**Caused Raccoons to almost be extinguished – pelts went from selling at .25 cents a pound to \$6.00 a pound.*

**Within (6) months of Disney releases of David Crockett movies - \$100 million dollars was spent on 3000 items*

**The Ballad of David Crockett – sold more than 4 million copies and was a #1 Top Ten for 13 weeks.*

**There is a lot confusion of the character traits of David Crockett. He:*

**exaggerated hopes*

**had well-checked fears*

**was idiosyncratic*

**had unusual views and was prejudices*

**was calculating*

**was valiant*

**was resourceful*

**was both authentic and contrived*

**enjoyed fraternizing with men of power and prestige*

**had little schooling but could read Ovid and Bard*

**was restless*

**believed in the wind and smells*

**confident in the wilderness*

**a survivor*

**had the scientific belief that frost was frozen clouds*

**David Crockett did NOT kill a bear when he was 3 (he did kill 105 bears 1825 – 1826 and 47 of these in one month)*

**David Crockett was NOT born on a mountain top*

**David Crockett only wore a coonskin cap to boost his image*

**Andrew Jackson received his license to practice law on August 5, 1788 in Green County, N.C. while John Crockett (David Crockett's father) was the presiding Justice of the Peace.*

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