

'We gazed in silent admiration'

Stanley Nelson

Three centuries ago, Frenchman Andre Penicaut was amazed at the wildlife that abounded along the banks of the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge. One day he recorded the following passage in his journal:

"Leaving our boats we passed through a cypress forest, even through a heavy canebrake, and at length stood on the bank of the great river. We gazed in silent admiration. Its banks were covered with splendid trees, and its soil seemed the richest in the world. We camped there that night, and by moonlight killed many wild turkies that roosted, in vast numbers, over our heads, and did not seem disturbed by our guns. I never saw any in France so fat and so large."

Were it not for abundant wildlife in the forests and fish in the streams of Natchez country, the explorers would not have survived. In the 1770s, Natchez settlers like Anthony Hutchins of North Carolina would have had a difficult time feeding their families upon arrival.

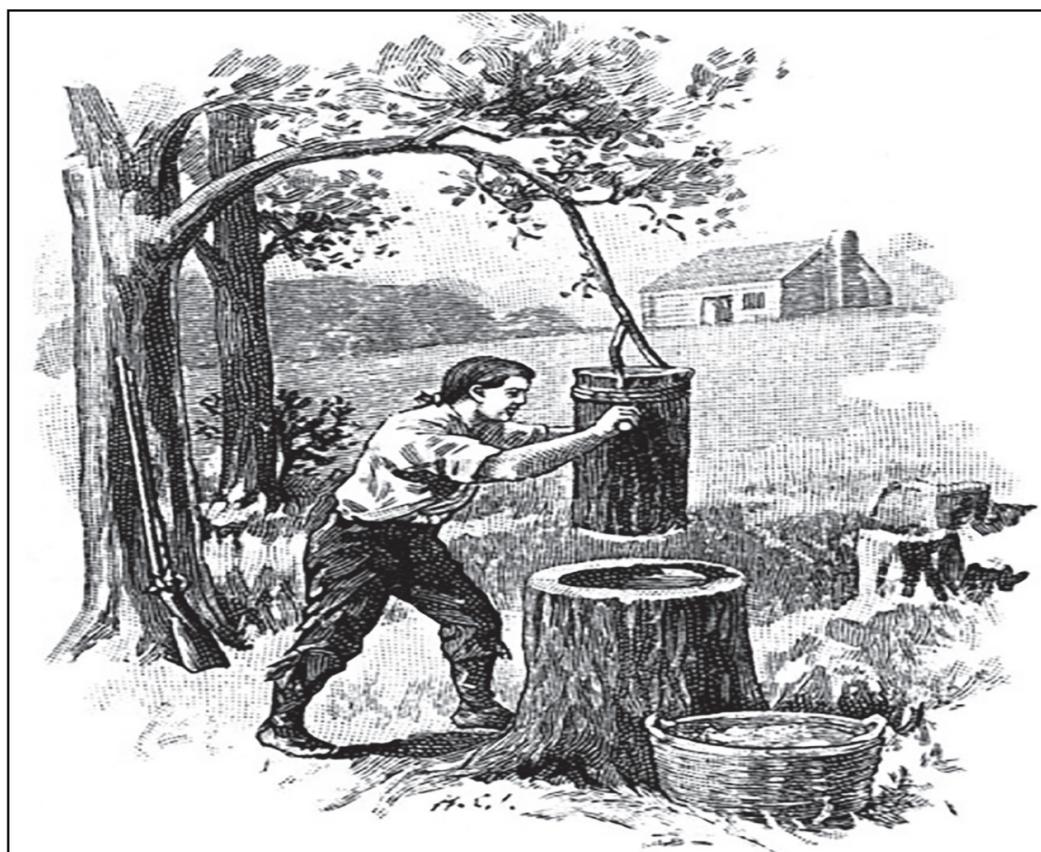
'OUR APPETITES WERE FINE'

"For several years we were almost without bread, or milk or butter," recalled Hutchins' son, John, who was born and reared on the Natchez frontier and later wrote about his experiences ("The Narrative of John Hutchins," edited by John Q. Anderson, 1958, Journal of Mississippi History). The Hutchins' favorite dish in the early years was a casserole made with potatoes that were boiled, mashed and minced in equal parts with dried and pounded venison and baked before a fire with bear oil mixed in.

"There was not one man in the country with money enough to buy a barrel of flour," said John Hutchins. "We had to join purses to do so and divide the flour according to sums paid. Flour was very high and scarce."

By the time he was eight, John Hutchins was killing game with his old flintlock, a Kentucky rifle, and working the tobacco and cornfields on his father's land. In those days, Hutchins recalled, "The country abounded in wild game, such as bears, deer, panther and cats..."

Hutchins claimed and he and fellow hunters killed 104 bears one winter hunting season: "I had from necessity become a hunter and was accustomed to roam at large through the woods in quest of game, having on such occasions sev-



DANIEL BOONE, the frontiersmen known for his hunting skills, also was handy on the farm. He's depicted here pounding corn. (Credit: D.H. Montgomery, The Beginner's American History, Boston, Ginn and Company, 1902)

eral fine dogs, a good rifle, a tomahawk, and a butcher's knife." With these weapons on him, Hutchins felt "perfectly secure and would roam through the woods for days together, sleeping near some brook or pond."

During rainy spells, he erected a camp in "only a few moments" from scratch. His shelter was made from the skins of a bear or deer, or both, wrapped tightly around poles in the form of a small hut. If the skins weren't available, Hutchins built "a comfortable house" with "cane tops tied in bundles" along with tree bark. He remained in the shelter "as long as game was plentiful in the neighborhood."

After making kills, Hutchins sliced the meat from the bones of bear and deer into thin slabs, put it in a sack made from bear or deerskin and tied it with a strip of hide.

"This was suspended to the top of a sapling until a sufficient quantity was obtained, when with a butcher's knife I would cut a part large enough to pass a loaded horse thru," wrote Hutchins. In this manner "our meat and skins were taken home."

Oil was rendered from the bear and poured into the bladder and intestines after they were cleansed. "I had on occasions a camp kettle for the purpose of rendering the oil and for cooking, but the common practice among hunters was to stick a strong cane in the ground, learning it toward the fire, on the end of which a piece of meat was stuck to broil -- three canes placed in that way one above the other."

On the top cane hung a piece of bear meat and fat. Directly under that hanging on the middle cane was a wild turkey and on the bottom cane a loin of venison. The heat of the fire, said Hutchins, "would cause the rich gravy to fall from the bear meat to that under it." Hunters plunged a knife into the bear fat and meat to help spread the gravy onto the wild turkey and venison below. Salt was added and once done the hunters enjoyed a scrumptious meal -- "delightful," said Hutchins.

"Our appetites were fine," he said. "We ate heartily, generally three times a day and once at midnight."

STEW IN POT

Historian Joe Gray Taylor (Eating, Drinking and Visiting in the South) writes: "Pioneers roasted venison on a spit over a fire, but if a pot was available, they more than likely made it the main part of a stew. Not only venison went into the pot, but also almost anything else edible the family might have, meat or vegetable. Like bear, deer were fattest in the fall, but a family in need of meat took what it could get regardless of the season. Frontier hunters were not interested in trophies. They much preferred a dry doe or a yearling to a tough old buck with impressive antlers."

John Hutchins' mother, Anne Hutchins served parched corn on her table, or pounded it into coarse meal with a mortar and pestle and make "unleavened hoe cake or ash cake to bake on the hoe blade or a board before the fireplace... she could boil the meal

in water and make corn meal mush," according to Taylor.

With "an ash hopper and leached out lye, she could soak the dry grains and make 'big hominy.' Then she could dry the big hominy and pound it into 'hominy grits,' a favorite southern dish to this day. Ordinarily years passed after people came to the frontier before they ate breadstuffs made from any grain other than corn."

BUFFALO MEAT

On April 25, 1805, Louisiana Territory explorer Meriweather Lewis reported from the Great Plains that "the whole face of the country was covered with herds of buffalo, elk & antelopes; deer are also abundant, but keep themselves more concealed in the woodland; the buffalo, elk and antelope are so gentle that we pass near them while feeding, without appearing to excite any alarm among them, and when we attract their attention, they frequently approach us more nearly to discover what we are."

Buffalo meat was a favorite of the pioneer, the hump and tongue considered choice. In the growing cities in the northeast, the tongue was considered a delicacy and by the mid-1800s smoked buffalo tongue taken from harvested animals on the western plains drew a premium in the eastern cities.

Buffalo were rarely seen around Natchez or east of the Mississippi by the 1790s. At one time buffalo herds roamed the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Rockies. In 1850, an estimated 50 million

buffalo thrived in the Great Plains, so many that when the first railroads were pushing to the Pacific it was not uncommon for brakemen to stop their trains and wait for hours for a huge herd to pass over the rails. By the late 1800s, unregulated hunting out west had decimated the herds to the point that less than 1,000 animals survived.

A buffalo is a massive animal. A bull stands 6-ft. tall at the shoulders and weighs as much as 2,000 pounds. The Indians wasted nothing when dressing a dead buffalo. The hides provided clothing -- robes, moccasin, leggings, coats, capes, belts, dresses. They were also used to make tobacco pouches, horse bridles and blankets. Bones were used for arrowheads and as hide scrapers; the horns for powder flasks, spoons, ladles, knives; the dung for fuel.

The brains and small intestines couldn't be preserved like other parts of the animal so the Indians would eat them on the spot of the kill as a celebration of victory and of life. They left the hearts in the field as symbolic seed to replenish the population.

ORCHARDS ON A LARGE SCALE

In time a frontiersman's survival cabin would be expanded or a new dwelling built. Livestock numbers increased, and the garden became a staple as dependence on the wild for survival lessened.

Historian B.L.C. Wailes in his 19th century book on Mississippi said "every article of prime necessity, which the soil could yield, was produced" by the settlers based on

"their wants. Cattle and swine required little other attention than protection from the bear and wolf of the forest, and were raised abundantly; whilst the small farms, frequently confined to a few acres, exhibited a variety of productions that is now rarely found together in the country. Indian corn, wheat, oats, rye, rice and potatoes, cotton, flax, tobacco and indigo, were almost universally cultivated, but rarely, if at all, for exportation."

"In the early stages of the settlement of the colony, many of the common conveniences of life were necessarily dispensed with, or supplied with such substitutes as ingenuity or skill could devise and fabricate from the productions of the country."

Sugar was an expensive and rare thing to find on the frontier. Without any cash, the frontiersman could trade bearskins for the supplies he needed, but often the frontiersman had to adapt.

The lone milk cow on the farm was a real luxury for the pioneer. "The ambition," said historian Joe Gray Taylor, "was to cease being a frontiersman and to become a settled farmer as soon as possible. Often more substantial settlers brought a cow with them. Her breeding might not be very good, and the diet she found in the forest would not improve her scrawny frame, but the scanty milk she provided in the months after calving was literally the difference between life and death for many a frontier child."

By the early 1800s most farms at Natchez were looking prosperous, according to historian Wailes:

"Bacon, beef, butter and poultry were plentiful."

"Orchards were on a large scale and the fruit better than at present."

"It was a common sight to see one hundred bee hives in a farm yard. Beeswax and honey were articles of export."

"The medicinal roots and herbs, rhubarb, ginger, pimento, saffron, hops, the opium poppy, were grown in the gardens."

"Many planters tanned their own leather. Shoes were almost always made on the plantation, ether by a workman belonging to the place, or by a man hired to do the work."

"Gentlemen and ladies were clad in homespun. Even the bridle-reins, girths and saddle-clothes were made at home."

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