

Isaac Cates, Pioneer Adventurer

Historians have long recognized Isaac Cates as one of this region's earliest settlers. His story offers a glimpse into life at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the virtually untouched wilderness of the upper Ouachita River valley. Representative of the highly mobile hunters and trappers who inhabited the area, Cates typifies the adventuresome nature of this region's earliest residents.

Arkansas became a part of the United States' new Louisiana Territory in 1803. Hunters and traders still dominated the entire Ouachita Mountains area, which must have been a wilderness paradise. In 1804, Lt. James Wilkinson reported the presence of thousands of buffalo, elk, deer, and other large game in the region, along with a few French hunters. Deer skins, furs, and bear fat remained important commodities.

Isaac Cates, best known as a hunter, was among the upper Ouachita River valley's pioneers. Cates traveled to Arkansas from Tennessee in a small party of adventurers. Others in the group included men named Hignight, Blaylock, Kellogg, Kelsey, Ferrell, Stanley, and Perciful. Abner Hignight's son later told of the men's arrival in the area: "They camped on what is known as Watermelon Island on the Ouachita River ... where they lived for some time without bread, subsisting solely on wild meat of which the forest abounded."

After making their way further into the mountains surrounding the Ouachita River, Isaac Cates and his fellow hunters moved around among a number of different campsites in the vicinity of Hot Springs. When explorers Dunbar and Hunter visited the springs in 1804, they found an open log cabin, but no inhabitants. The first permanent settler at the springs did not arrive until a few years after their expedition, when Jean Emmanuel Prudhomme moved there from Louisiana. Prudhomme suffered from some sort of eye disease and went to the springs in search of a cure. After about a year, he went back to Louisiana and left his claim to Isaac Cates and John Perciful. Cates and Perciful had also heard of the waters' curative effects, camped there, and spent most of their time hunting and trapping. Perciful became one of the first to establish a business related to hosting visitors at the springs, by supplying visitors with game and other provisions.

The earliest days of settlement in the upper Ouachita River valley illustrates the frontier character of the area's sparse population. For example, in 1808 John Perciful cleared a tract of land along the Ouachita River near the hot springs and grew the first crop of corn in the entire region. Perciful often supplied visitors to the springs with food, utilizing the corn he grew along with meat obtained on hunting trips with Cates. Significantly, it was Cates' and Perciful's fellow adventurer Abner Hignight who introduced the first seed corn into the area. He traveled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to obtain the corn and distributed it to others upon his return, including Perciful.

Isaac Cates probably considered the Arkansas area to be a virtual paradise, rich with wild game. In contrast to Perciful, he continued to move around and to hunt. Cates appeared to be hunting in Hot Spring County at the time of two of the New Madrid Earthquakes: "In December of 1811, with two companions, he left his home on the Little Missouri for a buffalo hunt in the hot springs area where they expected to remain until they had killed enough meat for the season." After that memorable buffalo hunt, in 1812 Cates moved to "Warm Springs Township, about 9 miles from Warm Springs on Fourche Gulpha Creek."

In 1814 Isaac Cates developed some land in the area, only to sell it a few years later. That land would have been on the Ouachita between the Caddo-Ouachita confluence and DeRoche Creek. Before long, he moved again and tried to establish a settlement further south, this time in what would later become the Manchester community of Clark County. While Cates probably enjoyed his surroundings, it seems the backwoods nature of the place resulted in him not being able to entice others to live there.

Cates appears in several Clark County government documents other than deed records. For example, court records state that he served as a juror for several cases during 1821 terms of the Circuit Court. During the July term, Isaac Cates was issued a "tavern license" in return for a ten-dollar fee. He and his son, Isaac Cates, Jr., also served as road overseers on numerous occasions.

In 1822 Cates purchased some other land for \$700. This parcel was near the Military Road about five miles from Rockport and less than a mile east of Social Hill. After that time, the old hunter seemed to have decided to settle down as he aged and his family grew. Then, on June 24, 1841, pioneer Isaac Cates died.

Few people were privileged to witness the spread of settlement into the virtually untouched wilderness of Arkansas, and much remains to be learned about the area's earliest days and the lives of those first residents. As one of the pioneers, Isaac Cates epitomized the nineteenth-century adventurers seeking a life of freedom and opportunity in a new frontier. He found that frontier in the upper Ouachita River valley.