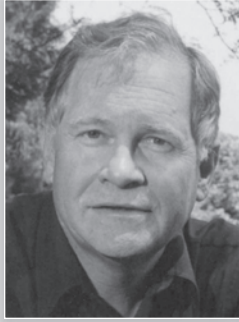


EIGHT THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT DANIEL BOONE

by Robert Morgan

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Novelist and poet Robert Morgan grew up in the North Carolina mountains near Daniel Boone's stomping ground. Morgan's fascination with the legendary trailblazer was*



Robert Morgan,
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Boone

rekindled while doing research for Brave Enemies, his novel of the American Revolution. The result: a full-blown and fully authoritative new biography.

The folklore—or “fake-lore”—about Daniel Boone began during his own lifetime and has grown steadily ever since. Luckily, the real Daniel Boone is even more interesting than the legend—to wit:

1. Forget the coonskin cap; Boone never wore one. According to his son Nathan, Boone thought coonskin caps uncomfortable and uncouth. It was probably the politician Davy Crockett who created the legend of the coonskin-topped frontiersman. And because the same actor, Fess Parker, played both Boone and Crockett on television, we confuse the two. Boone was raised as a Quaker, and all his life he preferred a Quaker-style felt hat made from beaver fur to protect him from the sun and rain.

2. The legend is that in the summer of 1788 Boone and his sons dug fifteen “tons” of

ginseng, loaded it on a keelboat, and poled it up the Ohio River. The boat hit a snag and overturned. The wet “sang” was rescued, loaded on packhorses, and carried to Hagerstown, Maryland, where it brought only half price because of water damage. The story was told to the scholar Lyman Draper by Boone’s youngest son, Nathan, in 1851. Dried ginseng is, however, light as paper, and fifteen “tons” of it would fill a warehouse. What Nathan actually described was fifteen “tuns,” or barrels. Most things were shipped in barrels in those days: tobacco, flour, nails, dry ginseng.

3. The great bird painter John James Audubon claimed to have hunted with Boone in Kentucky and described Boone as a giant of a man. But Boone left Kentucky in 1799 while Audubon was still a teenager in Haiti (he may well have met Boone later, in Missouri), and

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although Boone was powerfully built and possessed extraordinary strength, he was only five feet eight inches tall, about average for a man of the time.

4. Boone was neither the discoverer of the Cumberland Gap nor the first white settler in Kentucky. The gap, called Cave Gap by white hunters, Ouasioto by the Indians, and Cumberland Gap by Dr. Thomas Walker (who first recorded the existence of the gap), had been used as the entrance to Kentucky for several decades before Boone went there in 1769 to hunt and trap and explore.

5. Though the legend grew that Boone was a notable Indian fighter, the truth is he usually avoided conflict by offering Indians his furs and fine rifle and a drink from his flask. In fact, Boone was sometimes called a white Indian and was distrusted because of his friendship with Indians. He told his son Nathan that in his long life he was sure of killing only one Indian, at the Battle of Blue Licks in 1782. Boone was a dreamer, and his great dream was to live in the wilderness at peace with the Indians.

6. Boone's respect for all human life, whether Indian, British, or American, is often credited to his Quaker upbringing. But his son Nathan reported that Boone, like Washington, Franklin, and Lafayette, was a Freemason. A fresh wind of fellowship sweeping through Europe and North America in the eighteenth century, Freemasonry advocated brotherhood among men and service toward society. Boone's behavior during the American Revolution, which sometimes raised questions about his loyalty,

may have been influenced by his connection to Freemasonry.

7. The legend that Boone had a Shawnee wife while a captive at Chillicothe in 1778 may have some truth in it. The Shawnees were losing population from disease and war, and they often kidnapped whites, blacks, and other Indians for adoption. Boone became Sheltowee, or "Big Turtle, honored son of the war chief," and, as the honored adopted son of Chief Blackfish, he would have been expected to take a wife. He later told a granddaughter that during his captivity he had taken a Shawnee wife who cooked and mended his moccasins.

8. For almost two hundred years there have been rumors that one of Daniel and Rebecca Boone's children was conceived while Daniel was away from home for two years hunting, serving in the militia, or captured by Indians. The story goes that Rebecca told him the father of the new baby was one of his own brothers and that Boone's response was that since it was all in the family he accepted the child as his own. Certainly it's a colorful story. The problem is that Boone was away from home for two years only once, from 1769 to 1771, and his son Daniel Morgan Boone was born in December 1769, seven months after Boone left for Kentucky. Different versions of the story contradict each other and it's likely the legend arose from the fact that the birth of Daniel Morgan was months after Boone left home. Sorting through the strands of the legend, we see folklore come to life and grow. ■

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