

Cross Timbers wooded regions shaped North Texas history

By Nita Thurman

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Two fingers of forests that extended into North Texas prairies — the Cross Timbers — once were pathways for travelers, first for Native Americans and later for immigrants moving into the new Republic of Texas.

The Western Cross Timbers, sometimes called the Upper Cross Timbers, is an irregularly shaped wooded region that extends southward through Montague, Wise, Jack, Parker, Hood, Erath and Comanche counties.

The Eastern Cross Timbers, also known as the Lower Cross Timbers, extends southward through the eastern half of Cooke County through eastern Denton County and the city of Denton and south nearly to the Brazos River at Waco.

According to the Handbook of Texas, the Eastern Cross Timbers are no more than 15 miles wide. The hardwood forest sits slightly higher than the prairies on either side. Post Oak and Black Jack oak dominate, but a wide variety of trees — hackberry, elm, pecan, hickory and many more — existed.

Much of the forest has fallen to development in the years since. Early residents took timber for fences, homes and other structures and later for railroad ties. Bulldozers have leveled large areas to make way for more buildings.

Well before immigrants headed into Texas, the Cross Timbers was a dividing line between Native American hunting grounds. Sometimes Comanches crossed the divide to raid, but usually Plains Indians hunted to the west, and East Texas Indians stayed to the east.

The belt of trees also was north-south pathway for the nomadic tribes. Its dense thickets offered security where tribes could travel out of sight of their enemies while still having access to game and wood.

In 1850, Lt. W.H.C. Whiting, who was surveying possible sites for U.S. forts along the Texas frontier, wrote in his report:

"Perhaps the most remarkable features of this section are the two great belts of forest known as the Cross Timbers." The belts were about 50 miles apart, he wrote, and separated by a prairie entirely destitute of wood. They were "a favorite range of many Texas Indians and their usual home in the winter."

Whiting was less than happy at Fort Worth — the actual fort. Continual flooding of the Trinity prevented troops from living in the bottomlands, forcing them to higher plains where they were "exposed all winter to northers and sleets of the country and in the summer to scorching heat."

Even so, he continued, "within forty miles are found the little villages of Dallas and Alton ... and numerous hamlets are found through the Cross Timbers. After crossing Hickory Creek in Denton County, the lieutenant reported "houses of squatters were seen at short intervals" all the way to Coffee's Bend on the Red River.

As the pace of immigration increased, the Eastern Cross Timbers became a famous pioneer landmark. The belt of trees became a north-south highway, leading pioneers from the Red River crossing down into the North Texas interior.

Just as it had sheltered Native Americans, the belt of trees also offered shelter to the pioneers, who drove their teams and wagons along its edge and took game and firewood from the forest.

However, again quoting the Handbook of Texas, the most important function of the Cross Timbers was to preserve water — the commodity that is becoming more and more scarce in Texas. The forest prevented

water from running off the surface soil too quickly, thus allowing it to soak into sand that supplied artesian wells for hundreds of wells east and south of the Cross Timbers.

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