

# DISCOVER THE REAL STORIES BEHIND THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTERS OF THE WILD WEST

The legends of the West have fascinated people for generations. In fact, many of the frontier stories everyone knows are as tall as the tale of Paul Bunyan. Thanks to penny dreadfuls, Wild West shows, sensationalist newspaper stories, and out-right bragging, what we know of the men and women of America's frontier is often more myth than truth.

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*"There must . . . be something in me, or about me, that attracts attention, which is even mysterious to myself." – Davy Crockett, as quoted in A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee, 1834*

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*"In camp was found a book, the first of the kind I had ever seen, in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundreds." – Kit Carson, Memoirs, 1856*

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*The Real Dirt on America's Frontier Legends* separates fact from fiction, showing the legends and the evidence side by side to give readers the real story of the old West and such famous characters as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Lewis and Clark, Mike Fink, Hugh Glass, John "Grizzly" Adams, Kit Carson, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, and Calamity Jane among others.

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THE  
**REALDIRT**  
ON AMERICA'S  
FRONTIER LEGENDS

MOTAVALLI

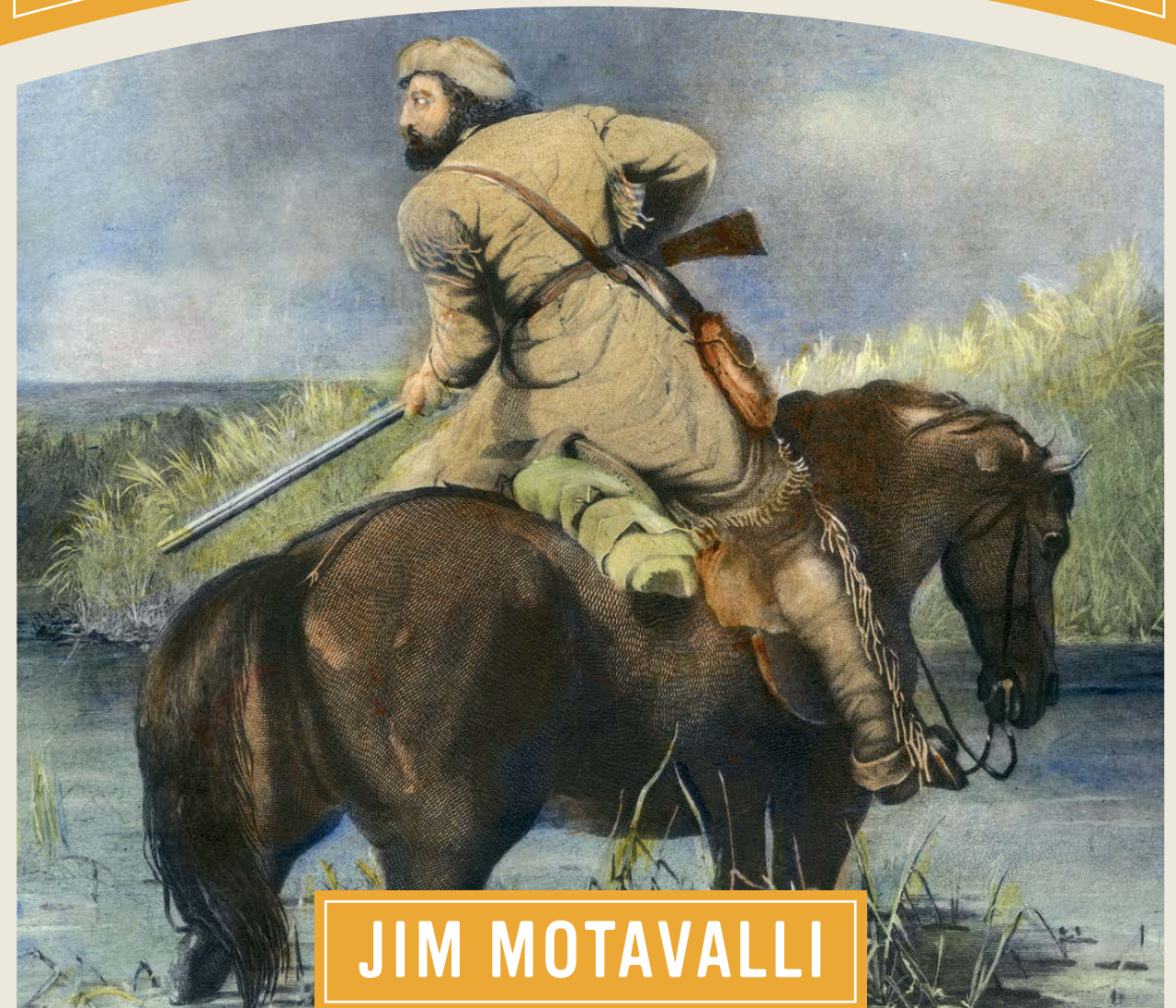


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# REALDIRT

ON AMERICA'S FRONTIER LEGENDS



JIM MOTAVALLI





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# PREFACE

## WE WERE MISINFORMED: MYTHS IN AMERICA'S FRONTIER LORE

The American frontier pushed continuously west from the 1630s to the 1880s, at the same time it was also moving both north (into Maine) and south (all the way to Florida). But it was the westward imperative that caught the public's imagination. In his historic speech at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, historian Frederick Jackson Turner expounded his "frontier thesis," which held that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."

But for the western frontier to get settled, there had to be advance scouts, explorers who—sometimes inadvertently—made the wilderness "safe for civilization." These mountain pioneers, trappers, and traders—extant after 1810—were a motley crew indeed, and often far from heroic.

True mountain men were never numerous—maybe there were three thousand of them, according to the 1980 *Marriage and Settlement Patterns of Rocky Mountain Trappers and Traders*. Only half were Anglo-Americans, from such places as Kentucky, Virginia, the Louisiana Territory, and points east. A quarter were either French-Canadian or French-American. The rest were African-American, Spanish-American, Native Americans, or Métis (mixed ancestry, Native American and European-American).

Their era didn't last long—the insatiable lust for furs, unmediated by anything resembling a conservation plan, meant that the great natural resources (and beavers in particular) were largely played out by the 1840s. But because the public couldn't get enough frontier tales, no matter how tall, many of these colorful figures were enshrined in legend as true American pioneers.

If trapping wasn't as lucrative as before, the mountain men found they could get work as guides, scouts, and Indian fighters. And then there were new opportunities—on stage.



No less a figure than legendary P. T. Barnum had an early hand in creating the legend of the American West. According to Michael Wallis's *The Real Wild West*, it was in 1843 that Barnum encountered a herd of fifteen buffalo near Boston and promptly bought them for seven hundred dollars, later staging "The Great Buffalo Hunt," complete with lariats wielded by pretend Indians.

Some twenty-four thousand people went to see the animals in Hoboken, New Jersey (admission was free, but Barnum had chartered the ferries from New York and pocketed the thirteen-cent round trip fee), and many fled in terror when the herd of buffalo broke through a fence, then took shelter in a nearby swamp. Plenty of other people came to a later Wild West show that Barnum staged. When a party of Indians visited President Abraham Lincoln in 1864, Barnum waylaid them to attract paying customers to his New York museum. Introducing an unsuspecting Yellow Bear, the chief of the Kiowas, Barnum described him as "probably the meanest, black-hearted rascal that lives in the Far West."

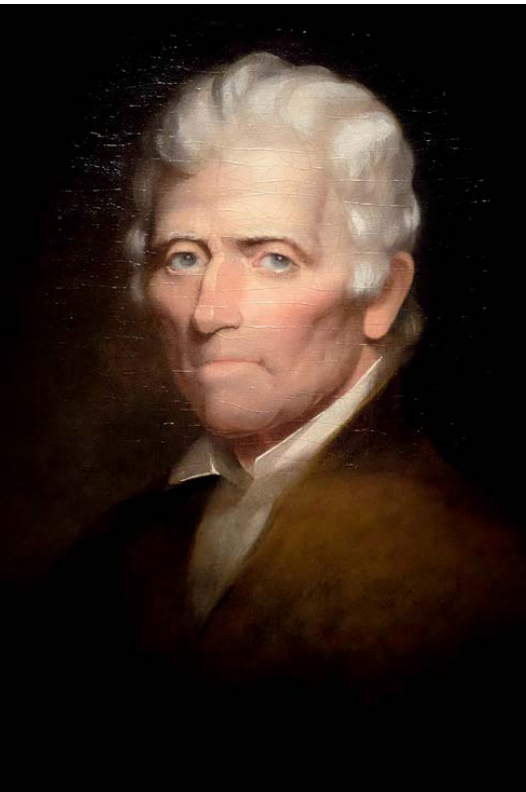


*P.T. Barnum somewhere between 1860 and 1864. He got in early on the Wild West flim-flam. (Charles D. Fredricks & Co./Library of Congress photo)*





# DANIEL BOONE



Daniel Boone became a legend after the publication of a—somewhat fanciful—1784 biography. (Alamy Stock)

## THE LEGEND

Born to Quaker parents near Reading, Pennsylvania in 1734, “Dan’l” Boone had little use for the classroom, instead finding his education in the woods. He was, as the History Channel puts it, “a scrappy lad who loved hunting, the wilderness and independence.” Boone, whose stint as a farmer was mercifully short lived, was always looking for the frontier—and finding it, too. Famously, he wanted more “elbow room.” He went first with his parents to the wilds of northwest North Carolina, then lived mostly in his beloved “Kentuck”—as wagoner, explorer, and pioneer (leading the way through the Cumberland Gap), settler (Boonesboro is named after him), Indian fighter (he even spent time as a prisoner of the Shawnees), and politician—as a state legislator.

Like Davy Crockett, he was a moral and upright man who couldn’t take civilized constraints for long, but was always off again to new adventures, new places to hunt, and new territories to discover.

## HOW THEY GET IT WRONG

Boone’s immortality can in part be attributed to one John Filson, author of the 1784 *Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*, which contains a whole first-person appendix on “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon.”

Read today, “The Adventures” clearly reflect their times. Filson did interview Boone, but the flowery language is his alone. “Thus we behold Kentucky,” Boone supposedly said,

lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; this region, so favorably distinguished by nature, now become the habitation of civilization, at a period unparalleled in history, in the midst of a raging war, and under all the disadvantages of emigration to a country so remote from the inhabited parts of the continent.

Filson’s book sold well in both America and Europe, ensuring that Boone was a frontier legend in his own time.

More than most wilderness explorers, Boone appears to have had a genuine love and enthusiasm for nature. Boone, with embellishments added by Filson, exclaimed on his perilous existence in Kentucky in 1770, surrounded by dangers, both human and animal,

The prowling wolves diverted my nocturnal hours with perpetual howlings; and the various species of animals in this vast forest, in the day time, were continually in my view. Thus I was surrounded with plenty in the midst of want. I was happy in the midst of dangers and inconveniencies.





This portrait, written one hundred years after the events, informs the view we have today.

Boone's 1823 biography reinforces this view, opining that he was a great friend to the Indians, notwithstanding that they had been his mortal enemies in the early part of his life—it was frequently remarked by him that while he could never with safety repose confidence in a Yankee he was never deceived by an Indian . . . [He] should certainly prefer a state of nature to a state of civilization, if he was obliged to be confined to one or the other.

In his own words, at least as they come down to us through not entirely reliable sources, Boone said that describing Indians as “undisciplined savages” was “a capital mistake, as they have all the essentials of discipline.”



## WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW

Daniel Boone fits his legend better than most wilderness pioneers. He really did have a love of nature, and he sought out wild places. He was the first explorer in eastern Kentucky in 1769, and despite many troubles there returned in 1773. He's credited with building the Wilderness Road through the territory (taken by, among many others, Abraham Lincoln's grandfather), pioneering the Cumberland Gap as a way in, and helping build the forts that made Kentucky habitable by settlers. He was a great hunter, and at least until the 1880s a beech tree grew near Boone's Creek Tennessee, with the legend, “D. Boon killed a bar. 1775.”

In the days before mountain men, Boone was known as a “Long Hunter,” because he'd be gone from his home in North Carolina on lengthy rambles in search of deerskins (which could fetch fifty cents each). In 1769, Boone met up with an old friend, John Finley, who got him excited about the rich opportunities for hunters in the new territory of Kentucky. The pair followed an old Cherokee trace Finley knew about, and it took them through the narrow Cumberland Gap and into the glorious prairies and forests of what became Kentucky's bluegrass country.

Boone and Finley spent two years in the wilderness with a constantly changing cast of characters. It wasn't an easy trip—Boone's brother-in-law was killed, and all the hard-won hides they'd collected were stolen by Cherokees. But they'd seen a wonderful and cultivatable land with huge pigeon roosts, vast flocks of fat wild turkeys, bears, deer, elk, and buffalo.

Despite opposition from both the government and the resident Cherokees, Boone led a group of settlers back to Kentucky in 1773. Tragedy struck again, when Boone's eldest son was killed by Indians

*George Caleb Bingham (American, 1811–1879), Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, 1851–52. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 1/4". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Nathaniel Phillips, 1890.*



Daniel Boone's reputation as an honorable man remains intact.  
(Library of Congress photo)

near the Cumberland Gap. The survivors retreated, but in 1775 Boone was again sent into Kentucky to cut a trail through the Gap to the Kentucky River. Soon he and his fellow adventurers were building cabins in the new town of Boonesborough. Kentucky settlement grew rapidly.

All of this depended on agreements with the Shawnee and Cherokees that were, of course, frequently broken in later years.

Boone acquired a great deal of property in the newly pacified territory, but like Davy Crockett he was a terrible businessman and ended up losing all of it. "He made and lost large amounts of money speculating in Kentucke land, buying and selling vast tracts,"

reports Bill O'Reilly's *Legends and Lies: The Real West*. "His common decency was his greatest business flaw, as he was too often reluctant to enforce a claim to the detriment of others."

Bedeiling Boone his whole life was a 1780 robbery that relieved him of twenty thousand dollars (an enormous sum at the time) worth of scrip and land certificates that had been entrusted to him by settlers. It



## DANIEL BOONE, POLITICIAN

Both Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett spent time as politicians, but Boone's time as a legislator is less well known. He was first elected to the Virginia legislature in 1781, elected again in 1787, then a third time in 1791. He also served as both sheriff and county lieutenant of Fayette County, Virginia, around this time.

Legislators led adventurous lives back then. In 1782, the by-then Colonel Boone fought Indians in the Battle of Blue Licks, which resulted in an ambush that killed his son, Israel. During his legislative term he was also captured for several days—and held in a coal house—as part of a broader British kidnapping plot that was to also have included Thomas Jefferson (who was then governor of Virginia).

Boone represented several different constituencies in the legislature, including, after being elected in 1787, Bourbon County (which he described as a hunter's paradise). Legislating was very part-time when Boone lived in Maysville. The area was mostly small farms, so the issues weren't exactly weighty matters of state. Maysville was a bustling place, and Boone did well there, keeping a tavern, surveying, and speculating in land and horses. He owned seven slaves at that time. His later years were less secure.

Boone was too restless to remain a politician for long, and maybe he didn't like all the backroom deals he saw going on. It's interesting to note that in 2003 a controversy arose when the Daniel Boone Parkway in the Kentucky he'd helped settle was renamed for Congressman Hal Rogers—who'd brought in the federal funding. "I'm humbled," Rogers said, but many of his constituents were outraged.

"I think we're getting a little carried away naming things after politicians," said Kentucky educator Mike Mullins. But, of course, Boone was also a politician in his day.







*There's plenty of "fake news," but Boone really did love hunting, the outdoor life and a wilderness to explore. (Library of Congress photo)*



## WHAT HE SAID

Boone may have wanted elbow room, but—at least in his purported writings—he sure liked the idea of taming nature (and its native inhabitants) for Christianity. He wrote,

Here, where the hand of violence shed the blood of the innocent; where the horrid yells of savages, and the groans of the distressed, founded in our ears, we now hear the praises and adorations of our Creator; where wretched wigwams stood, the miserable abodes of savages, we behold the foundations of cities laid, that, in all probability, will rival the glory of the greatest upon earth; and we view Kentucky, situated on the fertile banks of the great Ohio, rising from obscurity to shine with splendor, equal to any other of the stars of the American hemisphere.

He returned to this theme of a wild land civilized late in his life.

Two darling sons, and a brother I have lost by savage hands, which have also taken 40 valuable horses, and an abundance of cattle. Many dark and sleepless nights have I been a companion for owls, separated from the cheerful society of men, scorched by the summer's sun, and pinched by the winter's cold, an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness. But now the scene is changed: peace crowns the sylvan shade.

Boone also famously said, "I have never been lost, but I will admit to being confused for several weeks."

