

LARGER THAN LIFE

What Thomas “Bigfoot” Spencer lacked in historical staying power, he made up for in legendary adventure

By Mark E. Johnson



It was probably the winter of 1786, but nobody recorded the actual date.

A smattering of militiamen had gathered for one of the first musters, or troop assemblies, of brand-new Sumner County in what was then North Carolina — a decade before Tennessee statehood. Campfire smoke hung low in a damp December sky, and the lilting notes of an Irish fiddle tune mingled with the murmurs and laughter of the men. After a busy day of marching and maneuvers, the militia — composed mostly of “long” hunters, land speculators, trappers, and settlers — gathered around a dozen fires, cleaning squirrels, rabbits, and raccoons for the cookpot as they traded stories.

Castalian Springs

At one fire, the good mood soured when two young trappers began arguing bitterly over the ownership of a particular skinning knife. A local bully, Bob Shaw, suggested that the two young “bucks” fight it out, and they commenced, swinging wildly, throwing one another into stacks of firewood, and disturbing the horses hobbled nearby as a crowd of shouting onlookers materialized.

Suddenly, a towering figure clothed in buckskins appeared, dwarfing the combatants as well as every spectator. With sur-

prising speed, the giant stepped between the fighters.

“That’ll do,” said Thomas Sharp “Bigfoot” Spencer quietly. “I’ll not have this campsite dismantled. You boys can toss a coin for the knife.”

Shaw, however, had already placed a wager on one of the militiamen and was enraged that Spencer had stopped the fight. In a moment of remarkably poor judgment, he stepped forward and struck the larger man in the face.

Spencer barely moved. Instead of pummeling Shaw in retaliation, he grabbed the now-terrified bully by the back of his collar and the seat of his trousers, carried him several yards to the perimeter of the camp, and — to the amazement of the onlookers — tossed him with ease over a timber fence that one witness estimated was 10 rails (around 8 feet) high.

A flailing Shaw landed in a thicket of briars and cockleburs. His pride damaged but otherwise uninjured, the man stood and straightened his hat.

“Mr. Spencer,” he said with mock formality. “If you will now be kind enough to pitch my horse over, I’ll be riding home.”

Though the details are speculative, the story was one of many that would be recounted for generations about Spencer, Middle Tennessee’s first settler and a mythical figure so much larger than life that later historians tended to dismiss him as more legend than actual person. He was said to be a “mountain of a man,” upwards of 300 pounds by some accounts, with “Herculean” strength. No paintings or sketches of him are

known to exist, but as Tennessee State Historian Walter Durham explains, Spencer was indeed a real man and a major contributor to the exploration of Middle Tennessee.

“He was most certainly real,” says Durham, a Gallatin resident. “Spencer was one of the most colorful characters of that era of Tennessee history.”

It is believed that Spencer was a native of Virginia although there is no record of the location or date of his birth. He first came to Tennessee in 1776 as a member of a small group of longhunters — so named because their overland hunts often lasted several years. Along with partner John Holliday, Spencer began exploring the region between what is now Castalian Springs and Clarksville. After 12 months, the group reassembled and returned to southwest Virginia minus Spencer and Holliday, who decided to overwinter in the region.

“In the spring of 1778, the pair cleared land and planted corn,” Durham says. “This was the first recorded crop in Middle Tennessee planted by a person of European descent.”

By fall of 1778, Holliday decided the untamed wilderness was too much for him, too, and he retreated to established areas of Kentucky — never to be heard from again — and Spencer was alone.

“At this time, he was the farthest West of any white settler,” says Durham. “There was nothing in Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indiana, Chicago ... maybe a French trader’s post, but no settlement.”

It was during this winter that



ABOVE: Walter Durham, Sumner County and Tennessee state historian, wrote about the fascinating pioneer in his 1972 article, “Thomas Spencer: Man or Legend?” FAR LEFT: Though no images exist of Spencer, he probably wore clothing similar to this Appalachian longhunter re-enactor participating in a festival in Pennsylvania.

Spencer's legend began. He decided to settle near a sulfur spring in the rolling, fertile valley where he planted his corn. Known as "Bledsoe's Lick," the area had been discovered a few years earlier by fellow longhunters, brothers Isaac and Anthony Bledsoe, and was teeming with wildlife due to the ready source of water and salt.

Though he would later build several cabins in the region, Spencer chose a most unusual source of lodging for the winter of 1778-79: a huge, centuries-old sycamore tree — reportedly 12 feet in circumference — that was broken off some 20 feet up and partially hollowed out by the elements. Using a crude ladder that he could pull in behind him, the pioneer was effectively hidden from roving Indians and dangerous animals.

"From inside, he could inspect the lick area carefully before emerging from his blind," wrote Durham in a 1972 article entitled "Thomas Spencer: Man or Legend" published in the *Tennessee Historic Quarterly*. "On one occasion, he watched quietly from inside the hollow tree while a half dozen Indians spent the day stalking game all around him."

Thus began a respectful yet adversarial relationship among Spencer and a variety of Indian tribes who hunted the area, including Cherokee, Shawnee, and Creek. Later that year, Spencer and an unnamed companion were camped along the Duck River during a hunt when they were ambushed by Indians. Spencer's companion fell dead instantly to gunfire, and the attackers watched in amazement as the giant white man gathered up two Kentucky long rifles in one hand, the body of his fallen friend in the other, and ran at a dead sprint into the cover of underbrush. Suitably impressed, the Indians decided to give Spencer a wide berth and left the area. John Carr, an early Tennessee historian and explorer who was acquainted with Spencer, wrote that the hunter appeared to have no fear of Indians and would often roam the woods alone during periods of intense hostility among the native population and white settlers.

More stories began to circulate in the years that followed.



ABOVE: Historians believe that Spencer and his partner at the time, John Holliday, planted Middle Tennessee's first cultivated crop — corn — in 1778 in this field across from the Wynnewood property, built in 1832. **RIGHT:** Wynnewood site director Rick Hendrix displays a concrete memorial — erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution in the 1920s — on the site where Spencer's sycamore tree stood.

Apparently, Spencer had enormous feet — big, even, for his size — and since he explored extensively, he inevitably left footprints. A hunter who had come south from the Illinois region encountered the footprints and was so terrified that he fled Tennessee altogether. Some 200 miles away, he told a group of French traders that he had no intention of frequenting a land "inhabited by giants." By this time, local Indians had already dubbed Spencer "Bigfoot."

On another occasion, Spencer had a run-in with Timothy Demonbreun, a French trapper and fur-trader — and a large man himself — who had set up a trading post in the area that would become Nashville. Historian Edwin L. Drake recounted the story in an 1878 publication:

On a visit to Demonbreun's store, [Spencer] reached across the low counter, took some article from the shelf that he wanted to examine. Demonbreun, thinking he meant to take it by force, struck him across the head with a small stick. Spencer amply avenged the insult and blow by pulling his antagonist across the counter and greasing him from head to foot with buffalo tallow, of which there was a barrel standing conveniently.

Although he was renowned for his physical abilities and fighting skills, people who knew Spencer personally described him as friendly and even-tempered.

"There was no bluster about him, no disposition to quarrel or raise riots," wrote Carr. "He was one of the most kindly-disposed men within my knowledge, and could make himself pleasant and agreeable in company, even while he delighted to be alone and far away from society."

His mild temperament, however, apparently never softened

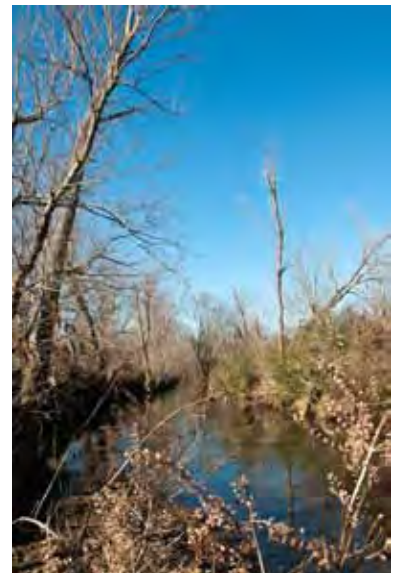
the opinions of his Indian antagonists. On April 1, 1794, while returning from a trip to his native home in southwest Virginia, Spencer was ambushed by

Cherokees, some believe, along the trail near what is now Crab Orchard in Cumberland County. After surviving hostile Indian territory, usually alone, for nearly 20 years, Middle Tennessee's first settler and farmer was killed instantly, dead before he hit the ground. The area is still known today as Spencer's Hill.

After his death, "Bigfoot" lived mainly in pioneer stories passed down from one generation to the other and in early historical writings, but he never gained the fame of contemporaries like Daniel Boone or later woodsmen like David Crockett. Walter Durham says this is probably due to the fact that Spencer wasn't a political or military figure.

"He was certainly a larger-than-life type of person," says Durham. "I think his legend probably contributed to the general concept that longhunters and explorers were strong, brave, resilient characters, and in fact, most were. They crossed nearly impenetrable mountains. They dealt with hostile Indians and extremely difficult living conditions. The early settlers almost didn't survive, and when they did, it spoke loudly about the strength and bravery of the people."

The giant sycamore in which Spencer spent the winter of '78-'79 survived into the middle of the following century and



Spencer would've trapped along Bledsoe Creek, which runs just a few yards from the sulfur spring that attracted wildlife and humans alike to the Castalian Springs area.

was an oft-visited landmark. In the 1920s, the James Robertson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a concrete memorial on the site where the tree once stood — now on the property of the state-owned historic Wynnewood in Castalian Springs. Some years later, a historical marker was placed along Highway 70 in Crab Orchard in Spencer's honor, but aside from these two memorials, "Bigfoot" has largely faded from Tennessee's collective memory.

And for a man who seemed to enjoy adventure in the company of nature rather than people, this would likely suit him just fine.