A Glimpse of the Hill Country in 1846

A German geologist, Ferdinand Roemer, visited the Hill Country from early 1846 until the spring of 1847, and chronicled his observations in great detail in a book, since translated into English by Oswald Mueller, called “Roemer’s Texas”. Roemer was actually employed to study the area by a German company interested in developing some German settlements in the Hill Country.

Roemer described in detail the difficulty in traveling in Texas back then, which was just after Texas became a state. It took them 17 days in January and February of 1846 to travel from Houston to New Braunfels, a distance of 250 miles. Much of the time was spent trying to get wagons unstuck from muddy trails.

In New Braunfels, Roemer made the acquaintance of Ferdinand Lindheimer, a naturalist and newspaper editor, now known as the Father of Texas Botany. Roemer described a trip he made with Lindheimer to Mission Hill, which is on the outskirts of present day New Braunfels, as follows, ”Our path led us again past the springs of Comal, but suddenly ascended the steep, wooded slope of the hill….The cedar trees which covered the slopes exclusively, formed an impenetrable thicket through which a path had to be cut….As soon as we reached the summit of the hill, the cedar forest ended. An open, grassy plain, only broken here and there by brushwood and scattered live oak trees, spread out before us. It extended to Mission Hill about two miles distant…”

Roemer described a trip to Fredericksburg from New Braunfels, the “road” going first southeast from New Braunfels to the Cibolo River and then north 90 miles to Fredericksburg. It was a four day trip, and on the second night they were concerned about a prairie fire that seemed to be approaching them from several directions. They burned the grass around their camp to protect them from the fire and then they enjoyed a “beautiful spectacle… the strips of fire, several miles in extent appeared as fiery brands..flames shooting up high or just glimmering…” This is just one of several of Roemer’s observations that included prairie fires.

Roemer reported that the herds of buffalo seen in the New Braunfels area by earlier settlers had disappeared by the time of his visit, although he did observe buffalo herds as well as some pronghorn on a trip to a trading post on the Brazos River. He had numerous encounters with Native Americans of various tribes during his visit, most were intentional contacts initiated by people Roemer was traveling with for the intention of doing business with the Native Americans. But Roemer was also fearful of unintentional contacts while traveling in small groups.

Although Roemer’s training was in geology, and he described the geology of each area he visited and took fossil samples, he also made numerous comments about the fauna and flora he encountered. He commented on flowering plants several times including

windflowers, blue tradescantia, trumpet creeper and roughleaf dogwood, and he particularly admired the Texas mountain laurel. He also noted the live oaks, cedar, cypress, post oaks and mesquite trees. He was fascinated by our cacti and succulents, noting three genus of cacti (Echinocereus, Mammillaria, and several species of Opuntia)

Roemer reported that while bears were common in the general area, they had left the area of New Braunfels after settlement began. He did observe mountain lions, wolves, deer, bobcats, ocelots, javelinas, skunks, opossums, rabbits and squirrels (including flying squirrels). He noted with some interest that raccoons, common in other parts of Texas, did not seem to be common around New Braunfels.

Roemer observed many rattlesnakes, also water moccasins and the rough green snake. The birds mentioned included the mockingbird, cardinal, bluebird, roadrunners, hummingbirds, whip-poor-wills and vultures. He also saw catfish (up to 4 feet long) gar, soft-shelled turtles and alligators (at least one 11 feet long).

As Roemer pointed out, his visit was not primarily for the purpose of cataloging all the plants or animals in the area, so the ones he mentioned probably caught his eye for some reason, and the lack of mention of any species certainly doesn't imply they were not seen or identified.

To get a more accurate picture of what early Texas was like, you have to read the accounts of many people.

Until next time…

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.