



Contact:
Scott Williams
rscottwilliamsemail@gmail.com
731-599-9749

July 14, 2021

“The Accidental Fame and Lack of Fortune of West Tennessee’s David Crockett” Q ‘n’ A with Author Scott Williams

What made you want to write about David Crockett?

As someone who grew up in West Tennessee, I had heard of “Davy” Crockett all my life, but actually knew nothing more than the average person—bear hunting, coonskin caps and the Alamo. When I first began working at Discovery Park, I was exposed to more about his life and career, and it inspired me to want to find out more. The more I learned, the more intrigued I became.

Does the world need another biography of the King of the Wild Frontier?

This book is not a chronological biography of the life of the Tennessee settler and member of Congress. Those who are seeking a biography of Crockett will find many for sale on the Internet or at their local library or bookstore. The aim of this book is to determine what fueled Crockett’s meteoric rise from frontier to icon, while also examining the birth of Tennessee during one of the most fascinating periods in American history.

What did you hope to accomplish with the book?

I had two goals. The first was to figure out how this uneducated frontier settler—among thousands of other settlers—somehow rose to become a potential candidate for president of the United States. Second, my own ancestors settled in Haywood and Madison Counties in Tennessee during the same time Crockett was in Congress, so he was their representative. I was curious about that land and how the former Native American hunting grounds was made available to them to settle on in the first place. That’s why I included “West Tennessee” in the title. I wrote it from the perspective of a West Tennessean who currently lives near Reelfoot Lake where Crockett settled in 1822. This area remained his home for the rest of his life, and he was one of the first settlers who hunted around the lake.

What did you discover about his fame?

Crockett really was the first American celebrity. He was blessed with loads of charisma, he made people laugh, and he had great instincts on how to turn the brand he created into votes. He knew how to play up the “adventurer and explorer” aspects of his life while pursuing a career in politics. He was also really lucky and was born at just the right time and place. Americans had grown weary of wealthy, educated elites having all the power and control, so Crockett played up being the opposite of that and won elections. I also thought it was fascinating that he intentionally managed his public image and developed the “Davy” Crockett brand that became so popular.

What inspired you to select the photos and quotes you included?

While researching, I found the different photos of Crockett in popular culture fascinating. From covers of the old dime novels to silent film actors to a Broadway star today, I wanted each chapter to begin with a

nod to “Crockett sightings” through the decades. Producer and writer David Zucker is a huge Crockett fan, and he sent me a photo of him dressed as Crockett for a scene in “The Naked Gun 2 1/2” to use. Similarly, the quotes that begin each chapter are from famous people through the years on how they feel about fame. For example, at one point, Brad Pitt supposedly said, “The three terrible karmas are beauty, wealth and fame—they’re the things that stop you from finding happiness.”

How about the relationship between Crockett and West Tennessee land?

The story of West Tennessee land was way more complicated than I ever imagined. Before the land was officially taken from the Native Americans and made available to Whites settlers, “squatters” began moving in and making themselves at home. They cleared trees, built cabins and planted crops. When the land was officially made available, it was challenging because the surveys were not very accurate and there were squatters that had to be forced off the farms they had been working for years. Crockett’s big issue was trying to get bills passed that would allow the squatters to either get their land for free or get it at an affordable price. That story of how he championed that lost cause and stood up against Andrew Jackson and other members of Congress is fascinating.

Although they were both from Tennessee, Crockett and Andrew Jackson were not friends?

Quite the contrary. While Crockett was elected as part of the “common man” period that sent Andrew Jackson to the White House, Crockett broke pretty quickly with the Jacksonian Democrats. It was an incredibly divisive period with some major changes taking place in both politics and American culture in general—sound familiar? Crockett ultimately sided with Jackson’s enemies on topics like the Indian Removal Bill of 1830. Crockett only wanted the Native Americans to move out west if they wanted to and gave a very passionate speech on their behalf. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Too many people wanted their land and wanted Native Americans as far away as possible.

What did you discover that surprised you during your research?

Crockett was a bit like the “Forrest Gump” of his day. He was everywhere. As more and more American writers, artists, actors and singers began creating “American popular culture” Crockett was something of a muse for them. In his buckskin, moccasins and coonskin cap, he represented western expansion for an entire generation, even if he rarely dressed that way in real life. He also never used the name “Davy.” He was in books, plays, songs, art and more during his lifetime. An unauthorized biography about his life became a best-seller, so he wrote an autobiography that was an even bigger hit. He then went on one of the very first book tours, and huge crowds gathered wherever he appeared. He did one of the first licensing deals and sold lithographs of his illustrations with his autograph on them. He even has a catchphrase that became popular: “Be always sure you are right—then go ahead,” sometimes shortened to “Go Ahead.”

He found fame. Did a fortune come with it?

No. The bottom line is, he spent more than he made. He was always coming up with clever ways to try and make money, but usually had to use what he made to pay off loans. In one case, he had the idea to hire men to cut down trees on his Northwest Tennessee land to make barrel staves, take them down the Obion River to the Mississippi River and down to New Orleans where he could sell the staves, pay the men and keep the profit. As soon as they hit the Mississippi, he and his men lost control of the flatboats and couldn’t stop until they hit a sandbar and a pile of logs and trash right outside of Memphis. While he lost everything—including his clothes—it ended up being a positive for him. After being rescued, he met the mayor of Memphis, Marcus Winchester, a wealthy, ambitious young man who became his good friend. Winchester even funded some of his future campaigns. It was Winchester and other Memphians that Crockett spent his last night in Tennessee with before he headed to the Alamo.

The story of what really happened at the Alamo and how we teach history is in the news again in a big way. Do you talk about that in the book at all?

Yes. I always assumed David Crockett spent years in Texas, but it was ultimately only a few months. He didn't go to Texas to fight. He went because, for a variety of reasons, he lost his 1835 election and at various times after that, made that infamous statement about where everyone else could go...and he was headed to Texas. The true story of how Crockett's death has been positioned is a story all its own.

Why Texas?

He was still after that fortune. His good friend Tennessean Sam Houston had filled Crockett's head with stories of a land flowing with milk and honey. Crockett wrote his daughter in January 1836, after he arrived in Texas, and told her it was the "garden spot of the world" and the "best prospects for health he had ever seen." He was dead just three months later. Crockett was planning to settle some land and run again for Congress representing the people wherever he landed. Unfortunately, he ended up at the Alamo, and made the decision to stay and help the outnumbered Texans and volunteers fight General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

How did Crockett die?

There were multiple stories of exactly how he died. Some say he went out in a blaze of glory swinging his gun at the Mexican soldiers after he ran out of bullets. Others say he and a small group of fighters surrendered and were killed after the battle. There were a few women and slaves who survived, and a some of them reported he was killed during the battle. We will never know for certain. What we do know is he and most of the others in Alamo died and their bodies were burned to ash on a funeral pyre. And his name is forever linked to the history of Texas. Although I must add, there were stories that he escaped. And like with Elvis, there were reports of "Crockett sightings" in the newspapers for decades after he was killed. His son even had some of them investigated.

It's been 235 years since he was born, and most people still know the theme song "Davy, Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier." Why does his legacy endure?

After he died, his name became even hotter as a brand, and "Davy" could be found in newspapers and magazines, only his powers had grown even more spectacular. He was by then, a fictional superhero who was celebrated around the world. The popular "Crockett Almanacs" that featured his exploits were a bit like Superman meets "Mad Magazine" with a weather prediction thrown in. He as even part of the vehicular for decades. Whenever someone bragged about something they had done, it was a common response to reply, "it's nothing to Crockett." In the mid-1950s, Walt Disney saw an opportunity to promote the "Cowboy and Indians" section of his new California theme park using "Davy" Crockett. His team produced a few episodes based on Crockett for his *Disneyland* series on ABC. The response was mind-blowing, even for Walt. It launched a licensed-product phenomenon unlike anything that had ever been seen before. Like other fads, it came and went, but it left the "Davy" Crockett brand once again imprinted on a generation. Sadly, that image greatly overshadows the accomplishments of David Crockett, the member of Congress and West Tennessee settler.

I hope people will read this book and get to know the real David Crockett just a little better.

["The Accidental Fame and Lack of Fortune of West Tennessee's David Crockett" can be purchased now on Amazon.](#)

For more information, visit TheRealDavidCrockett.com.

