

# Traveling Trunk: *Old Bill Williams*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

Two years before George Washington became the first president of the United States, a baby boy was born in North Carolina. His parents were Joseph and Sarah Williams. They named the baby William, but they called him Billy. As he grew older, they called him Bill, and as a young man he became known as Old Bill Williams. Perhaps, his friends called him Old Bill because from early on, he could fire a musket like a full grown man.

When Billy was seven years old, the Williams family moved west. Near St. Louis, Mr. Williams bought some land. There he built a log house. The house had two rooms separated by an open space with a roof over the entire building. The open space was called a dog trot. In the dog trot, firewood was stacked, and there the family laundry was done.

Bill was able to attend school one year. He learned to read, write, and do numbers. In those days, many children never learned to read or write. Bill took pride in his book learning.

Bill's friends were the Osage children who lived nearby. They thought he was quite odd with his red hair and freckled face. But they soon learned to admire him when he used a bow and arrow with great accuracy. His days were spent in the woods, learning to hunt and trap, skills which would make him famous throughout his life.

Bill's mother was a religious woman and knew a great deal about the Bible. He liked the Bible stories; Jonah and the Whale, David and Goliath and his favorite, Baby Moses. His mother told the story, time and time again, in the shade of the dog trot, or by the fireplace in the cool of the evening. When Moses was born many years ago in faraway Egypt, the king was a wicked man called Pharaoh. He ordered that all the baby boys born to Hebrew parents be drowned in the river. Moses's mother built a little boat in which she hid Moses at the river's edge among the

cattails. Pharaoh's daughter found baby Moses and saved his life. When Moses grew up, he became a prophet of the Hebrew people.

As Bill grew to manhood, he wanted to be a prophet like Moses. Living with the Osage Indians, he preached to them telling the stories he had heard from his mother's Bible. However, he soon forgot his mother's teachings and stopped preaching. He started out to change the Osages, but they changed him. He became more like an Indian than a white man, learning the language of the Osage, Delaware, and Shawnee. He went on extended hunting trips to the far West, becoming well known as a hunter, trapper, and explorer.

No wonder then in 1825 that he was hired as a guide and hunter for the team sent out by the government to survey the Santa Fe Trail.

As Old Bill got ready to go, he packed his trunk. It was a small round chest with a flat bottom. Old Bill was careful to take some extra socks. A man had to keep his feet dry. Then there was his shaving stuff; mug, brush, and razor. Men didn't grow beards back then. Of course, he took plenty of tobacco and an extra pipe. A man needs a good smoke after a hard day's work.

The survey team set out from Fort Osage, Missouri with thirty-eight men, two slaves, fifty-seven horses and seven wagons. All were under the command of three commissioners appointed by President John Quincy Adams to oversee the survey. One of the commissioners was George Sibley. Old Bill had known him for many years. He had worked at a trading post near Bill's boyhood home in Missouri.

Mr. Sibley sent Old Bill on ahead to find the Osage and arrange for them to meet the commissioners at the Neosho River. As he left, the survey team began their work, measuring the distance between places where they camped. The measurement was done with a survey chain,

sixty-six feet long with 100 links. Eighty chains made 1 mile. Mr. Browns, the chief surveyor kept an accurate record of the measurements in a little book.

By the time the survey team reached the Neosho River, Old Bill was already there with the Osage chiefs. Beneath a big oak tree, the Osage agreed that the survey party could travel through their lands. The commissioner gave them many presents. The Osage particularly liked the warm wool blankets and the bright brass kettles.

Old Bill was then sent to find the Kanza Indians, and the survey team continued to the southwest. At Sora Creek, the Kanza agreed to allow the survey team to travel through their lands, just like the Osage had done at the Neosho River.

From Sora Creek, the survey team continued their work without the threat of an Indian attack and reached the Pawnee River on August 30<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Sibley: who kept a diary during the expedition, describes the place the team camped.

*The Pawnee River is here about 40 yards wide, banks pretty high, bottom sandy, water at present muddy. Timber Elm, Ash, Elder, Cotton Tree, Willow, and Grape Vines. Yesterday I turned off from the direct course and struck the Arkansas at the mouth of this river, and then coursed it up about a mile to the fording place near which we are now encamped, which is just at the foot of a high rocky hill. The path leading up from the mouth to the ford passes between the Pawnee and some cliffs of Soft Rock, upon the smooth faces of which are cut the names of many persons, who have at different times passed this way to and from New Mexico.*

The camp site was a beautiful place. On the north were the cliffs of soft stone. On the south was the river. Between, little fires were scattered among the wagons. Men in groups of five or six were cooking supper. Biscuits were baked in Dutch ovens and bacon sizzled in the skillets. Old Bill had killed two deer and meat was roasting over the glowing red coals. Down at

the river, a bull frog croaked. In the distance a coyote howled. What a nice scene and what a good ending to a long hot day!

After leaving the Pawnee River, the survey team followed the Arkansas River to the southwest and finally arrived at Taos, New Mexico. Mr. Sibley made arrangements for the survey team to stay there through the winter. It was then that Old Bill left for the Rocky Mountains which were to be his home for the next twenty-four years. Trapping beavers and serving as a guide for exploratory expeditions, he became a legend in the West. Sadly, he was killed by Ute Indians in 1849.

Old Bill lost his life, but he never lost his fame. The city of Williams, Arizona is just south of a towering peak named Bill Williams Mountain. Near Prescott, Arizona is the Bill Williams Fork of the Colorado River. Old Bill would have been proud of his namesake.