

Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
July, 2024

THE LITTLE MISSOURI RIVER

Have you ever wondered why we have a Little Missouri River in Arkansas when it is nowhere near the Missouri River? If you do a google search on this question, you might read that the Little Missouri River is a tributary of the Missouri River and think that can't be right. Well, it is correct. There is a Little Missouri River that originates in Montana and flows through South Dakota and North Dakota before emptying into the Missouri river, but that is not "our" Little Missouri River. The Little Missouri River that forms the northern boundary of Nevada County and part of Ouachita County originates in Polk County near Mena and flows through Montgomery and Pike counties and on southeastward. It is 147 miles long and empties into the Ouachita River at Tate's Bluff in Ouachita County.

So, how did the Little Missouri River get its name? It is believed that the early French explorers named it Little Missouri because it reminded them of the Missouri River.

The Caddo Indians lived in the area at one time and there is evidence of Indian villages along the Little Missouri river. A name associated with the river is Albert Pike who was involved in all kinds of things during his life. He was poet, writer, judge, editor of a paper, a brigadier-general during the Civil War, and was instrumental in advancing Masonry. When he retired, he moved to a place on the Little Missouri. After his death, he was honored with a statue in Washington, DC. That statue and others were toppled during the George Floyd protests in 2020. A highway from Hot Springs, Arkansas to Colorado Springs, Colorado was named the Albert Pike Highway.

The Little Missouri River is prone to flooding at times and water sometimes rises rapidly in the hilly areas. A disaster struck on June 11, 2010 at the Albert Pike campground in which twenty campers drowned. That is part of the Albert Pike Recreational Area in the Ouachita National Forest. This is a scenic area and a popular place for recreation. The campground was closed after the tragic flood in 2010, but plans are to re-open it for camping, but camping will only be allowed outside the 100-year flood zone.

Narrows Dam on the Little Missouri was completed in 1950 forming Lake Greeson, named for Martin White Greeson. The dam is 183 feet high and was constructed between two natural bluffs forming a narrow gorge which is why the dam is called Narrows Dam. Narrows Dam is about six miles north of Murfreesboro. Some cemeteries that were in the area that became Lake Greeson had to be relocated.

The rest of this article is a closer look at the Little Missouri River in our area (Nevada and Ouachita counties).

A Civil War battle was fought along the river at Elkin's Ferry on April 4, 1864. This location is north of Prescott where the river is the boundary between Nevada and Clark

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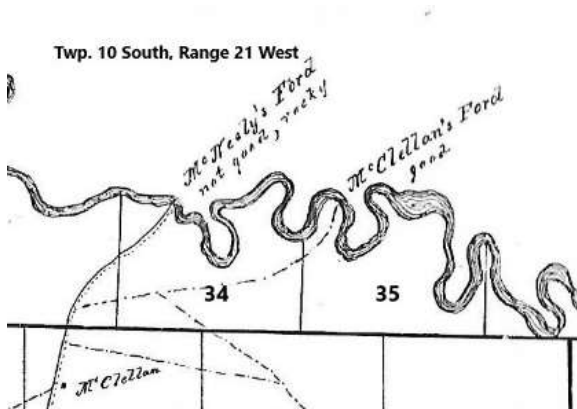
counties. An historical marker commemorating this battle is located at the Nubbin Hill Cemetery on County Rd. 37 in Nevada County.



The next landmark along the river is the old iron bridge at what was known as McIntosh's Bluff, sometimes called Nachitoch Bluff, on a road leading from Nevada County to Clark County. A ferry operated at the location before the bridge was constructed. The construction job was opened for bids by contractors. There were nine bidders and the winning bid of \$11,200 was made by Morava Construction Co. of Chicago. The bridge was completed in November, 1908 and opened to the public. This was a popular place for community gatherings, picnics, and recreation in the early days. The bridge was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990 and is also depicted on the mural in the city of Prescott. The bridge was closed to traffic in the mid-1990s.

Continuing southeast, Interstate 30 and old Hwy. 67 crosses the river as well as the main railroad line.

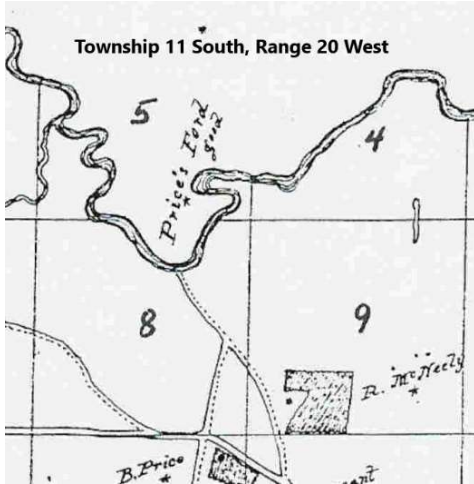
The 1865 map of Ouachita County included part of what is now Nevada County. That map shows several other crossings (fords) on the river.



There was McNeely's Ford and McClellan's Ford about two miles apart as shown on the map. McNeely's Ford was said to be "not good, rocky" and McClellan's Ford was said to be "good".

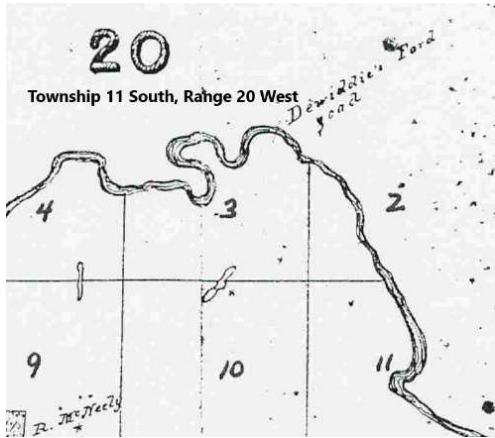
On a modern map, the location of these fords is about three and one-half miles north of the Terre Rouge Creek bridge on Hwy. 24.

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The next crossing on the 1865 map is Price's Ford in Section 8. You can see the name "B. Price" at the bottom of the map. Some of these fords were named for people who owned land near the crossing. This ford is labeled as "good".

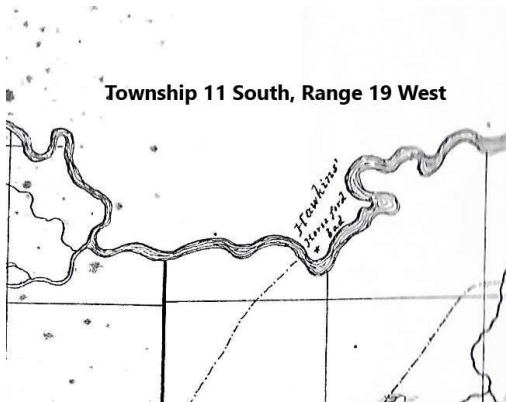
On a modern map, this location is near what we call Terrapin Neck or about one mile northwest of the Hwy. 24 and Hwy. 53 intersection.



The next crossing on the 1865 map is Dewiddie's Ford. I am pretty sure that name should be DeWoody since members of that family had land in that area and some still live there today. Some of the family names on this old map are not spelled correctly. This ford is also labeled "good".

This location on a modern map is near the Hwy. 53 bridge near Whelen Springs. I remember a one-lane bridge there, but that has been replaced with a modern concrete bridge.

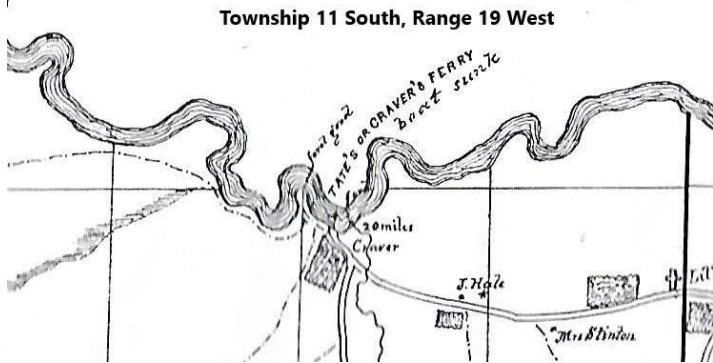
The old Camden branch railroad connecting Gurdon and Camden was constructed in the early 1880s and it crossed the river near Reader. That track is no longer being used. I have not been there, but I am told the concrete foundation is all that remains of the trestle at the river crossing.



Further down the river in what is now Ouachita County, we find Hawkin's Ford. The note on the map says "horse ford, bad".

This location on a modern map is a little less than one mile east of the Ouachita-Nevada County line near the old town of Sayre. The dark vertical line on the map is the county line.

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The next crossing is what is commonly called Riffe Ford north of Red Hill. The note on the 1865 map says “ford good”. I also see the name “Tate’s or Craver’s Ferry” with the notation “boat sunk”. I also see a note near the river that says “20 miles” with a line pointing toward the name Tate’s or Craver’s ferry. I’m not sure if they are trying to say that it is 20 miles to Tate’s Ferry or if this crossing is known as Tate’s Ferry or

Craver’s Ferry”. I do see the name “Craver” on the map. We know that further down the river is Tate’s Bluff where the Little Missouri River empties into the Ouachita River.

A bridge once crossed the river at this location near Red Hill and was known as Riffe Ford. It was a one-lane wooden bridge connecting Ouachita and Clark counties. I drove across that bridge many times in the early 1970s when I was working for a timber company. During floods, debris would sometimes float down the river and lodge against the old bridge. To prevent the bridge from being swept away, the company I worked for would bring a log loader out on the bridge. The loader would pick up the debris and move it across the bridge to the other side where it could float on downstream.

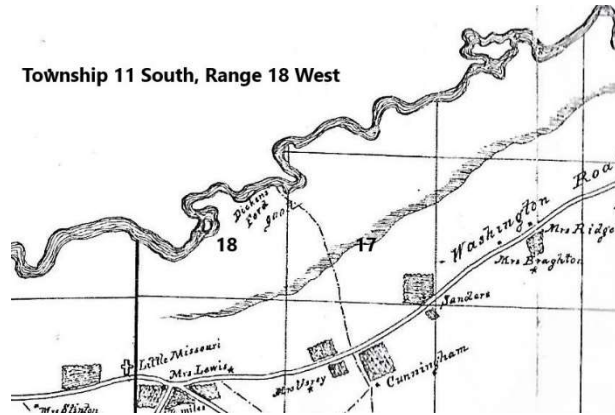


Left: The Riffe Ford bridge ca 1977 (Photo from John Guess)

Right: Same bridge in 1996. Bridge was used until about 1978.

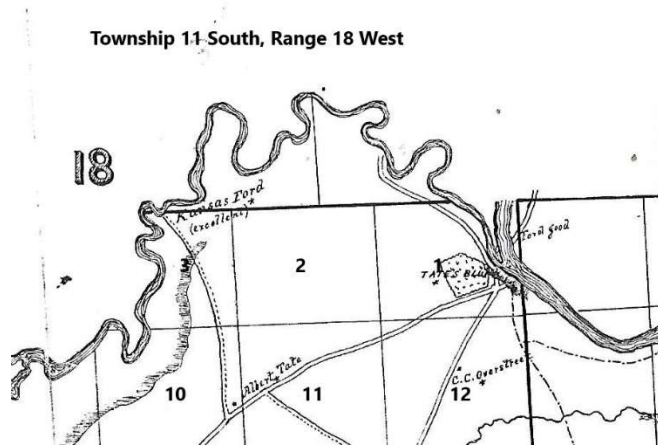


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A few miles further downstream, we find Dickin's Ford with note "good".

At the bottom left on this map, you will see a cross symbol with the name "Little Missouri". This is what is known as Little Missouri church which still exists. A cemetery is next to the church. This ford is a little less than two miles northeast of the church.



The next crossing on the map is Kansas Ford which is marked "excellent". The county across the river is Clark County and there is an old community a few miles from the river called Kansas. Very few people live there today and most of that part of Clark County is timberland.

Further down the river, you see Tate's Bluff where the Little Missouri empties into the Ouachita River. The note on the

map says "ford good". This has been a major river crossing for over 150 years. There was once a narrow wooden bridge at the Tate's Bluff crossing, but that has been replaced with a more modern bridge. This is a popular place for fishing and other recreation.



View from the Tate's Bluff bridge where the Little Missouri River empties into the Ouachita River.

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The 1865 map is interesting because it shows names of some of the people who lived in the area and well-known landmarks at that time. It also shows the road system as it existed in 1865. There are notes at the river and stream crossings such as “ford good”, “not good, rocky”, “good for horses”, etc. This map was used by the military during the Civil War. The generals needed to know the location of good fords on streams and the condition of the roads as they moved through the area.

I know this probably seems more like a geography or history lesson to most of you, but at least now you know a little more about the Little Missouri River than you did before reading this article.

Here is a trivia question you might be asked sometime. What is the longest river in the United States? Most people think it is the Mississippi River. According to the experts, the longest river in the United States is the Missouri River at 2540 miles. The Mississippi River is second in length at 2350 miles.



My wife’s grandfather, John Gribler, plowing with mules in southeast Missouri

There was a lot of hard work to do back in “the good old days.”

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Rundown House – by Don Mathis

The windows of the well-worn house were withered
like the eyes of the aged grandfather.

The floor was as uneven as his teeth
and the closet reeked of feet.

The doors squeaked and popped like his knees.

The roof sagged like his bad posture.

Shingles were a big problem too.

The foundation was tilting.

The grindstones were worn smooth
and the plumbing was beyond repair.

The appliances were past their life span.

All the features were outdated.

The old house was contaminated
with mold and asbestos.

He couldn't get the lead out.

No amount of renovation
could make it like new again.

Time to move on.