

ALEXIS PIERRE BEATTE

By Arthur Shoemaker*

Those unexplored reaches of land that now make up the present-day State of Oklahoma, once held a particular fascination for men during the early 1800's. This land, drained by the Red, Washita, Canadian, Cimarron and Arkansas rivers, was known only to traders and trappers. It was said to be the home of the wild tribes of Plains Indians.

The well-known Chouteau family of Missouri and the eastern portion of Indian Territory made early inroads into the area. The Chouteau family association with the Osages, who were themselves renowned traders, opened the way for trading posts to be established at Grand Saline, in the present Mayes County, one near Lexington, in Cleveland County, and another near the site of Fort Sill, Comanche County.

One of the first persons of note to heed the call of adventure and to explore the region was Washington Irving, the first American writer to achieve renown at home and abroad.

Irving began his adventure in the Autumn of 1832 in the Company of companions and a detachment of U. S. Rangers.¹ Using Fort Gibson as a base, the party headed for what Irving called, "the Pawnee hunting-grounds."² After heading up the Arkansas, the party crossed to the west near the mouth of the Cimarron, then traveled west, southwest to the vicinity of Oklahoma City. It was here that the group turned south moving to the Norman area before making the swing back to the east that eventually brought the party back to Fort Gibson.

Irving published the story of these travels under the title, *A Tour on The Prairies*. It was in this simple narrative of everyday occurrences that we were first introduced to Pierre Beattie. Irving

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¹ The Rangers mentioned were among the first U. S. soldiers on the Oklahoma frontier. They wore no uniforms, but followed the rough dress of the frontiersmen.

² *A Tour on the Prairies* by Washington Irving, Edited by Joseph B. Thoburn and George O. Wells (Harlow Publishing Co., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1930). This book was reprinted by Harlow Publishing Company in 1955.

is not impressed with Beattie, reputation nor qualifications notwithstanding.

Irving writes:¹

I confess I did not like his looks when he was first presented to me. He was lounging about, in an old hunting frock and moccasins or leggings, of deer skin, matted and greased, and almost jappanned by constant use. He was apparently about thirty-six years of age, square and strongly built. His features were not bad, shaped not unlike those of Napoleon, but sharpened up with high Indian cheek bones.

In fairness to Irving, and his unflattering statement, this estimate of Beattie, from the time he first appears until the journey is completed, shows that he changed his mind. Beattie proved indispensable to the party, serving as guide, hunter and interpreter.

Charles J. Latrobe, the English gentleman who was one of Irving's traveling companions, also wrote an account of this same tour, which was published as a part of his two-volume work entitled, *The Rambler in North America*.² In the main, each corroborates the story as related by the other, though Mr. Latrobe does not put forth the early criticism of Beattie.

Beattie was well known on the southwestern frontier for many years. According to the records of the Leavenworth-Dodge Dragoon Expedition of 1834, he was present at the big peace council which was held at the Wichita Village, on the North Fork of Red River, and spoke briefly on behalf of the Osage delegation, of which he was interpreter.

Both Irving and Latrobe described Beattie as a half-breed Indian, Latrobe even going so far as to state that Beattie's mother was a member of the Quapaw tribe. George Catlin, the painter of Indian scenes and portraits, knew him well and traveled with him on the Dragoon Expedition. Enroute from Fort Gibson to St. Louis, Catlin visited with him at his home. In Catlin's account of that journey, he made the following mention of this visit to Beattie's home:³

"On my way, I visited Reques's village and lodged during the night in the hospitable cabin of my old friend Beattie, of whom I have often spoken, heretofore, as one of the guides and hunters for the Dragoons on their campaign in the Comanche country. This was the most extraordinary hunter, I think, that I ever met in all my travels. 'To hunt' was a phrase almost foreign to him for, when he went out with his rifle, it was for meat, or for cattle—buffalo, and he never came in without it. Beattie lived in this village with his aged parents, to whom he introduced me and with whom I spent a very pleasant evening in conversation. They are both French and have spent the greater part of their lives with the Osages and seemed to be familiar with their whole history. This Beattie (Pierre) was the hunter and guide, the

¹ *The Rambler in North America*, MDCCCXXXII-MDCCCXXXIII by Charles J. Latrobe (London, 1836).

² *North American Indians* by George Catlin (Leary, Stuart & Co., Philadelphia, 1813).

summer before our campaign, 1832, with whom Washington Irving made his excursion to the border of the Pawnee country and of whose extraordinary character and powers Mr. Irving has drawn a just and glowing account, accepting one error which I think he was inadvertently fallen into — that of calling him a half-breed. Beattie had complained of this to me often while out on the prairie and, when I entered his hospitable cabin, he said he was glad to see me and almost instantly, continued: 'Now you shall see, Monsieur Carlin, I am not a half-breed. Here I shall introduce you to my father and my mother, who, you see, are two very nice and good old French people.'

In 1926, the Harlow Publishing Company of Oklahoma City published a special school edition of *A Tour on The Prairies*.⁵ This small, paperback edition was edited by Joseph B. Thoburn, then Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society, and George C. Wells, High School Inspector of Oklahoma. Notes compiled by them add greatly to the historical significance of the journey.

In commenting on Beattie's Indian lineage, they reflect that the fact that neither of Beattie's parents were Indians does not signify that he was not of Indian descent. Many, if not most, of the early French settlers of Missouri were from Canada and there was much Indian blood in the veins of many of the Canadian-French people.

It is from this same series of notes that we are able to learn of the last years of Pierre Beattie. In 1926, there was still living in Carthage, Missouri, a Mr. R. T. Greer who, not only knew Beattie personally, but in 1867, accompanied him on a horseback journey from Fort Gibson, past the site of the Creek Agency — Chouteau's trading post — and on up the Arkansas, for some distance over practically the same ground that had been traveled by Irving and his party, thirty years before.

Mr. Greer stated that Beattie was then living with the Little Osages and the half-breeds on the Neosho River near Osage Mission, in southern Kansas. With the opening of their new reservation in Indian Territory, the Osages moved from Kansas and Beattie went with them, settling on the Caney River not far from No-pa-wal-la crossing and village, where he kept a store for a number of years. It is generally believed that he died around 1880 at the age of eighty years. He had taken an Osage wife and was highly regarded by the Osage people, who called him Be-att, or Alexo Be-att, his full name having been Alexis Pierre Beattie.

⁵The Leavenworth-Dodge expedition of the First Dragoons had some notable officers. Brigadier-General Henry Leavenworth was in command, but was fatally stricken and died while on the trip. Colonel Henry Dodge was next in command and was in charge for most of the trip. Among officers who later distinguished themselves were: Colonel Stephen Watts Kearney, Captain Nathan Boone (youngest son of Daniel Boone), David Hunter, Clifton Wharton, Lieutenants Jefferson Davis and P. St. George Cooke. The *Wheelock Journal* of this noted expedition appears with annotations by George H. Shirk, under the title of "Peace on the Plains," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVIII (1950).

Thus it is that history rang down the final curtain on a man who became a legend in his own lifetime. He had traveled with and befriended noted men of letters, a famous artist and distinguished Army officers, yet he was a simple man of the plains. Nevertheless, he earned the respect of all that knew him and it is unfortunate that so little is known of his final years. The name Beattie or Be-att is nearly forgotten in Osage history and does not appear on the Osage rolls. It is hoped that more can be learned about Pierre Beattie so that his final resting place can be located and marked.