Davy Crockett and the Wily Raccoon (An American Legend)

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There weren't many men like Davy Crockett. As he said, "It's the grit in a fellow that makes the man," and he was a gritty kind of fellow.

"Always be sure you're right, then go ahead," he once said, which is the motto he followed. Some folks say he killed his first bear when he was just 3, and others sing songs about his amazing feats, but whatever tales you've heard, you probably know he was a real, live American frontier hero. He was a fearless sharpshooter and hunter, a joker who was known for his bragging. He was a congressman, too, and he fought and died at the Alamo.

In real life Davy was born Aug. 17, 1786, in a cabin on the banks of the Nolichucky River in Tennessee. He was the fifth son of nine children born to John and Rebecca Hawkins Crockett, a pioneering family. Davy's grandfather had settled lands in North Carolina and crossed the mountains into east Tennessee. He was searching for fresh territory to settle.

When Davy was just a boy, his father moved the whole family to Cove Creek, where he built a mill. Sadly, that mill washed away in a flood, so John Crockett moved on, this time to Jefferson County, where he built and operated a log-cabin tavern. Young Davy heard many a tale from travelers, which piqued his curiosity about the world. He learned a good deal in those days about human nature, which helped him later when he chose to be a politician.

Davy never had much schooling. When he was young, he worked as a cattle drover, moving to Virginia, where he worked for farmers, wagoners and, once, even a hatmaker. By the time he returned to Tennessee he was 15 and more than 6 feet tall, ready to take on the world.

You've probably heard stories of Davy's strength and courage. People say he wrung the tail off Halley's comet, and that he climbed Niagara Falls on an alligator's back. They say he rode on a streak of lightning. There's a famous sunrise story about the day Davy saw the sun frozen fast on her axes, jammed between two cakes of ice. Davy had a freshly killed bear on his back, so he beat the carcass against the ice until hot oil poured out, and used that oil to thaw the sun's axes. Then he gave the whole works a big kick, and a minute later the sun and Earth were turning again. Grinning, Davy lighted his pipe by the light of the sun, shouldered that old bear and walked on home, a piece of sunrise in his pocket and another tale to tell.

Those wild tales of Davy Crockett are everywhere, and especially down in Tennessee. He was a famous bear hunter, and folks say he snagged more than a hundred bears in one season. Some say he was elected to the Tennessee legislature just because of that. Davy could stare down a streak of lightning without blinking; he could pull rainbows out of the sky; and his rifle -- Old Betsy was her name -- was the surest shot in the world. And he loved danger.

There's one story, though, you may not know about a wily raccoon who managed to outsmart Davy. One afternoon he was walking home from a day of hunting, and wasn't in the best of tempers because he hadn't had much luck that day. Well, he was passing under a tall tree near the Great Gap when he looked up and saw a big furry raccoon in the tree. That raccoon was staring down at Davy.

Naturally Davy raised his shotgun and aimed it right between the raccoon's eyes.

That raccoon lifted his paw and said, real politely, "Excuse me, are you the famous Davy Crockett?"

"That's me," Davy said, and smiled because he liked being famous. He lowered his shotgun and kind of bowed.

That raccoon put on the saddest face. "You don't need to worry," the raccoon said. "I'll come right down." He climbed down that tree, real slowly, because he knew he was as good as shot. After all, this was the famous Davy Crockett, and everyone knew Davy never missed.

Davy watched him climb down and began to feel kind of sad. He was thinking that maybe this courteous coon deserved a little better in life.

When the raccoon reached the ground, he waddled right over to Davy and just waited there, ready for anything.

Davy bent down and patted that creature on his furry head. "You're very thoughtful," he said. "I can't hurt such a creature."

The raccoon didn't seem at all surprised by that. He began to back slowly away into the woods, and all the time he was backing away, he kept saying, over and over, "That's mighty kind of you, Mr. Crockett."

"Hey," Davy said, "what's your hurry?" He was thinking he might like to get to know this raccoon a little better because he'd never really had a chance to know one before.

"Well, Mr. Crockett," the raccoon said, "you might just change your mind." And with that the raccoon turned right around and ran like lightning into the woods.

When that happened, Davy did change his mind, but that smart raccoon was long gone by then. Davy Crockett laughed so loudly that the whole forest shook.

Still, people say that raccoon was the last creature who ever outsmarted Davy Crockett.