

# Capricious Winn Creek

IN TN IN 1850

Winn Creek — an innocent enough sounding name — just another creek flowing gently and sometimes not flowing at all in periods of drought — a mere trickle of water between deeper pools along its course. Its entire length is only 5.6 miles from its source north of the blacktop road from Winslow to Devil's Den to where it joins the West Fork of White River just east of the trestle of the railroad south of the old Woolsey store building. All along its course, the main stream is joined by many branches, some as large as Winn Creek itself. This combination of tributaries drains a watershed as precipitous and untamed as any in Southern Washington County. It encompasses all the land between West Fork on the east side and Lee Creek on the west. Pickle Creek, carrying a large amount of water, rises just back of the first house after the turn-off to Oak Grove; Riley Creek rises and drains that side of the mountain into Winn Creek. Hays Hollow comes in from the west side; Jones Creek comes from the east. There are many more - all named for early settlers along their banks.

It is not known whether Winn Creek was first called by that name merely because Zedrick (Zodak) Winn was one of the first white men to settle above its headwaters or whether it was called so after his tragic drowning in the stream. Zedrick Winn

arrived in Southern Washington county, Arkansas, from Tennessee in 1832 along with his brother James Minor Winn. James homesteaded in what is now West Fork, and Zedrick settled on land on the mountain above the creek that bears his name and was drowned in its flood in 1852.

These early settlers had not yet learned of the capricious nature of this seemingly calm flowing stream. Because of the steepness of the terrain and the number of branches flowing into it, Winn Creek can within a matter of minutes change from a shallow trickle to a roaring torrent 30 feet deep. For creeks to rise considerably in a short time is not unusual in this mountain country — but no other can rise to such depths so quickly and be as treacherous as Winn Creek. This tremendous rise occurs only once in 20 to 40 years — and only after heavy rainfall. The autumn of 1852 had been exceptionally wet, and the ground was saturated on that day when Zedrick Winn rode his horse to transact business with his brother in West Fork. The creek was swollen when he made the trip downstream, but was easily navigable on horseback. During his stay in the valley, heavy rains fell along the headwaters of the branches above his crossing. Night was falling as he rode homeward. The lowering clouds and the rumbling thunder and encroaching dark-

ness prevented his being aware of the rapid rise in the creek. At the crossing below his farm, known as Bush's Crossing north of the Caudle Bluff, the road follows in the bed of the stream at a slanting angle, so that the horseman must ride against the current almost directly up the stream. When the creek rises, fast surges of water come rushing down, sometimes carrying large uprooted trees with the torrent.

Exactly what happened on this dark night is not known. There were no witnesses to the tragedy. The wife was anxiously awaiting the arrival of her husband, realizing that a great amount of rain had fallen since his departure, and knowing that the creek could become treacherous, she was especially alert. When she saw the riderless horse arrive in the gathering darkness and investigated, she saw that the animal was badly bruised and bleeding and that the saddle was water soaked. Her worst fears were realized.

Neighbors were few in the year 1852, but all those who could be reached on that side of the stream soon were aroused and the search was begun. The creek had risen until reaching the opposite bank was impossible. Attempts during the night were futile. Just as quickly as it rises, the creek can recede. By morning the rain had ceased, and the creek was soon within its normal banks. The badly battered body

of Zedrick Winn was found among debris along the bank of the creek late the following day, more than a mile below the crossing. Records tell us that he was buried near the mouth of Winn Creek, but not exactly where. Since the Woolsey cemetery is almost directly across White River from the mouth of Winn Creek, presumably he lies in an unmarked grave in this cemetery.

In later years two other Winns came near losing their lives in the same creek. The two Winn youths, Austin and Otto, escaped with only minor injuries, but two of their companions, Elzy and Oren Lofton, were drowned; a third Lofton brother, Andrew (Jake) escaped. In addition to sustaining multiple bruises and cuts as he was swept down the stream, his hands were badly cut by the barbed wire of the fence that he seized and by which he pulled himself above the raging waters. An account of this tragedy was recorded in the *Fayetteville Democrat* on Monday, December 26, 1932. The account was headed: "Lofton Brothers of West Fork Drown - Car Overturns in Swollen Creek; Two of Five are Drowned." The main body of the article reads in part: "The deaths of Elzy and Oren Lofton of West Fork which occurred Friday night, December 23, is one of the saddest experiences this community has ever witnessed. On the night of December 23, Elzy, Oren, and Andrew (Jake) Lofton, Austin and Otto Winn started to a Christmas tree at Sycamore (a schoolhouse farther up the creek). They were driving a Chevrolet sedan ('26 model). While crossing Winn Creek near Caudle's, the car stalled in mid-stream. Mr. Caudle took his team and was going to

pull it out. Mr. Davenport, who was present, rescued three of the boys, but nothing could be found of the other two. Word was telephoned for help and the search went on all night, but darkness and rain were a hindrance. The car went down about 7:30 p.m. and the bodies were not found until 10:30 the next morning — about a mile downstream and 100 yards apart.

"As evidence of their popularity, the attendance at the funeral which was held at the West Fork Cemetery Sunday afternoon, was one of the largest in the history of the community."

In an interview, Austin Winn, who lived on the road between Winn and Lee Creeks, stated that they could have gotten out of the flood if they had realized their imminent danger. Austin did get out of the car and was trying to hitch the team to the bumper, but each time that he thought he had the double-team attached, a new wave of water surged down and tore the connection loose. Suddenly, an exceptionally high wall came roaring upon them, and the car was turned over several times in the swirling waters. The team escaped to the bank. Austin was able to seize the limb of a tree and cling until rescued. Otto clung to a log and was rescued by the combined efforts of Austin and Mr. Davenport, and Andrew was helped from the barbed wire fence to which he was clinging. By morning the stream had receded into its banks again, and the bodies of the two boys were found in debris along the side of the creek.

On the night of April 21, 1973, the creek demonstrated another of her unpredictable caprices. Again the ground was saturated and could hold no more

water. The exceptionally heavy downpour in the middle of the night sent the creek roaring out of its banks to spread from hill to hill. The vast amount of water cascading over the bluffs and into the stream made a deafening roar. The power of these walls of water pounding against each other as they converged from the branches into the main stream sounded like the firing of cannons. The wild surging or the combined forces pounding over the boulders in the bed and along the banks tore out large trees by their roots and swirled them downstream as if they were straws.

Fortunately, people have learned the caprices of this unpredictable stream and shun contact with the waters in these times of heavy rainfall. Few people now live up the hollows. At the Nobert Roach home across the creek from the road, the waters rose to fill the entire valley; the white fence from the creek to the foot of the rise upon which the house sits was completely covered. Again the waters receded in a short time and by mid-day Sunday, the creek was flowing within its banks - but evidence of its force was plain to see in the wreckage of the long wooden span that had been the bridge across this usually shallow stream. •