

Davy Was HERE!

Colonel Crockett thought he was going to be seasick off Point Judith but on that score the frontiersman was disappointed

BY HENRY H. SMITH

ON SUNDAY, May 4, 1834, there arrived in Providence a visitor who, while he drew a rousing welcome on the occasion, would, it can be said without fear of contradiction, do substantially better today. In fact, one shudders to picture how much better.

To get right to the point, this visitor was none other than that certain member of Congress from Tennessee, that Indian fighter, backwoods strong boy and frontier wit—Colonel David Crockett.

Yes, boys, girls and other wearers of the soon skin cap hereabouts, there you have it, Davy Crockett, star of TV and screen, was once in Providence!

The *Providence Republican Herald*, a semi-weekly, carried the following notice of the event in its issue of May 6, 1834:

"Davy Crockett—This famous personage who is a member of Congress from Tennessee, arrived here on Sunday in the steambot, Boston, from New York. On his arrival, the loungers on the wharf set up a shout, in the hope that they should get a stump speech from the Tennessee hunter—but he appears to have had a higher veneration for sacred things than Messrs. Webster and Sargeant, who did not hesitate to profane the Sabbath, on a recent occasion, in Baltimore, by delivering a political harangue to a mob assembled in the streets."

Davy's stay in Providence was short. He was in a hurry to make it to Boston. For that reason, local coverage of the event was depressingly scanty. The *Providence Journal* of May 5, 1834, had the following to say and little else:

"He was received at the wharf with three hearty cheers by the assembled multitude who crowded the landing on the first appearance of the boat in the river. He proceeded immediately in the stage to Boston. As far as one may judge from external appearance, for we had not the pleasure of hearing the Colonel speak, we readily subscribe to the above remarks of the *Long Island Star*."

Such was the poverty of local journalism at the time that we now have to depend upon the impressions received in *Long Island* to cover impressions received in Rhode Island. In any case, the *Star* man was quoted "above" as follows:

"He is a fine, hale looking man, brim full of honesty and good-natured waggy. He speaks without the least concealment on the subject of all his political views and acts. He is no Jackson man—no 'man worshipper.'"

Our original information about this momentous event in early Rhode Island TV history came from Albert E. Lownes, a Providence textile executive and book collector. Mr. Lownes has a seven-year-old son, Richard—a Crockett man from head to toe and no Jackson man, either. Richard, of course, has been

talking Davy Crockett ever since Walt Disney first put the Tennessee hunter on TV. This reminded Mr. Lownes that, among his books, he had one by Davy. He searched around and found it, along with Davy's own description of his visit to Rhode Island.

Mr. Lownes, president of the South County Museum, remembered another piece of Crockettiana to show Richard. Between 1835 and 1839, either Davy or his heirs published the popular *Davy Crockett Almanac*. The museum owns one of them. A feature of the Crockett almanacs was the tall stories they contain, the kind of backwoods lore with which Davy made such a bit in his political speeches. They are among the earliest examples of backwoods tall tale telling and, because of them, the almanacs are regarded as having considerable literary importance. The South County almanac, for the year 1837, will be on exhibition when the museum opens around Memorial Day.

Back to Davy's book, however. Right on the title page is an explanation of how Crockett, then 48 years old, happened to come to Rhode Island. The book is titled *An Account of Col. Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East*.

"His object," it says further, "being to examine the grand manufacturing establishments of the country; and also to find out the condition of its literature and morals, the extent of its commerce, and the practical operation of 'The Experiment.'" This last refers to a contemporary political controversy and need not concern us.

WHAT does concern us is Davy's impressions of Rhode Island which begin on page 56 of the *Account*. Of his approach to Rhode Island, he wrote:

"We went on very pleasantly till night; and the captain told me, if I would rise at daylight, we would be out of sight of land. So I went to bed, and rose as soon as I could see. I walked out on deck, and sure enough, there was no land to be seen. We were coming near Point Judith, a place where, the captain informed me, people on board was very often seasick. So I sat myself down for a case; but was disappointed: it was quite calm, and a clear fine morning; and when the sun rose, it came up like a ball of fire out of the water, and looked for all the world, as if it had been made for the first time. We went round Point Judith, and kept in sight of land on our left hand. There was very little timber to be seen; the whole country appeared to be laid off in fields, divided by stone fences. These were a great curiosity to me; and I could not help thinking that their cattle must be well schooled here; for one of my cows would pitch over a dozen such fences, without flinching her tail.

"We went by the great fort at the Naragansett



DAVY CROCKETT in his prime: Steel engraving faces title page in the 'Account.' Woodcuts below and on facing page illustrate the frontier tales (some of them 'tall') in the Almanac. It will be on exhibition at South County Museum.

bay, and landed at Newport for a short time. From thence we took our way again to Providence. There I met a large number of the citizens. They cheered me on my arrival, and wanted me to stay and partake of a dinner with them; I declined, and took my seat in the last stage. The driver was ordered to go ahead; and sure enough, he did. It was forty miles to Boston, and we ran it down in four hours."

Crockett spent several days in Boston and was entertained lavishly. By the end of that time, he was able to form clearer judgments of New England than had been possible when he arrived at Providence. These he put into words which formed part of a speech made toward the end of his Boston visit. Addressing a Boston audience he said:

"We have always been taught to look upon the people of New England as a selfish, cunning set of fellows, that was fed on fox ears and thistle tops; that cut their wisdom-teeth as soon as they were born; that made money by their wits, and held on to it by nature; that called cheaterly moth-wit; that hung onto political power because they had numbers; that raised up manufactures to keep down the South and West; and, in fact, had so much of the devil in all their machinery, that they would neither lead nor drive, unless the load was going into their own cribs. But I assure you, gentlemen, I begin to think different of you, and I think I see a good many good reasons for so doing.

"I don't mean that because I eat your bread and drink your liquor, that I feel so. No; that don't make me see clearer than I did. It is your habits, and manners, and customs; your industry; your proud, independent spirits; your hanging on to the eternal principles of right and wrong; your liberality in prosperity, and your patience when you are ground down by legislation, which, instead of crushing you, whets your invention to strike a path without a blade on a tree to guide you; and above all, your never dying deathless grip to our glorious constitution."

Davy, it is plain, best speaks for himself in recounting his visit to Rhode Island.



Desperate and Fatal Contest between a



Party of Hunters and Gang of Grizzly Bears.

