BENGE!



by Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.

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Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.

Best Wishes
Larry Fleenor

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1998
Big Stone Gap, Va.

Dedicated to
All Those Who Died

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue 5
William Benge 8
Albemarle County 9
The Yadkin 10
The Cherokee 11
Old Trader Benge 14
The Dortons 16
Settlement of the Valley of the North Fork of the Holston 18
Hargis 20
The Approaching War 23
The Holston Militia 29
The Fort Blackmore Raid 31
The Long Island Treaty of 1777 39
Running Water Town 41
The End of The Revolutionary War 43
The State of Franklin 45
The Archibald and Fannie Scott Raid 47
The End of the State of Franklin 51
The Return of the Small Raid 53
Ensign Moses Cockrell 59
Yoakum's Station 64
The Livingston Raid 66
Postscript 86

The Historic Documents
Used as Sources for
Benge!

The Cotterell-Benge Confrontation from Wilburn Waters 90
Col. Arthur Campbell's Report based on Elizabeth Livingston 91
The Death of Benge from Wilburn Waters
based on Mrs. Solomon Osborn 93
The Benjamin Sharp Document from Summers 95
The Andrew Lewis letter of April 17, 1794 96
The Andrew Lewis letter of April 19,1794 97
The Col. Campbell letter to the Gov. of Va. 98
Dr. James Huff's Article in "The Jacksonian" of 1846 98
Statements of Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson and Dr. James W. Sage 100
The Fulkerson Material from Addington's Scott Co 101
Second Version of Campbell letter to the Gov. of Va 102
Citizen's Petition to the Gov. of Va. April 1794 102
Comfrey Patch Fort letter of William A. Orr 104
Capt. Joshua Hobbs article from "The Powell Valley News" 105

Obituary of Joshua Hobbs from "The Post" 105
Revolutionary War Pension Affidavit of Job Hobbs 106

Bibliography 114

Genealogic Charts

Pedigree of Chief Bob Benge 117
Benge - Dorton 118
General Joseph Martin and his Cherokee Kin 119

Index .....

PROLOGUE

In 1926 two car loads of Indians pulled up in front of Claude Parker's farm near Hilton's, Virginia, on the North Fork of the Holston River. The cars were expensive models, and the Indians politely introduced themselves to Mr. Parker as Oklahoma Cherokee. They explained that their ancestors had come from Tennessee, and had once considered this site to be their favorite hunting ground. They produced an old map painted on deer skin which convincingly showed a little knob and streams all in the right places, and Mr. Parker could see that it showed his farm.

The Cherokee went on to explain that in the 1830's their ancestors had made a pilgrimage from their homes in East Tennessee to see their favorite spot one last time. They camped here for a while, and when they could tarry no longer, they drew the deer skin map and placed an 'X' on the map designating their last camp ground. These Cherokee then made their sorrowful way to Chattanooga where they met others and began the "Trail of Tears" journey into exile in Oklahoma. Fate had it, however, that the land they settled on turned out to be oil rich, and their descendants became wealthy because of it. These were the Indians now standing before Mr. Parker, and one of them then pointed to the 'X' on the faded map and asked Mr. Parker for permission to camp there.

Permission was rapidly given. Perhaps it helped that Claude Parker was himself 1/16 th Cherokee, and by tradition was descended from an Indian princess, the daughter of Chief Benge.

The wealthy Oklahoma Cherokee camped on the Parker farm for days, and at night one of their elders told tales of the ancient exploits of Chief Benge and other Cherokee in this valley. Parker's eight year old nephew, Homer, would sit on the old Indian's knee for hours night after night as the old man recounted the raids made by their mutual kinsman a century and a half earlier. Years later, Homer, as an old man, would regale his own family with these stories.

Who was this man from long ago? Why does the mention of his name, even today, excite emotions in Southwest Virginia, East and Central Tennessee, and in Kentucky? Is there any importance attached to him other than as a folk figure?

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the killing of Chief Benge was the most important single event to ever to have happened in the above defined part of the country. The event is and was important both in its own right, and is and was important as a symbol of significant threads in the tapestry of people's lives. To the people of that area of his

generation, only the Battle of King's Mountain could rival it as an event of transcendental significance, and though that event involved the forebears of today's citizens of that region, it did not occur in the region itself.

We need to take a step back and examine his life and times to see both why our ancestors were so elated by his death, and why his ghost still stalks the land.

What were the most important events occurring in the world and in our country at the time of Benge? Certainly the break up of the First British Empire was at the top of the list. This Empire was the greatest to have occurred since the dark ages. It was the lynch pen of world order until the American Revolution provided the "shot heard around the world" and started wars of liberation that have continued to the present.

The development of the American as a separate ethnic, and the development of America as a place separate from Europe have dominated world history ever since these related events occurred during the generation of Benge. The area in question can be viewed as being center stage in each of these dramas, and Benge as being an active player in each.

At the beginning of the American Revolution the area was a back water, with the main action occurring around the great cities and waterways of the Northeast. The people who lived here were fighting for their lives in a war of extermination between the Cherokee and the Holston Militia. This war had been started by the British as part of their response to the larger American Revolution. It is important to understand this war as a civil war, as not only did it pit loyalist against rebel, but both the so called settlers and the so called Cherokee were already so interbred that it pitted kin against kin. This crucible forged the Holston Militia into a highly motivated professional fighting force, and when it annihilated the loyalist troops at King's Mountain, the British were placed on the road that lead to Yorktown. Benge was from a family of Cherokee war chiefs, and helped lead his people in their conflict with the Holston Militia. In fact, he was the leader of the rear guard action that gave the Holston Militia its single bloodiest defeat.

Prior to the generation of Benge the people who lived here were either Irish, Scots, English, German, Cherokee, Shawnee, or Negro. Even though ethnic divisions did not completely vanish during this generation, intermarriage and cultural borrowing had progressed far enough to produce the American as an identifiable person. The American English language was born in the same process. The Great Valley of Virginia, the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina, and the Greater

Holston Valley were the cradles of these events. In his own person, Benge exemplified these threads in our national tapestry. He was physically part Cherokee and part British, and was partially raised in each of these cultures. These warring contradictions played out within his own psyche, and his own internal conflicts were but private expressions of the external mayhem that swirled around him.

The seeds that were to grow to become America had been planted two hundred years earlier on the coast, but only in Benge's generation did the newly born American break out from the Atlantic Seaboard with pent up explosive force and funnel through the Holston Valley to sweep across the continent within the next hundred years. Benge spent his life trying to stop this torrent, and in the end was swept over by it. His death actually marked the end of the Indian wars in the original thirteen English colonies that had started in 1607, and symbolically closed the era of colonization and opened the era of manifest destiny. To both the settler and to the Indian he had become the symbol of resistance to these defining events, and herein lies the basis for his being viewed simultaneously as villain and as hero. Which view one takes says as much about the viewer as it says about Benge.

The historic Benge is important for historic reasons, but the Benge of today is important as a symbol of unresolved issues living at the nerve center of our social self awareness. Alex Haley purposely sat out to help his people when he wrote Roots. He understood that an ethnic minority group could not achieve equal status in society unless it had ethnic pride, and this came from self knowledge beginning with the knowledge of one's history. So it is with those who live here in the Appalachians. They are a definably different ethnic minority within the greater nation. They have not achieved their equal potential within America. They suffer in silence from the semi-myth of the Scots-Irish settler. They are scarcely aware of the Cherokee among themselves, present in countless eighths and sixteenths - each fraction crying in suppressed anger at the other seven eights of their soul.

In his own body Benge represents the unresolved ethnic divisions within our society, and his rehabilitation will mark their healing. For this reason we need to examine his life and times. When we accept the internal conflicts that drove Benge, we will accept with understanding the different ethnic threads that compose our own tapestry.

Once having arrived at this higher level of self acceptance, we will be in a better position to address our future. As we come to appreciate Benge as a symbol of who we are, he can serve as a unifying symbol to encourage us to common efforts within the region of the world that was both his home and his battle ground.

debts. Then North Carolina changed its mind, and kept its western lands. In addition to his jobs as Virginia's local commanding militia officer and its agent to the Cherokee, Martin also became both Georgia's and North Carolina's Indian agent. His mission to enforce the French Broad settlement line placed him in conflict with the settlers lead by John Sevier.

In 1784 the settlers in the North Carolina part of the Overmountain settlements seceded from that state, and formed The State of Franklin. The Virginia part of the Overmountain settlements threatened to secede from Virginia and to join the State of Frankliners. John Sevier was its governor and commander of its militia. The reason for these moves was to allow the militia to invade the Overhill Cherokee settlements between the French Broad and Little Tennessee Rivers.

North Carolina and Virginia persuaded the National Government to take charge of their role in this affair, and the Congress of the Articles of Confederation did so. It appointed Martin as the Federal Indian Agent to the Cherokee, and nationalized the Virginia militia under Martin. North Carolina issued a warrant for the arrest of John Sevier.

Not one to sit quietly by his fireside in the shadow of Lookout Mountain, Bob Benge and his warriors chose this chaotic period to strike again into the heart of the Southwest Virginia settlements near where Benge had spent part of his youth.

The Archibald and Fannie Scott Raid

The head of Wallen's Creek is in a beautiful bowel formed by the juncture of Powell Mountain and Wallen's Ridge. About a mile and a half across, its sides scoop upward to the sky ending in an almost vertical ascent. The floor of the bowel has always been an open blue grass meadow, said to afford forage rich enough to fatten cattle just as good as corn. Passage in and out of this lovely cove is obtained, not by going up Wallen's Creek, whose passage is too difficult, but by crossing through one of the three mountain top passes notched in the rim of the basin. Lovelady Gap to the north affords passage into either upper Powell Valley or to the upper reaches of the North Fork of the Clinch. The Great Warrior's Path, later called either the Wilderness Road or the Boone Trail, enters to the east through Kane Gap from Little Flat Lick, present Duffield, and makes a nearly circular curling descent along the face of Powell Mountain before paralleling Wallen's Creek to Stickleyville, where James Boone and Henry Russell were murdered and Whiteside Hargis II was taken into captivity. This greatest of Indian trails exits the valley to the west by passing over Wallen's Ridge into Powell's Valley to the head of Station Creek.

In 1782 Archibald and Fannie Scott moved from Castle's Woods into the very center of the basin. Fannie's maiden name was Dickenson from one of the original settling families of that frontier community. The Scotts planted ten acres in corn, and by the terms of "the corn right law" they got a grant of one hundred acres of land for each acre that they had planted in corn. They built their home in the form of a blockhouse beside the trail on a little knoll above a sweet spring and by a rushing creek that soon was to bear their name. From their home, which was to become widely known as 'Scott's Station', they had an unobstructed view of the circling walls of their own private sanctuary. There were no other homes within sight, but they had plenty of visitors as the emigrants passed by their door on their way to Kentucky. Their only neighbors were the Ball family. By 1785 the Scotts were blessed with five children, the oldest being a girl of eight.

In the Spring of that year Benge, Hargis, and eleven of their mixed band of Cherokee and Shawnee warriors left Lookout Town in North Georgia and started on a trip to the Shawnee towns of Ohio. The main trail up the Tennessee River and through Moccasin Gap was too dangerous for them to follow, so they swung to the west, finally entering the Valley of the Powell. Their detour of the Overmountain settlements would end as they regained the main trail to Shawnee towns of Ohio near Fort Blackmore. On June 29th the war party was dismayed to find the home of the Scotts sitting in the middle of what had been a meadow filled with grazing deer. Incensed at this intrusion, the warriors hunkered down in the shadows and watched the Scotts until after sunset.

The Scotts had had supper. Archibald had just gotten into bed, and Fannie was in process of undressing when without any warning the door was burst open with a rending crash. Archibald jumped out of bed, and as he gained his feet, he was mortally shot. He staggered out the door where he collapsed and died. The three youngest children were tomahawked and had their throats slit in their beds as they screamed. The girl of eight ran into Fannie's arms, where she was tomahawked while her mother pleaded for the child's life. Hargis, who had begun his life with the Indians not more that four miles away, was in the midst of the mayhem.

The war party then attacked the Ball home, but having been forewarned by the attack on the Scotts, the Balls were better prepared. The door could not be forced. The Indians fired into the house through a crack between the logs, and killed a young boy. His brother then fired through the closed door and drove the Indians off, and the family ran away.

The war party gathered up the Scott's portable household belongings and four loaded rifles, scalped their victims, and sat the

Map 4

KANE GAP / SCOTT'S STATION
A Scott's Branch
B Scott's Station
C Wallen's Creek
D Wilderness Road to the west
E Trail to the south end of Lovelady Gap or to Dry Creek
F Kane Gap
G North Fork of the Clinch and the trail to the east end of Lovelady Gap
H Wilderness Road to the east
I Little Flat Lick
J The Devil's Race Path

house afire. Prodding Fannie along, they abandoned their direct route to regain the trail to Ohio, but took another detour over Lovelady Gap into Turkey Cove of Powell Valley. Up the valley they trod, with dawn finding them at Three Forks in front of the Big Stone Gap in Cumberland Mountain, later to be called in this segment Stone Mountain. Following the Middle Fork of the Powell through the Gap they veered up its major tributary to the left. Fannie, exhausted by the forced march through the night, was encouraged to greater efforts by being slapped in the face with the scalps of her husband and children. The head of this creek bore the Cherokee name 'Stonega', and marked one of the lesser passes between the head waters of the Tennessee River watershed and into either the head waters of the Cumberland, or by going a few miles east up the crest of Black Mountain, they could enter the head waters of either the Kentucky River, or of the Ohio by way of Elk Horn Creek and the Big Sandy. Before making this ascent, Benge divided the plunder among the war party, and detached nine of the braves to back track into the settlements of the Clinch to steal horses. The remaining four and Fannie proceeded across the pass.

Eleven days and two hundred miles from her home, Benge and his party and Fannie Scott stopped at a place to await the reunion with the horse thieves from the Clinch. One day three of the Indians went out from camp to hunt and left Fannie in the care of the oldest man in the group, who was to be her husband when they reached the Shawnee towns on the Miami River in Ohio. Fannie asked his permission to go to the creek where she could wash the blood of her eight year old daughter off of her dress. Thinking Fannie was too far from home to consider running off, the old Indian said in English, "Go on." While the Indian was preoccupied dressing a deer skin, Fannie went to the brook, but kept on going.

She went back down the trail, and three days later she heard the approach of the horse thieves returning from their foray into Clinch Valley. She hid in a hollow sycamore till they had passed. A day or two later she heard the whoops of the Indians as they back trailed her with barking dogs. Again she took refuge in a hollow log that lay across the trail, and the mounted Indians jumped their horses across it, and others passed around by its open end without discovering her.

Blundering around in the wilderness, starving, and with her clothing in shreds, Fannie became lost. She came to a big river flowing out of the mountains to the east, and concluded that it must be the Big Sandy which she had heard so much about as a girl in Castle's Woods. She knew that the head waters of this river were located near the home of her parents, so she began its ascent.

The Big Sandy cuts its way through the mountain separating

ginia from Kentucky forming a huge two mile long gorge. The vertical walls of this canyon are nearly impassable. Fannie tried to climb out of the gorge, but could not do so. Weak and exhausted, she allowed herself to slide back down the cliff. Bruised and scrapped raw, she was addled by the plunge, but when she came to herself she saw that she was in one piece. She got a drink of water, and began to wade her way upstream. Luckily the water was low. It took her two days to make the two miles out of the gorge.

Wolves and bears frequently passed her by without any attempt to harm her. One day she startled a bear that had a fawn in its mouth. The bear dropped the deer in its surprise, and ran away. Fannie started to eat the fawn, but decided that the bear might return to reclaim it, and hurriedly left it behind. Continuing to exist on berries, cane, bark, and herbs, she continued up the Big Sandy till she came to a forks. She did not know which way to go. She was too weak to survive the wrong choice. She sat down to ponder her dilemma, and chose the left hand fork. She had gone but a little way up this trail when a bird lit on her shoulder and then lit in the path up the valley of the right fork. In a moment a second bird did the same thing. Believing these birds to be the spirits of her murdered children, Fannie turned and went up the right hand fork and two days later, August 11th, she reached the settlement at New Garden, in the upper reaches of the Clinch, not but a day's travel from Castle's Woods.

The End of the State of Franklin

During the years 1786 - 1787 anarchy and mayhem reigned in the Overmountain country as the State of Franklin militia moved to exterminate the Cherokee; the States of North Carolina and Virginia and the National Government moved against the State of Franklin, and solemnly made treaties, and innocent white and red lives were savagely destroyed.

Old Tassel, who had once wryly observed, "Truth is if we had no land we should have fewer enemies," struggled to keep the Overhill Cherokee at peace, but the war between the State of Franklin militia and the forces of Dragging Canoe consumed everything and everyone. One of the families that settled in the Overhill's land between the French Broad and the Little Tennessee was that of John Kirk, Sr. The Cherokee attacked and killed eleven of the Kirk family. The militia retaliated with an expedition against the Overhill towns. The commander of the militia force, Major Hubbard, sent for the chiefs of the peace faction, and had them meet under a flag of truce. Old Tassel, Hanging Maw of Chota and his brother, Old Abram and his son all entered the designated cabin and

Fannie Scott - She remarried Thomas Johnson, for whom Johnson Co, Tennessee is named. They had several children. She died May 1796, and is buried on the northern slopes of Hayter's Gap in Clinch Mountain, in Russell Co., Virginia.

Brig. General John Sevier - Born in Rockingham, Virginia, he became another Virginian that figured in Tennessee history. He became that state's first Governor. He was convicted of treason over his role in the State of Franklin revolt, but was pardoned. He served in the House of Representatives, and later died in 1815 in Decatur, Georgia.

Col. Evan Shelby - Before his role in the Benge story, he had fought in the French and Indian War at Braddock's Defeat, the retaking of Fort Duquesne, and later at the Battle of Point Pleasant in Lord Dunmore's War. The States of Virginia and of North Carolina showered honors and land grants on him before his death 12-4-1794, the same year that Bob Benge was killed. Two of his sons, James and Evan, Jr., were killed by Indians. A third son, Isaac, became the first Governor of Kentucky. Col. (later General) Evan Shelby is buried in East Hill Cemetery, Bristol, Tennessee.

few yards of them but being desirous to know whether the rest of the party was yet in sight, Benbever cautiously raised his head above the rock to make the discovery and the keen eyed savage saw him at the distance of forty yards, the rest not yet being in sight, at the sight of the white man's head he stooped forward and threw off a pack and made the dark deep hollow ring with a terrific Indian yell, at the same time making a blow with his tomahawk, struck the woman on the head and she fell dead at his feet; he wheeled and bounded off the way he had come, the two heroes seeing their plan was all frustrated, rose from their hiding place and Benbever fired at the running savage without effect; Hobbs a celebrated marksman leveled his piece and held her steadily upon a spot until the Indian passed before his sight, when with that quickness, with which the backwoods rifleman are so wonderfully gifted he fired and the Indian fell shot through the brains, and this was the celebrated Benge. All the party then left their hiding places and rushed forward to rescue the rest of the prisoners when they found the Indians striving to make their escape into the laurel, and as they rushed upon the enemy who were striving to get into the laurel with the prisoners, my informant says he ran up very near the Indian, who had the other white women, and raised his rifle to shoot him at that instant he raised a tomahawk to strike the woman, who caught his arm and held it until my informant made several attempts to shoot the Indian as he was dragging her by the arm, but at every attempt, one of his comrades would seize his gun telling him not to shoot he would kill the woman, he then threw down his gun, drew his butcher knife and rushed towards the Indian, at that instant the Indian having crossed a log, jerked the female against it and extricated his arm and as quick as lightning entered the thicket, but as he entered he recieved the contents of another man's rifle, which sent him bleeding to death in the laurel. The party then collected all their prisoners and returned to the tomakawked woman and to thier great joy found she was yet alive, and was shortly afterwards with the other prisoners deilvered to her friends to the great joy of all.

"I would pursue this narrative further, but fearing his unvarnished relation would not be worthy of a place in your excellent paper, I for the present say no more."

Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson & Dr. James W. Sage

These entries are taken from Annals of Southwest Virginia by Lewis Preston Summers. They are from Coale's Wilburn Waters, but Coale attributes them not to the narratives of Waters, but to "data written by Dr. James W. Sage, of Lee County, and Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson, the youngest daughter of Mrs. Scott, now about ninety years of age, and living in the adjoining county of Russell. The statements, therefore, may

be relied on as accurate". (1)

A later entry states that "After some years Mrs. Scott married Mr. Thomas Johnson, for whom the county of that name in Tennessee was called. She raised a family of children, all of whom married and became useful and respectable members of society. She lived to an advanced age, and her ashes now repose on a little hillock near the old blacksmith shop, not far from the base of Clinch mountain at Hayter's Gap, in Russell county, Virginia." (2)

The Statement

"The leader of the band was the cruel and notorious half-breed Benge, who was killed three years after not many miles from the same place, as he was making his way to Big Stone Gap with the Livingston captives" (3)

(1) page 1603 of Summer's Annals

(2) ibid pg. 1606

(3) ibid pg. 1604 (page 202 in the original Wilburn Waters)

The Fulkerson's and Benge

Robert Addington in his History of Scott County relates an oral tradition concerning Benge's route of retreat from the Livingston raid. It is on page 125.

"Two of these petitioners (*see document "Petition of Citizens Near Big Moccasin Gap"*), Abraham and James Fulkerson, lived at that time near the present village of Hiltons,. Va. Abraham Fulkerson lived only a few hundred yards northeast of the present town. An old loghouse now stands on, or near the site of his former dwelling. It is said that Benge intended to attack Abraham Fulkerson's dwelling on his return from the capture of the Livingstons, but a fortunate circumstance kept him from doing so. On the day the Livingstons were captured, Fulkerson was being assisted by his neighbors at a "house-raising." This work brought so many men together that Benge dared not make an attack, or even let his presence in the neighborhood be known. After watching the operations of the men at work on the house, for a time, Benge with his prisoners effected a crossing of Clinch Mountain at what is now known as the Hamilton Gap. This course enabled him to avoid detection by the settlers in the neighborhood of Fort Houston."

On pages 109-110 Addington identifies Fort Houston as having been on Big Moccasin Creek in Scott County near the Washington