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# They May Say What They Please: Daniel Boone and the Evidence

by John Mack Faragher

In 1834, the centennial year of Daniel Boone's birth, the old Ohio Valley frontiersman Simon Kenton was asked his opinion of his late comrade in arms. Boone had been America's preeminent frontier hero for half a century. But during the 1830s, a controversy arose over Boone's reputation. Men with a starker view of imperial destiny and racial superiority detected in Boone a man a bit too much in sympathy with the Indians. One popular writer criticized what he called the "shallowness" of Boone's leadership during the siege of Boonesborough in 1778, the central episode in the claim for Boone's heroic status. Acting on his advice, the Kentucky settlers had sent their leaders out to treat with the Shawnees. At the conclusion of those negotiations, the Indians suddenly turned on the Americans, nearly capturing them and putting a quick end to Boonesborough's resistance. "We look here in vain," the critic wrote, "for the prudence and sagacity which usually distinguished Boone." In the age of Indian removal, the notion of negotiating with natives was simply too much to take.

But Simon Kenton would have nothing to do with such talk. "He acted with wisdom in that matter," the old scout declared of Boone. Any suggestion that Boone had been duped by the Shawnees was simply ridiculous. He was merely playing for time in order to prepare the fort's defense. Anticipating possible treachery, Kenton argued, Boone had instructed sharpshooters to fire on the attackers at the first sign of trouble, and that barrage had effectively covered the retreat of the Boonesborough leaders to the fort's protection. Kenton was a quick-tempered man, but here, during his last days, he seemed resigned to the

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inevitability of revisionist opinions. He summed up his feelings with a rhetorical shrug of his shoulders: "They may say what they please of Daniel Boone."<sup>1</sup>

Kenton's remark serves as an appropriate epigraph for the historical documentation on the life of Daniel Boone. Materials include the public record of the historic events in which Boone participated, the accounts of contemporaries, a biographical narrative of his Kentucky adventures written soon after the American Revolution, and scraps of writing in Boone's own hand. The greatest bulk of the evidence, however, is reminiscence and recollection, gathered by some notable nineteenth-century historians and antiquarians. As a social historian working on a biography of Boone, I confess to being as interested in his times as in his life. The materials for a biography of Boone are rich, not merely with details about the life of an American frontier hero, but about the American frontier cultures. The things people choose to say about Boone provide us with clues about their own lives. People may say what they please, as Kenton put it. But why do they say the things they do?

During his own lifetime, Daniel Boone became the living symbol of American pioneering. He was among the first English-speaking Americans to reconnoiter the trans-Appalachian West in advance of settlement. He laid out and supervised the building of the Wilderness Road over the Cumberland Gap, which opened a path into Kentucky for thousands of emigrating families. And he was one of a group of Kentuckians who led the American struggle against the Shawnee defense of their hunting lands. But unlike the others, it was Boone's fortune to become the hero of the first popular narrative of the American Revolution in the West. "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon," published as an appendix to *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*, written by Pennsylvania schoolmaster John Filson, was published on Boone's fiftieth birthday in 1784. Soon Boone's name was instantly recognizable both in America and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lyman C. Draper (hereafter LCD) interview with Sarah Kenton McCord, December 19, 1851, in Draper Manuscripts (hereafter DM) 5S150, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; quote from John A. McClung, *Sketches of Western Adventure: Containing an Account of the Most Interesting Incidents Connected with the Settlement of the West* (Dayton, 1847; orig. pub. 1832), 54; John H. James to Mann Butler, November 12, 1835, DM 11C76-76[3].

<sup>2</sup>Important scholarship on Filson includes John Walton, *John Filson of Kentucky*

Filson interviewed Boone in Kentucky and took down the narrative, he wrote in his preface, “from his [Boone’s] own mouth.” But Filson was no mere amanuensis. He structured the narrative to read like Arthurian romance. It begins with the perilous journey. Boone leaves home “to wander through the wilderness of America, in quest of the country of Kentucke,” the language here explicitly referring to medieval legend. After crossing the mountains, Boone and his hunting companions are almost immediately taken prisoner by the Indians. They escape, but his companion is killed. Left alone and tormented by thoughts of his anxious family, Boone is nearly overwhelmed by “dreadful apprehensions.” But one day, as he mounts a commanding summit and looks out over the land below, he is struck by the wonder of the landscape:

I surveyed the famous Ohio that rolled in silent dignity, marking the western boundary of Kentucky with inconceivable grandeur. At a vast distance I beheld the mountains lift their venerable brows, and penetrate the clouds. All things were still. I kindled a fire near a fountain of sweet water, and feasted on the loin of a buck, which a few hours before I had killed.

In this moment of epiphany and communion, Filson’s Boone resolves to make Kentucke his own. He returns to his family in North Carolina, “with a determination to bring them as soon as possible to live in Kentucky, which I esteemed a second paradise, at the risk of my life and fortune.”<sup>3</sup>

After first being turned back by an Indian attack that costs the life of his eldest son, Boone finally succeeds in bringing his kin across the mountains, “my wife and daughter being the first white women that ever stood on the banks of the Kentucke river.” With other pioneers they establish the wilderness community of Boonesborough. But, in the deadly struggle that is central to romantic epic, Boone then “passes through a scene of suffer-

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(Lexington, 1956); Michael A. Lofaro, “The Eighteenth-Century ‘Autobiographies’ of Daniel Boone,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 76 (1978): 85-97; Reuben T. Durrett, *John Filson, The First Historian of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1884); and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Ohio, 1973), 268-95.

<sup>3</sup>John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (Wilmington, Del., 1784), 50-51, 55, 56-57.

ings that exceeds description." Filson related a succession of thrilling episodes in which Boone's daughter and two of her girlfriends are taken captive, then rescued by her father; Boone is captured with his men, but escapes to lead the defense of Boonesborough against savage siege; his brother is murdered and Daniel saves himself by employing the greatest cunning; and in awful culmination, dozens of soldiers, including his second-born son, are killed in a terrible ambush at the Battle of the Blue Licks. Only then, when an enraged General George Rogers Clark responds by crossing the Ohio with his army and burning the Indian towns, are the Shawnees finally "made sensible of our superiority," and give up the struggle.<sup>4</sup>

The narrative closes with Boone reflecting on his adventures. "Now the scene is changed," he says. "Peace crowns the sylvan shade. . . . I now live in peace and safety, enjoying the sweets of liberty, and the bounties of Providence, with my once fellow-sufferers, in this delightful country, which I have seen purchased with a vast expence of blood and treasure." Filson emphasized the manner in which his hero's actions articulated the destiny of the newborn nation. Indeed, the hero's exaltation lies in the prospect of Kentucky's becoming "one of the most opulent and powerful states on the continent of North-America." "My footsteps have often been marked with blood," Filson's Boone concludes.<sup>5</sup>

Two darling sons, and a brother, have I lost by savage hands, which have also taken from me forty valuable horses, and abundance of cattle. Many dark and sleepless nights have I been a companion for owls, separated from the chearful society of men, scorched by the Summer's sun, and pinched by the Winter's cold, *an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness.*

Filson wrote Boone's story as legend. In so doing he displayed a thorough familiarity with Indian warfare and captivity narratives as well as journals of spiritual revelation and growth, the perennials of colonial American literature. Even more obvious to the reader of today, perhaps, is Filson's debt to an ersatz Enlightenment philosophy of "natural man." "Thus situated,

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 60, 62, 79.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 80, 81.

many hundred miles from our families in the howling wilderness," Filson's Boone declaims,

I believe few would have equally enjoyed the happiness we experienced. I often observed to my brother, You see now how little nature requires to be satisfied. Felicity, the companion of content, is rather found in our own breasts than in the enjoyment of external things: And I firmly believe it requires but a little philosophy to make a man happy in whatsoever state he is.

At times Filson's classicism became ludicrous, as when he had Boone compare the rugged passes of the Appalachians to the ruins of the ancient Persepolis and Palmyra.<sup>6</sup>

Filson's was a work of propaganda and promotion. Although he loudly disclaimed any "lucrative motives" in the production of the book, like nearly everyone else in Kentucky, he had speculated heavily in land, buying more than twelve thousand wild acres with his share of his late father's estate. Lacking the talent for improving his holdings by axe or plow, he determined to publicize the country with pen and ink, thereby hoping to increase their resale value. "The Adventures" quickly became a minor sensation in Europe, where Boone was celebrated as an American original, a true "natural man." The book was soon reprinted in England and Ireland, and translated into French and German. In 1785; there appeared in New England a pirated, abridged version that trimmed Filson's highblown language, and this was in turn reprinted in literally scores of editions over the next fifty years. To Filson belongs major credit for creating a classic American literary form, the Western, an epic of settlement starring a reflective, frontier hero who is drawn to the natural world yet leads the way for civilization. For example, an early review of the first of James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales," *The Pioneers* (1823), noted that its hero was "modelled from the effigies of old Daniel Boone." But Filson himself partook in none of these successes. He lost all his Kentucky lands in lawsuits and, without copyright laws to protect him, realized not a shilling from the success of his narrative. He was killed by Indians in 1788, while working as a surveyor of

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 53, 58.

the site of the future city of Cincinnati.<sup>7</sup>

Filson wrote of Boone triumphant. But Filson's pathos was part of a legacy of failure that is central to the Boone history. Boone, too, lost nearly all his Kentucky properties, the combined result of the hopeless tangle of early Kentucky land claims and his personal ineptitude at business. Disappointed and disillusioned, he left the United States in 1799, moving his kith and kin to the Missouri country, where the Spanish authorities granted them large land grants. After the Louisiana Purchase, however, he again lost most of his lands because of inadequate attention to legal process. In the aftermath of this second bankruptcy, a quarter-century after his collaboration with Filson, Boone collaborated once again on an autobiographical statement, this time with a friend of the family who was also an influential lawyer. Together they drafted a memorial addressed to the Congress of the United States, designed to win Boone a land grant as compensation for his pathfinding services to the nation. In this petition Boone adopted Filson's heroic characterization as his own. "Your petitioner has devoted a long life in exploring the wilds of North America," the document read, "and he conceives [he] has been greatly instrumental by his own personal exertions, in opening the road to civilization." Yet, "Boone" continued, "he has to lament that he has not derived those personal advantages which his exertions would seem to have merited." In thus attempting to turn his public image to personal advantage, Boone clearly possessed a motive in saying some of the things he said.<sup>8</sup>

However, as his youngest son, Nathan Boone, later remarked, the language of these collaborative accounts "is none of Boone's." The truth of this complaint becomes readily apparent to anyone who reads the surviving Boone manuscripts. Although many believed Boone to be illiterate, he was in fact an avid reader and, in the words of one contemporary, "wrote what would be called a common farmer's hand." His wife Rebecca Bryan Boone, in contrast, never learned to read and write, and neither did his mother, sisters, or daughters. In that culture writing was a skill necessary only in the world of men.

<sup>7</sup>Walton, *Filson*, 7, 43, 116-17; Lofaro, "The Eighteenth-Century 'Autobiographies' of Daniel Boone," 86-87; Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 399-400.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Boone (hereafter DB), Petition to United States Senate, ca. 1810, DM 23C1.

July the 7<sup>th</sup> 1786

Sir

The Land has been Long Surveyed  
 and Not Knowing Whither Money would  
 be Hadly Was the Reason of my not returning  
 the works however the may be returned  
 when you please but I must first have a  
 Another Copy of the Entry as I have lost that  
 I had when I lost my plotting instruments  
 and only have the short field Notes just  
 the Course Distance and Corner trees pray send  
 me a Another Copy that I may know how  
 to give it the proper bounding agreeable  
 to the Location and I will send the plot to  
 the office a munitly if you Charge it the Expenses  
 as follows viz Surveyors fees 1 3 8  
 Registers fees 1 11 4  
 Charmer and Marker 11 1/2  
 permissiions for the tower 2 0 0  
 you will also send a Copy of the agreement betw<sup>en</sup> us  
 overland and my self when I had the Warrant  
 I am Sir your obedt servant

Daniel Boone

Original Lett. of Daniel Boone  
 to John Overton of Lincoln Co  
 to be left at Elijah Smiths Lexington Va.

KHS Library Collection

“Reading Boone’s rough-hewn penmanship and deciphering his idiosyncratic spelling, one comes away with the impression that, for him, writing was a painful and slow process.”

Less than a hundred Boone autograph manuscripts of any significance survive. It is undoubtedly the case that many pieces were lost over the years. But, as a niece of Boone's once put it, truth was, "that was not the time for corresponding much."<sup>9</sup>

Reading Boone's rough-hewn penmanship and deciphering his idiosyncratic spelling, one comes away with the impression that, for him, writing was a painful and slow process. Nevertheless, he could command a distinctive and forceful written voice. His was one of the first letters written from Kentucky after the devastating American loss at the Blue Licks in 1782. Boone reported to the governor of Virginia that "sixty six of our Brave Kantetuckians fell" at the hands of the Indians, "the Matchless Massacraed victoms of their Unprecedented Crueltie." "I have Encouraged the people here on this Country all that I Could," he wrote, but warned that without immediate support, "I Can no longer Encourage my Neighbours, nor my Seff to resque our Lives here at Such Extraordinary hazzards." In his words we hear the direct, no-nonsense approach that so appealed to his contemporaries. We hear it again in a letter written to a business associate during his brief and unsuccessful career as a Kentucky merchant and land speculator. "Sorry to here of the Dath of your brother," he wrote, "as I make No Doubt it puts you to many Disadvantages. However We must submit to providence and provide for the Living and talk of our Lands."<sup>10</sup>

Tantalizing as these and other fragments are, they alone do

<sup>9</sup>LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, October and November 1851, DM 6S128-29, 6S269, 6S281; McClung, *Sketches of Western Adventure*, 79; John D. Shane (hereafter JDS), interview with William Suddarth, November 1840, DM 12CC63 and 12CC96; DB deposition, September 15, 1796, DM 4C93-95; Dr. S. Paul Jones to LCD, May 13, 1887, DM 21C1; Rebecca Boone Lamond to LCD, August 23, 1845, DM 22C37[3]. On the illiteracy of Boone women: for Rebecca Bryan Boone see indenture of sale of farm in North Carolina, February 21, 1764, DM 8C103-103[3]; for his mother, Sarah Morgan Boone, see indenture of sale of farm in Pennsylvania, 1750, DM 25C3; for his daughter, Jemima Boone Callaway, see the testimony in Morgan Bryan to LCD, May 27, 1855, DM 23C93.

<sup>10</sup>DB to Governor of Virginia [?], September 11, 1782, HM 39952, Huntington Library; DB to Governor of Virginia, August 30, 1782, in John Bakeless, *Daniel Boone: Master of the Wilderness* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1989; orig. pub. 1939), 308, which copies the original from the Virginia State Archives rather than the "corrected" version in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (New York, 1968; orig. pub. 1883), 3: 275-76; DB to Charles Yancey, May 30, 1785, DM 14C14-14[1]. I prefer to leave the spelling of these documents in their original form, and forego the interruption of the Latin [*sic*], although I occasionally add minor punctuation for clarity.

not constitute material sufficient for a biography. For the most complete portrait of Boone, one turns to the testimony of those who knew him or who claimed knowledge of Boone "traditions." One important collector of this evidence was John Shane, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister so fascinated with the everyday life of early Kentucky that he never married, and never took a settled pastorate, but instead chose the hard life of traveling missionary to the backcountry. In this way he could devote himself to interviewing hundreds of old pioneers, whose testimony he meticulously transcribed in his small, cramped hand into leather-bound notebooks. Shane had an ear for the speech and the idiom of upland-South folk, and he recorded their frequently earthy language and allusions without embarrassment. "My aim," Shane wrote of his historical informants in the 1840s, "has been to get of them what they themselves know." Talking with one, he carefully avoided alluding "to what any other person had been telling me," in order to avoid shaping their testimony. John Shane was an early master of what we now would call oral history.<sup>11</sup>

After Shane's untimely death in the 1850s, his notebooks were purchased by Lyman Copeland Draper, who added them to his own growing hoard of documents, correspondence, and transcriptions. Draper, the most important collector of frontier historiana in the nineteenth century, was not as historically open-minded as Shane. He liberally edited and expurgated the testimony he recorded, clipped and sold autographs from original manuscripts, annotated them with red ink, even crossed out and corrected their spelling. His efforts were directed toward writing and publishing a series on "The Lives of the Pioneers." The collection he described as his "lumber yard of history," in which he could "collect, stack up, keep and season, the materials out of which, in future, a most useful and accurate history may be constructed." When Draper showed young Francis Parkman a prospectus of this collection, the future historian was very impressed. "You have already dispatched the laborious part and have got nothing but pleasure before you," Parkman wrote to Draper in

<sup>11</sup>JDS, memo, ca. 1840s, DM 12CC78. For a brief biographical sketch of Shane see Otto A. Rothert, "Shane, the Western Collector," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 4 (1930): 1-16.

the mid-1840s, "while I, for my part, have the greater part of delving and rummaging still to look forward to." But while Draper loved the "delving and rummaging," writing petrified him. "Why don't you publish," a friend once wrote him, "[or] tell me when (Oh When!) will it appear?" But very little ever appeared. Draper labored for years on a biography of Boone, leaving at his death a handwritten manuscript of several hundred pages, but he was never able to commit to print. "I have wasted my life in puttering," he wrote in despair towards the end. "I can write nothing so long as I fear there is a fact, no matter how small, as yet ungarnered." Draper made his own contribution to the Boone legacy of failure.<sup>12</sup>

His triumph, however, was the collection itself, later to become the heart of the archive of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the granddaddy of state historical libraries, which Draper founded and directed for over thirty years. His papers, filling more than one hundred twenty reels when they were microfilmed in the twentieth century, constitute the single most important archive for the early history of the Mississippi Valley. Draper traveled some forty thousand miles on research trips through the backcountry, mostly alone and on horseback, interviewing pioneers and collecting materials. Infamous throughout the Upper South as "the man who stole all our documents and carried them off to Wisconsin," Draper and his efforts probably preserved those materials from what would have been almost certain destruction during the Civil War, and in addition captured the testimony of hundreds of aged pioneers.<sup>13</sup>

A great deal of that testimony came from Boone kin. Draper obtained his single most detailed account in 1851 from Nathan and Olive Van Bibber Boone, Daniel's youngest son and daughter-in-law, with whom the old man had lived during his last years. Nathan and Olive Boone boarded Draper in their isolated dog-trot cabin in Green County, Missouri, for three weeks, and as

<sup>12</sup>LCD, "First Settlement of Cincinnati," mss., ca. 1840s, Codex 59, Durrett Collection, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; William B. Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman Copeland Draper* (Madison, 1954), 64, 71; LCD quoted in Reuben Gold Thwaites, "Lyman C. Draper: A Memoir," *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 1 (1903): xvii.

<sup>13</sup>Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*, vii. For the collection itself see Josephine L. Harper, *Guide to the Draper Manuscripts* (Madison, 1983).

he was about to depart presented him with the surviving papers of their father, "carefully rolled up in the pieces of deer skin in which he left them." On his way home, the trunk containing all these materials fell off the back of the stage, and it was three agonizing days before the trunk was found and returned to Draper by "an honest Negro man." In other interviews, scores of Boone grandchildren offered their own recollections, as well as stories heard from parents, aunts, and uncles. Kinfolk scattered from Pennsylvania to North Carolina — from Kentucky all the way west to California — lived in close-knit, intermarrying rural communities. Contacts with one cousin lead invariably to conversations and notes with another. Neighbors, associates, friends, enemies, and the descendants of all these, had the opportunity to say their piece. Not surprisingly, the testimony of one informant was frequently in conflict with the views of another. In her attempts to get her uncle and father to agree on certain details, Boone descendant Mary Emily Bryan came to grief. She had raised his questions, she wrote to Draper in 1889, "hoping they would come to decisions that would do for Historic facts: but they disagree so much . . . and are both so sure they are right, that I think their memories are both defective."<sup>14</sup>

One problem was that Boone had not been much of a talker, sharing little in common with the boasting, self-promoting frontiersmen of American legend. He was, one Kentuckian remembered, "quiet, of few words and to the point," and virtually everyone who had known Boone agreed on this description. One old Missouri woman noted that like "all of the old hunters, who spent most of their time in the deep solitude of the then unbroken woods," Boone spoke in "low, soft tones," with an "almost effeminate voice." No, a descendant declared, "Boone was no chatterbox, nor did he devote his time in repetition of extended details of [his] many hairbreadth escapes and deadly encounters." He "ever kept his own council, and made but few confidential friends," and thus, this kinsman worried, the information for a true Boone biography probably did not exist. Nevertheless, countless people claimed to possess "an inexhaustible fund of information" about him. "I know men who would sit and manu-

<sup>14</sup>Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*, 58-59, 133; Mary Emily Bryan to LCD, February 21, 1889, DM 4C38.



**This rifle, part of the Kentucky Historical Society Museum collection, is one of many artifacts attributed to Daniel Boone.**

facture out of whole cloth every word they utter of Daniel Boone," he warned, and urged Draper to be "on your guard against all such for they are but imposters." Towards the end of his life Boone himself had complained of false reports. "Many heroic actions and chivalrous adventures are related of me which exist only in the regions of fancy," he told a visitor a year before his death in 1820. "With me the world has taken great liberties, and yet I have been but a common man."<sup>15</sup>

In short, problems abound with these materials. Some people supplied eyewitness accounts, others hearsay information gained at second or third hand. Some recalled relatively recent events, others a past reckoned not merely in years but in half-centuries. Some testimony was clear and easily corroborated; some was internally inconsistent and contradicted by other evidence. The historian must carefully assess the reliability of each piece of evidence. But these accounts offer more than simply the oppor-

<sup>15</sup>LCD interview with George Edwards, September 21, 1863, DM 19S83; Elizabeth Corbin to M. D. Lewis, March 1, 1868, DM 16C97; Jones to LCD, DM 21C1; Boone quoted in Cincinnati *National Republican*, August 19, 1823, copying the New York *Statesman*, clipping in DM 16C67.

tunity to reconstruct the facts of Daniel Boone's life. They are the stories of humble men and women, written out laboriously in response to queries with blunt pencils on the backs of envelopes or advertising flyers, or tales told in backwoods cabins or around campfires and taken down verbatim. For the historian of American frontier culture, these are a treasure trove.

Boone's family life offers an instructive case for examining in more detail the things that these people said. On the subject of his marriage to Rebecca Bryan, Boone descendants spoke with a single voice. As one granddaughter eulogized, Rebecca was "the Companion of his toils, Pleasures, Sorrows for more than a half century," and Daniel "loved her devotedly — living so long together he hardly could live without her." But outside the family, others wondered: if Boone could not live without her, why did he insist on being away from her and the nine children for such long periods? In the spring of 1769, for example, in the words of the Filson/Boone narrative, "I resigned my domestic happiness for a time, and left my family and peaceable habitation . . . to wander through the wilderness of America, in quest of the country of Kentucke." He was gone for two whole years, not coming back to their North Carolina home until 1771, despite several earlier opportunities to return. Even when not on such long hunts, Boone typically would be away hunting and trapping for months at a time, while Rebecca and the children cropped the farm. As each of the five boys reached young manhood, they joined their father in the woods, leaving the farming to their mother and sisters.<sup>16</sup>

These family patterns provoked a good deal of comment. John Shane gathered Boonesborough gossip that Boone "wouldn't live at home" because he "didn't live happily with his family, [and] didn't like to work." These rumors found expression in a story, first recorded in the 1840s but probably circulating for years before, that during one of Boone's long absences in Kentucky, Rebecca had an affair and bore an illegitimate child. When Boone returned home to North Carolina, so the story goes, Rebecca met him, weeping, at their cabin door. "What's the matter," asks Boone. "You were gone so long," says she, "we had

<sup>16</sup>Mrs. E. L. Cushow to LCD, May 25, 1885, DM 21C45[2-3]; Filson, *Kentucke*, 50. The Boones had ten children, but one son died in infancy.

supposed you dead." In her sorrow she had found company with another man, and now there was a new baby in the house. "Oh well," says Boone, "the race will be continued. Whose is it?" "Why," says Rebecca, "it's your brother's." Here the tale records a long pause. "So much the better," says Boone finally, "its all in the family."<sup>17</sup>

In his pursuit of Boone evidence, Draper relentlessly sought the truth behind this tale. Stephen Hempstead, a Missouri neighbor during Boone's last years, wrote him that Boone himself had told a similar story. According to Hempstead, late one night Boone got to talking and told him that after escaping from captivity among the Shawnees he had returned home to find

his wife quite lusty and in great distress on account of her peculiar situation. She had supposed him dead &c &c. He enquired who would be the father of the child when born. She told him a certain Boone. He answered, you need not distress yourself so about it, I do not blame you one bit. I could not get away from the Indians any sooner to come to you. It will be a Boone any how, and besides I have been obliged to be married in Indian fashion a couple of times. Pho'pho! Dry up your tears and welcome me home. And that he said was the last of it.

"Mrs. Boone was present at the time he told me," Hempstead wrote to Draper, and as old Boone spoke, "she made her knitting needles fly very fast I can assure you."<sup>18</sup>

Important details of this and the previous version of the story do not withstand historical scrutiny. The accepted birthdates of the Boone children will not even approximately corroborate a conception for Rebecca Bryan Boone occurring during either her husband's first Kentucky exploration from 1769 to 1771, or his Shawnee captivity in 1778. "The main fact is not new to me — I presume there is some foundation for it," Draper wrote to Hempstead, "but not at the time you indicate." Draper collected numerous other variants of the story of what in his notes he came to refer to as "Boone's surprise." In the 1880s, he tracked down an octogenarian who reported that his father, one of Boone's North Carolina hunting cronies, had been with Boone when they

<sup>17</sup>JDS interviews with Nathaniel Hart, Jr., ca. 1843, DM 17CC195; Josiah Collins, ca. 1840s, DM 12CC97; and Robert Wickliffe, Sr., April 1859, DM 15CC84.

<sup>18</sup>Stephen Hempstead to LCD, February 15, 1862, DM 16C76.

returned from an extended two-year absence in the early 1760s to find the new baby. “The child was layed to his brother Ned Boone,” the man reported, but “Daniel didn’t seem to care much.” Rebecca offered the explanation that Edward, or Neddy as he was known in the family, “looked so much like Daniel — she couldn’t help it.” The children’s birthdates and the evidence on Boone’s absences made this version plausible, and Draper judged it to be the one closest to the truth.<sup>19</sup>

One historian recently labeled this evidence “traditional and circumstantial.” As a nineteenth-century informant put it, “it may be a damned lie or a damned fact, I tell it as it was told me.” But then nearly all the material which allows Boone’s story to be told with veracity and verisimilitude is equally traditional and circumstantial. If Boone biographers demanded absolute corroboration for each piece of evidence, their books would be thin affairs indeed. Faced with the scarcity of evidence, biographers frequently have shown far too little regard for rules of evidence, repeating stories while acknowledging their suspicious reliability. Given the general limitations of the Boone documentation, however, there is perhaps as much corroboration on the question of “Boone’s surprise” as for any other incident in his private life.<sup>20</sup>

Viewed from a different angle, this evidence also suggests some interesting things about frontier culture. Such stories were part of a genre in circulation about separated couples. One told of a hunter who outstays his welcome at a friend’s Missouri cabin. “As a ruse to get him off home,” his host arranges to have word sent one evening that the folks in Kentucky fear he has died, and that his wife is about to marry another man. The next dawn finds him riding furiously home. In another, a man has been gone so long that his wife is to be married “to a much younger and likelier man.” At that very moment the absent husband reappears. “Well, Hugh,” the frustrated bride exclaims with bitter disap-

<sup>19</sup>LCD to Hempstead, February 23, 1862, DM 16C77; Silas W. Parris to LCD, November 3, 1884, DM 2C77. Hesseltine, *Pioneer’s Mission*, 285, says that in the 1880s Draper “explored — and dismissed — the oft-repeated tale of Rebecca Boone’s illegitimate son.” What he fails to note is that Draper concluded the child had not been a son, but “probably a daughter.” See Draper’s opinion, expressed in his note, DM 6C22[2-3].

<sup>20</sup>Michael Lofaro, introduction to the 1989 reprint of Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, xix; Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 1883, clipping in DM 3C75.

pointment, "are you alive yet?" Such humorous anecdotes functioned as moral tales about the problems of frontier marriage. They reflected a tension between conventional prescriptions, which condemned prolonged male absence from the home as an aspect of family disorder, and the actual household division of labor, in which women remained at home farming, while men left the household for long periods to go hunting.<sup>21</sup>

Seeking resolution for this dilemma, the folk raconteurs of these tales did not blame women for their actions. In one story Rebecca Boone "cries for shame," in a second she is "wonderfully mortified ore the matter," and in a third she "falls upon her knees" at her husband's approach. But Boone, who commands the voice of moral authority, bids her "to get up and do so no more." No pious moralizing is offered about fallen women. In the words of one informant, one never hears "a whisper to the disadvantage of Mrs. Boone" in these tales. Accountability for the crisis is placed squarely on male shoulders. In one variant, for example, Boone and a hunting companion return to find *both* their wives in the embarrassing situation of conceiving and delivering babies in their husbands' absence. Boone manfully accepts responsibility for Rebecca's, but his companion makes "his wife put her child away." Hearing this, Boone seeks out his friend and insists that he take the child back. "We have acted worse, if possible, than the women had," says Boone, for "if we had stayed at home, nothing of this kind would have happened." In another version, told by a woman, Rebecca herself gets a variation on this line. Says she to Boone when he appears: "You had better have staid at home & got it yourself."<sup>22</sup>

Not only do these stories highlight important cultural tensions, but the manner in which they handle Boone's role in his own family crisis offers an instructive contrast with biographers who for many years suppressed the whole incident for fear it would sully the reputation of an American hero. "I could not well use it in a published biography," Draper wrote about

<sup>21</sup>LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, DM 6S85; JDS interview with Jacob Stevens, ca. 1840s, DM 12CC136.

<sup>22</sup>JDS interview with Josiah Collins, DM 12CC97; Stephen Hempstead to LCD, February 15, 1863, DM 16C75; Samuel Alley to LCD, April 28, 1884, DM 6C70-71[1]; John Rader, Sr., to LCD, April 28, 1885, DM 6C22[2-3]; LCD interview with Stephen Cooper, October 16, 1889, DM 11C101.

“Boone’s surprise,” and he pursued the evidence, as he explained to one concerned family member, only so he “could more carefully & guardedly” avoid the matter in print. The storytellers, on the other hand, by making Boone’s principal concern the calming of Rebecca’s fears, conclude the tale not by soiling the character of the family but by easing Boone back into its bosom. “And so,” the tale ends, he “hushed her up,” then “gathered up the family, brother and all, and went on to Kentucky.” People from Boone’s own cultural background were far more understanding and tolerant of the stresses of frontier life than were the historians who later wrote the biographies.<sup>23</sup>

The oral testimony also provides interesting information about Boone’s second family. In 1778, when he was captured by the Shawnees and taken to their village on the Little Miami north of the Ohio, he was adopted by Chief Blackfish. Old Boone later told a granddaughter that his Indian parents were consistently “friendly and sociable and kind” to him. Blackfish always addressed Boone as “my son,” and Boone afterward described his Indian father as “one of Nature’s noblemen.” In later years, a kinsman remembered, Boone referred to his Indian mother as “old mamma,” and spoke of her “with the greatest kindness.” The memoirist further declared that he was more impressed by the continuing love Boone clearly felt for his Indian mother than anything else the old man ever expressed to him. Boone also grew attached to Blackfish’s two little daughters and frequently indulged them with presents. Many years after Boone’s death, one of his granddaughters encountered an old Shawnee woman in Kansas who unexpectedly showered her with affection upon learning of her ancestry: the old woman was one of Boone’s adopted Shawnee sisters.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>LCD to Hempstead, February 23, 1862, DM 16C77; LCD to Sarah Hunter, May 22, 1854, DM 22C62; JDS interview with Josiah Collins, DM 12CC97; JDS interview with Robert Wickliffe, Sr., DM 15CC84; Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 1883, clipping in DM 3C75. Lawrence Elliott, *The Long Hunter: A New Life of Daniel Boone* (New York, 1976), frankly discusses the question of illegitimacy; but on this, and other key incidents in Boone’s life, Elliott employs such fanciful readings of the evidence that the narrative becomes as much fiction as fact.

<sup>24</sup>LCD interview with Delinda Boone Craig, DM30C53, 30C57; Bettie T. Bryan to LCD, September 5, 1884, DM 22C28-28[2]; LCD interview with Susan Callaway Howell, July 12, 1868, DM 23S233; LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, DM 6S117-19; J. W. Cunningham, “Daniel Boone and His Sons in Missouri,” Frankfort (Ky.) *Capital*

A fellow prisoner of the Shawnees later declared himself at a loss to understand "how Boone could be whistling & contented among the dirty Indians while he was so melancholy." Boone's place within Blackfish's family must have had a great deal to do with it. But it seems that he was also very much at ease with Shawnee ways. While one must not minimize the differences between the frontier cultures of Indians and Americans, there were certainly interesting similarities. Both Kentuckians and Shawnees established log-construction settlements based on farming, livestock grazing, and hunting. Both were geographically mobile, emphasized personal freedom and independence, structured their social life around the loyalties of family and clan, and were localistic in their attachments, valuing primary groups over allegiance to tribe or nation. Both were warlike and frequently violent, believers in honor and vengeance, adherents to the ancient law of blood.

One of the most striking similarities was their gender division of labor. Boone once told a granddaughter that when as a captive he first arrived at the Shawnee village on the Little Miami, he was assigned to work in the fields. "No," Boone remembered declaring to the Indians, "I'm a chief at home, and don't work, and I won't be made a squaw of here." Frontier men, whether Kentuckian or Shawnee, were hunters and warriors, not farm laborers. Thereafter, Blackfish said to Boone, he would work with the men. With such similarities easing the way to assimilation, Boone developed an affection for his Shawnee family that was so deep, he told one relative, that when he was finally forced to choose loyalty to his wife, children, and Kentucky community over life with the Indians, "he really felt sorry."<sup>25</sup>

This was precisely what troubled Boone's critics. After the siege of Boonesborough had been lifted, one faction among the settlers charged him with being a Shawnee sympathizer and a Tory

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*Gazette*, July 29, 1880, clipping in DM 16C29. Aside from Stephen Hempstead's comment about Boone marrying "in Indian fashion a couple of times," I find no evidence that Boone took a Shawnee wife during his captivity, despite assertions to the contrary by, among others, Thomas D. Clark in *A History of Kentucky* (New York, 1937), 77-78, and Elliott in *The Long Hunter*, x, 124-25, 154-55.

<sup>25</sup>LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, DM 6S119-22; LCD interview with Delinda Boone Craig, November 1866, DM 30C53; LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, DM 6S117-19; John C. Boone to LCD, November 10, 1890, DM 16C132; Elijah Bryan to LCD, May 12, 1885, DM 4C33.

besides, and brought him before a court-martial. In this proceeding Boone was acquitted by his Kentucky comrades, who then, as a further vote of confidence, promoted him to the rank of major. But so stung was he by the charges that he never mentioned them or the trial to his family. Years later, descendants of Richard Callaway, Boone's principal Boonesborough opponent, continued to rehearse their suspicions. One of Callaway's sons offered Draper "a long and interesting acct of Boons attempted treachery." Callaway's daughter, who admitted she could "never bear an Indian's presence," said that the Shawnees surrounding Boonesborough called often for Boone, and he "would rise up, and go out freely to and among the Indians. Did so repeatedly." She believed that "Boone was willing & wished to surrender" the fort, and taught her children that "Boone never deserved any thing of the country." But the truth was that Boone had made the hard personal choice, then led the defense of Boonesborough bravely, even brilliantly. It was easy to misinterpret sympathy for disloyalty — or even treason.<sup>26</sup>

These critical views found a new audience in the 1830s. As Andrew Jackson set the nation on an intransigent course of Indian removal, an "Indian hater" school of American thought rose to cultural prominence and respectability. The new tone of the times was reflected in the work of William Gilmore Simms, a novelist who in 1835 declared it "utterly impossible that the whites and Indians should ever live together and agree." Thus, one of Draper's correspondents urged him to let reports of Boone's regard for the Shawnees "quietly sleep," since they were "not much to his credit." A later biographer reexamined the evidence and assured his readers that Boone was an Indian hater, something he most assuredly never was. It was this kind of revisionism that angered old Simon Kenton, who, according to his daughter, sought out the company of old Indian associates during his last years.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Joseph Martin to William Martin, October 15, 1844, DM 24C41; JDS interview with Richard French, ca. 1840s, DM 12CC205; JDS interview with Major Jesse Daniel, ca. 1843, DM 11CC94. The sole piece of evidence on Boone's court-martial is the 1827 reminiscence of Daniel Trabue, who was an eyewitness; the manuscript is in DM 57J, but it is more accessible in the excellent edition of Chester Raymond Young, ed., *Westward into Kentucky: The Narrative of Daniel Trabue* (Lexington, 1981).

<sup>27</sup>J. W. Cunningham to LCD, January 16, 1883, DM 16C31; Reuben Gold Thwaites,

**BOONE**  
**PROCESSION ORDER.**

It is requested that all business be suspended, and that all persons unite, and strictly observe the following *Order of Proceession*, for the re-interment of the remains of the great Pioneers of the West.

**DAVID BOONE AND WIFE,**  
in the Frankfort Cemetery Grounds, on Saturday, the 13th instant.

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**PROGRAMME.**

MARSHAL—GEN. JOHN T. PRATT.

No. 1. Military. Music.  
    Fall Bearers. HEARSE. Fall Bearers.

No. 2. Relatives and Companions of David Boone and Wife.  
    *Marshal—Gen. Leslie Combs.*

No. 3. Officers and Soldiers of the Late War.  
    L. HORD & JOHN WATSON, ASSISTANT MARSHALS.

No. 4. Committee of Arrangements.  
    Orator of the Day and Officiating Clergy.

No. 5. President and Members of the Frankfort Cemetery Company.

No. 6. Governor, Suite, and Officers of the State, and United States Departments.

No. 7. Judges of Superior and Inferior Courts, and Officers.

No. 8. Members of Congress and Legislature.

No. 9. Trustees and Officers of the City.  
    J. SWIGERT & COL. E. H. TAYLOR, ASSISTANT MARSHALS.

No. 10. The Rev. Clergy and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Conference.  
    DOCTOR E. H. WATSON, ASSISTANT MARSHAL.

No. 11. Masonic Order.

No. 12. Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

No. 13. City Fire Companies.  
    W. M. TODD, ASSISTANT MARSHAL.

No. 14. Male and Female Sunday Schools and Teachers.  
    SAMUEL HARRIS, ASSISTANT MARSHAL.

No. 15. Day Schools and Teachers.  
    MARSHAL—GEN. L. DESHA.

No. 16. Officers of the Militia in Uniform.

No. 17. Military. Music.  
    E. H. CRITTENDEN, ASSISTANT MARSHAL.

No. 18. Ladies and Gentlemen on Foot.

No. 19. Gentlemen on Foot.  
    MARSHAL—MAJ. E. H. FIELD.

No. 20. Strangers and Citizens in Carriages.

No. 21. Strangers and Citizens on Horseback.  
    R. KNOTT, ASSISTANT MARSHAL.

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A guard will be stationed at the Cemetery Gate, to prevent the entrance of any one, until the Proceession have passed.

At 10 o'clock, the 1st Gun—Divisions will form.

At 10½ o'clock, the 2nd Gun—Proceession will move off.

Each Division taking its position in line per marginal numbers, on the march: and pass down Wapping, thence Washington to Main and out Main to the place of interment.

The Proceession will return in reversed order of Divisions, the body of Military on the right.

No horseman admitted into the Cemetery Gate.

No carriage permitted to leave the Cemetery Avenues except under permit of a Marshal.

A. W. DUDLEY,  
*Chief Marshal.*

Frankfort, Sept. 12, 1845.

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NOTE—Nos. 1 to 9, will form in Wapping street. No. 10, near the Presbyterian Church, or any point chosen by them. Nos. 11, 12 and 13, on Wapping foot ways. Nos. 14 and 15, on Wapping foot ways below Washington. Nos. 16 and 17, on St. Clair street. Nos. 18 and 19, on Washington foot ways. Nos. 20 and 21, on adjoining entry streets. All Flags, Banners, &c., will be brought out by the Divisions having them. A staff for each Marshal. A badge to each member of the Committee.

KHS Library Collection

In his old age, Boone generally did not appreciate visitors of any stripe. According to Nathan Boone, “anticipating their prying curiosity and inquisitiveness, he would take his cane and walk off to avoid them.” But he brightened at the visits of Shawnee friends who had migrated across the Mississippi after the Revolution. “The Indians had treated him through his life better than the whites,” he once told a relative. One day Nathan’s young daughter, seeing strange horses tied up before the house, asked her grandmother who had come. “Your grandfather has got some visitors, old friends,” Rebecca told her, “some of the identical old Shawanoes with whom he was a prisoner.” In the fall of each year Boone and these Shawnees paid visits to each others’ homes. They would do some hunting, then sit up late around the evening campfire. A grandson wrote Draper that on these occasions he would listen to the Shawnee men “talk over their old narotives.” Their stories reflected their own distinctive point of view. “Dan, you remember when we had you prisoner,” one tale began, “and our chief adopted you as his son, and you and he made an agreement that we would all go to Boonesburow, and you would make them all surrinder, and, all bury the Tomahack & all live like Brothers & Sisters.” And the tale ended, “then you rember we were all glad.” The Shawnees, too, said what they pleased of Daniel Boone.<sup>28</sup>

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*Daniel Boone* (New York, 1902), 58-59; LCD interview with Sarah Kenton McCord, DM 5S171.

<sup>28</sup>LCD interview with Nathan and Olive Boone, DM 6S277, 6S124; Joseph Bryan to LCD, December 14, 1866, DM 22C23[2-3]; LCD interview with Delinda Boone Craig, 30C66-67; John C. Boone to LCD, DM 16C132.