

F.A. MICHAUX'S JOURNEY

FRANÇOIS ANDRÉ MICHAUX, son of ANDRÉ MICHAUX, as part of his travels through the eastern United States, passed through the Toe River Valley in the fall of 1802. His written description is so detailed that it merits full quotation here.

I have added a few explanations in square brackets.

"On the 21st of September 1802 I set out from Jonesborough [Tenn.] to cross the Alleghanies for North Carolina. About nine miles from Jonesborough the road divides into two branches, which unite again fifty-six miles beyond the mountains. The left, which is principally for carriages, cuts through Yellow Mountain, and the other one through Iron Mountain. I took the latter, as I had been informed it was much the shortest. I only made nineteen miles that day, and put up at one Cayerd's at the Limestone Cove, where I arrived benumbed with cold by the thick fog that reigns almost habitually in the vallies of these enormous mountains.

Seven miles on this side [of] Cayerd's plantation, the road, or rather the path, begins to be so little cut that one can scarce discern the track for plants of all kinds that cover the superficies of it; it is also encumbered by forests of rhododendrum, shrubs from eighteen to twenty feet in height, the branches of which, twisting and interwoven with each other, impede the traveller every moment, insomuch that he is obliged to use an axe to clear his way. The torrents that we had continually to cross added to the difficulty and

danger of the journey, the horses being exposed to fall on account of the loose round flints, concealed by the ebullition of the waters with which the bottom of these torrents are filled.

I had the day following twenty-three miles to make without meeting with the least kind of plantation. After having made the most minute inquiry with regard to the path I had to take, I set out about eight o'clock in the morning from the Limestone Cove, and after a journey of three hours I reached the summit of the mountain, which I recognized by several trees with "the road" marked on each, and in the same direction to indicate the line of demarcation that separates the state of Tennessee from that of North Carolina. The distance from the Limestone Cove to the summit of the mountain is computed to be about two miles and a half, and three miles thence to the [base at the] other side. The declivity of the two sides is very steep; insomuch that it is with great difficulty a person can sit on his horse, and that half the time he is obliged to go on foot. Arrived at the bottom of the mountain, I had again, as the evening before, to cross through a forest of rhododendrum, and a large torrent called Rocky Creek [Big Rock Creek], the winding course of which cut the path in twelve or fifteen directions. Every time [the path crossed the creek] I was obliged to alight, or go up the torrent by walking into the middle for the space of ten to fifteen fathoms, in order to regain on the other bank the continuation of the path, which is very rarely opposite, and

of which the entrance is frequently concealed by tufts of grass or branches of trees, which have time to grow and extend their foliage, since whole months elapse without its being passed by travellers. At length I happily arrived at the end of my journey. I then perceived the imprudence I had committed in having exposed myself without a guide in a road so little frequented, and where a person every moment runs the risk of losing himself on account of the sub-divisions of the road, that ultimately disappear, and which it would be impossible to find again, unless by being perfectly acquainted with the localities and disposition of the country, where obstacle upon obstacle oppose the journey of the traveller, and whose situation would in a short time become very critical from the want of provisions.

On the 23d I made twenty-two miles through a country bestrewed with mountains, but not as lofty as that which I had just passed over, and arrived at the house of one [Martin] Davenport, the owner of a charming plantation upon Doe [Toe] River, a torrent about forty feet in breadth, and which empties itself into the Nolachucky. I had learnt the evening before, of the person with whom I had lodged, that it was a Davenport's [that] my father had resided, and that it was this man who served him as a guide across the mountains when on his travels to discover their productions. I was at that time very far from thinking that at the same time when this worthy man was entertaining me about his old travelling companion, [that] I lost a beloved father, who died a victim of his zeal

for the progress of natural history upon the coast of the island of Madagascar!

I staid a week at Davenport's, in order to rest myself after a journey of six hundred miles that I had just made, and during this interval I travelled over the Blue Ridges that encompass his plantation. On the 2d of October, 1802, I set out on my journey again, and proceeded towards Morganton, a distance of thirty-five miles. About four miles from Doe [North Toe] River I re-passed the chain of the Blue Ridges [McKinney Gap]. Its summit is obtained by a gentle declivity, which is much longer and more rapid on the eastern side [Peppers Creek], without being impracticable for carriages. The journey over this mountain is computed to be about four miles and a half.

About five miles from the Blue Ridges are the Linneville Mountains, not quite so lofty as the latter, but steeper, and more difficult to ascend. The road that cuts through them is encumbered westward with large, flat stones, which impede the traveller on his route. From the summit of these mountains, which is not overstocked with trees, we discovered an immense extent of mountainous country covered with forests, and at their base only three small places cleared, which form as many plantations, three or four miles distant from each other.

From the Linneville Mountains to Morganton it is computed to be twenty-five miles, where I arrived on the 5th of October. In this interval the country is slightly mountainous, and the soil extremely bad; at the same time we

did not find more than four or five plantations on the road.

About a mile on this side [of] the town we crossed the northern arm of the river Catabaw [Catawba], in this part nearly fifty fathoms broad, although the source of this river is only fifty miles. The rains that had fallen in the mountains had produced a sudden increase of water, and the master of the ferry-boat conceiving it would not last long, had not thought proper to re-establish his boat, so that I was obliged to ford. One of his children pointed out to me the different directions that I had to take in order to avoid the immense cavities under water.

[I now delete a long section in which Michaux makes observations about the Allegheny mountains in general, about his belief that the highest part of the range is in western North Carolina of which the Grandfather is the highest, the chilly weather in early September, mineral riches (chiefly iron), the condition of the soil, vegetation, natural pasture for cattle, purity of air and water, and so on.]

Estates of the first class are sold at the rate of two dollars, and the taxes are not more than a half-penny per acre. Indian corn, wheat, rye, oats, and peach trees, are the sole objects of culture.

In the torrents [streams] we found a species of salamander, called by the inhabitants "the mountain allegator," many of which are upwards of two feet in length. It was in Doe [Toe] River that my father caught the one which is described in The New Dictionary of Natural History,

published by Deterville.

The inhabitants of these mountains are famed for being excellent hunters. Towards the middle of autumn most of them go in pursuit of bears, of which they sell the skins, and the flesh, which is very good, serves them in a great measure for food during that season. They prefer it to all other kinds of meat, and look upon it as the only thing they can eat without being indisposed by it. They make also of their hind legs the most delicious hams. In autumn and winter the bears grow excessively fat; some of them weigh upward of four hundred weight. Their grease is consumed in the country instead of oil. They hunt them with great dogs, which, without going near them, bark, teaze, and oblige them to climb up a tree, when the hunter kills them with a carabine. A beautiful skin sells for a dollar and a half to two dollars. The black bear of North America lives chiefly on roots, acorns, and chestnuts. In order to procure a greater quantity of them, he gets up into trees, and as his weight does not permit him to climb to any height, he breaks off the branch where he has observed the most fruit by hugging it with one of his fore paws. I have seen branches of such a diameter that these animals must be endowed with an uncommon strength to have been able to break them by setting about it in this manner. In the summer, when they are most exposed to want victuals, they fall upon pigs, and sometimes even upon men.

Morganton, the principal town of the county of Burke, contains about fifty houses built of wood, and almost all

inhabited by tradesmen. One warehouse only, supported by a commercial house at Charleston, is established in this little town, where the inhabitants, for twenty miles around, come and purchase mercery and jewellery goods from England, or give in exchange a part of their produce, which consists chiefly of dried hams, butter, tallow, bear and stag skins, and ginseng, which they bring from the mountains."

Submitted by Lloyd Bailey, 4122 Deepwood Circle, Durham, N.C., 27707 (919-489-8731). Source: Michaux's diary, as published in Reuben Gold Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, 1748-1846 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904), III, at pp. 283-290. The salamander which he mentions is probably Protonopsis jusca or Protonopsis horrida, the latter commonly called a "hellbender," "mud puppy," or "water dog." The dictionary referred to is Nouveau Dictionnaire d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris: Deterville, 1816, 36 vols.), in which I have not yet been able to find an article by Michaux (it is not indexed by author), but there is (in v. 30 at p. 61), mention of "La salamandre des monts Alleghanis...a été trouvée par Michaux, dans les montagnes de l'intérieur des l'Amérique septentrionale. C'est la plus grande de toutes les salamandres connues, attendu qu'elle a treize pouces de long." It then cites Plate P.12 (which turns out to be in Vol. 31, facing p. 317, which has a drawing of the "Salamandre des Alleganis") and then continues: "Elle se voit au Muséum d'Histoire naturelle de Paris..."