

History of Old Sumner Bledsoe's Creek, Part One

Nothing in his life had prepared him for this sight. As far as he could see across the narrow valley the great shaggy beasts jostled for places along the creek, cows leading their nudgling calves, great bulls solemnly herding their harems, now and then butting the young ones practicing to replace them. They had not smelled him, and with their short sight and shaggy manes over their eyes, did not notice a man on horseback quietly approaching from the east, from whence the wind seldom blew. As he drew nearer he realized: they were there for the salt.

Isaac Bledsoe was a hunter, and had killed many buffalo, along the trails as they migrated. They were the best of meat, and furnished not only food but oil, fur wraps to see him through the winter, and hides, to load his two pack horses tethered a mile back up the trail. These he would convert to the food and supplies he needed for his next long hunt, as well as food, cloth and perhaps bolt of cloth and some needles and thread for his intended wife, the saucy Katherine Montgomery.



Back east in Virginia game was scarce, but not enemies. Isaac Bledsoe had used his long rifled gun on Frenchmen and their Indian allies in Lord Dunmore's War. If pressed, he might still call himself British, although there was little enough of help from them on the Virginia frontier or in Western North Carolina, wherever he happened to be. Mostly it was every man for himself, and some back east were

saying we did not need the English at all, with their hateful restrictions on a man's moves and their taxes on everything.



That didn't matter here, where he never saw an Englishman. Or anyone else, save an occasional party of Cherokee, or Chickasaw, who took no offense at a solitary hunter, and passed peacefully. Still, he took no chances, and generally camped cold or well concealed, living off venison jerky, nuts, or roasting his meat within one of the several caves he happened upon. French hunters were another matter, for they traveled with Indians accustomed to killing subjects of King George. They would take this entire herd back up the Mississippi River as hides, as indeed they did, a few years later.

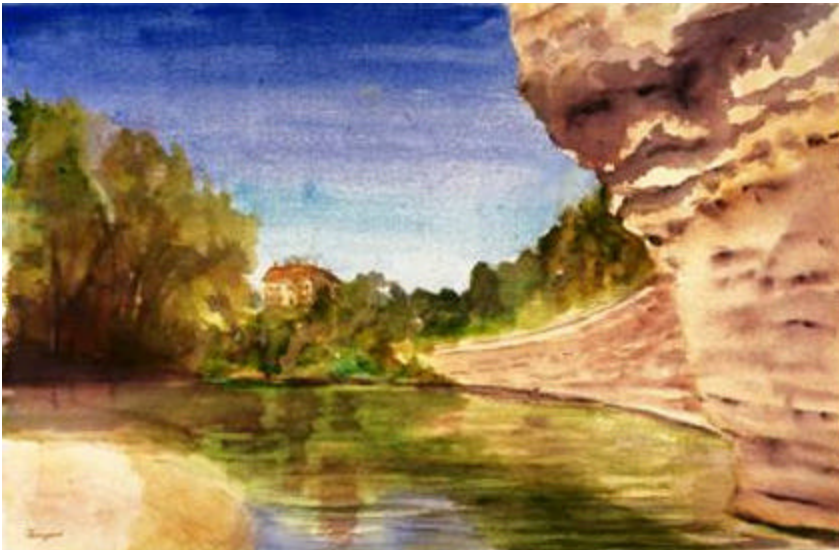
Here were enough hides to make him independent for life, with the salt to preserve them, in a rich creek bottom, surrounded by tall timber and plenty of water. What more could a man want? Yet today's want was only for meat, and some salt, to season it. As he thought to dismount, prime and aim, the herd moved like a tide, around him, his mount nickered, and he kept his seat. He remembered the little party of Carolina hunters he had camped with for a week. They had told the story of coming into the midst of such a herd one winter twilight in a canebrake. When one of them shot a bull, it charged and trampled him so deep in the muddy cane the others could not find him for two weeks, too late.

Buffalo were easy to shoot, but hard to kill, unless the shot was perfectly placed. It was not a shot to be tried from a shying horse. Then there was the work of skinning and butchering in the midst of a spooked herd. Sooner or later this milling herd would get his scent, panic and stampede. Dying was easy in the wilderness, and especially for one alone, separated by three hundred miles of mountains, wolves and wilderness from the nearest friends. He had but two pack horses, already half laden, and wondered how long Katherine might wait for him with no word before she married another. He did not dismount, but clucked and pulled his right rein to skirt the herd to the north, still upwind of him. He would return tomorrow for meat and salt. Today he would explore.

As he skirted the flat valley to the north he may have noticed the unusual mounds rising like a low fort around larger ones in the center. He had heard of such places from French prisoners and trappers who told of entire cities of large mounds up the Mississippi River. The Indians were evasive about the history of such places, their eyes widening as they described them as belonging to the ancient ones and possessing strong medicine. They held no interest for Isaac today.

What did interest him was the fresh branch watering the meadow: It had none of the sulfur stink rising from the salt lick, so he followed it up, looking for a good spring. He found it, and more, too. Here was a cave, more a sinkhole, twisting down into a cavern, where, by torchlight, he found skulls, bones and curious stone dolls, medallions and spear points. He pocketed a couple of these curiosities to show Katy and wondered if the skulls were a personal omen for himself. He did not sleep in this cave, but went back to water and move the tethered packhorses, which had stripped their glade of grass and were glad to see him and his bay stallion.

Nest morning, before sunup, he mounted and led his pack train westward, out of the spring branch valley onto a broad, fertile plain, with huge trees, broken here and there by open parks with views to a range of distant blue hills circling to the north. This was the broadest valley he had seen since leaving Virginia, a clear indication of good water ahead. Two miles later he came to the edge of a high bluff and peered down into what appeared to be a navigable stream fifty feet below. Isaac had found the creek which was to bear his name – Bledsoe's.



Next Month – The Indian Wars and Bledsoe's Fort