

# CHAPTER 1

## ARKANSAS: THE PLACE

Let's travel through Arkansas as if we were explorers in the 1700's. We will follow the six major river systems upstream to their origins. This will take us to within a few miles of every spot in the state. These river systems were the "interstate highways" for the fur traders of the 1700's and 1800's who established the first trading posts. The explorers and traders of those days usually began their journeys on the Mississippi River. Traveling along the Mississippi they would have seen virgin hardwood forests of huge oak and gum trees. Cottonwood, willow, ash, elm, maple, southern pine, and cypress trees would also likely have been in these forests. The land would have been mostly level in the Mississippi bottom.

From the Mississippi River, the fur traders could have turned their canoes up the Arkansas River. This would take them through the heart of Arkansas all the way to Indian Territory, which is now Oklahoma. There would be many miles of travel after leaving the Mississippi River before reaching the Ouachita Mountains and the Boston Mountains. In order to explore the Ouachita Mountains, they would need to branch off into the Fourche La Fave River.

Some of the more energetic fur traders probably left their boats and went mountain climbing. Magazine Mountain, southwest of what is now Russellville, is almost 2,800 feet above the level of the oceans. It is the highest mountain in Arkansas. Shortleaf pine and oak trees cover these mountains.

Now let's begin back at the Mississippi River and explore the White River system. To follow this system, we must travel in a northerly direction all the way to Missouri. The White River begins its course southward as a narrow stream in the Boston Mountains. Tributaries that feed the White River System are the Buffalo, Little Red, Cache, and Black. The St. Francis River System, unlike the White River, stays in the lowlands. It forms the boundary for the Missouri "boot heel." This land is almost level eastward all the way to the Mississippi River.

Parallel to the St. Francis River is Crowley's Ridge. This ridge of hardwood trees extends for over 200 miles from southern Missouri to the present town of Helena.

Exploring the Red River system requires much less travel. All of the Red River drainage is in southwestern Arkansas. Tributaries are the Little River, the Cossatot River, and the Saline River. Red River forms a border between Texas and Arkansas. The forests consist of oak, gum, hickory, poplar, elm, and maple trees. Loblolly pine grows on the wetter lowlands. Uplands have shortleaf pine.

The Ouachita and Saline Rivers begin in the Ouachita Mountains. As other typical mountain streams, they start as small, fast-moving rapids and then slow gradually as they enter the almost level plain. When water slows, it forms meandering waterways. The Bayou Bartholomew is a system of slow-moving streams across the rich soil of southeast Arkansas.

## TODAY'S ARKANSAS

Traveling Arkansas in the 1990's is much different from traveling in the 1700's. Highways now crisscross the state, and towns and cities are numerous. Traveling is much easier.

We also see some very different scenery in the 1990's. The Mississippi River Valley has probably changed the most. Cotton, corn, soybeans, and rice now grow where the mighty oaks and other trees grew in the 1700's. The water in the streams may be a little more polluted, but most of the streams are clear and full of fish. The mountains have not changed.

Arkansas is blessed with numerous lakes, both natural and man made. The largest natural lake is Lake Chicot. Along the Arkansas River Bottom are many small lakes made by slow-moving bayous. The best known man-made lakes in northern Arkansas are Bull Shoals, Beaver, Norfolk, White Oak, Peckerwood, and Greer's Ferry. In southern Arkansas, dams have been built to create Lakes Conway, Dardanelle, and Maumelle.



Six states surround Arkansas. They are Missouri on the north, Tennessee and Mississippi on the east, Oklahoma and Texas on the west, and Louisiana on the south.

God has blessed Arkansas with an abundance of precipitation in the form of rain and snow. Southeastern Arkansas receives about 54 inches per year, decreasing as we travel northwest to about 44 inches in the northwest corner.

Good moisture conditions permit rapid growth of the subtropical loblolly pine forests in the south. Cooler mountains in northern Arkansas provide for temperate hardwoods to prosper along with shortleaf pine.