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SUSAN DRAGOO

A love for history and information hunting meld into a life of adventure.



"LOOK AT THE PAST IF YOU WANT TO PREDICT
THE FUTURE." – SUSAN DRAGOO

Historians have called Pathkiller, the last hereditary chief of the Eastern Cherokees, "King of the Cherokees." Legend has it that the daughter of his daughters still roams the lands where their ancestors once lived.

It is August and 100°F along the banks of the Arkansas River in eastern Oklahoma. A thick stand of briars, post oak, and blackjack trees extends north to south across what was not so long ago Indian Territory. Washington Irving called this impenetrable barrier the "cast-iron forest" because of the hardship it presented to 19th-century settlers crossing the region.

With a rustling in the thicket, an unassuming figure—63 inches tall, sun-scorched, and slight of build—emerges from the entanglement. Sweat-soaked, scratched, and smiling, Susan Dragoo has found the crossing of botanist Thomas Nuttall, who, in 1819, attempted to find a path from Fort Smith through the Arkansas River Valley to the Rocky Mountains. From somewhere in her ancestry, the spirit of Chief Pathkiller urges her onward.

In Susan's efforts to experience and share history in the most honest of ways, she places herself in the seasons and settings of those whose stories she aspires to tell. Her writings are not of the politically correct version of history we see through rose-colored glasses and Google, but raw, original source quotations from ancestors of those who traveled these trails long before motorized transportation. Her work as a historian often leaves her skin torn, with clothing stained by mud, muck, and blood while researching her latest interest. She has hiked through

Iceland twice, walked from Lukla in Nepal to Mount Everest Base Camp, trekked the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and made multiple hikes into the Grand Canyon, including rim to rim in a single session. Susan thinks nothing of wading chest-deep in frigid weather to capture the perfect photographic perspective of a waterfall. “It had to be done, and I will dry out soon enough,” she says with a shrug after stepping out of her ice water plunge, water squishing from her boots.

From the Oklahoma Historical Society to the Seaver Center for Western History Research in Los Angeles, important facts are painstakingly recovered from dusty alcoves. Personal letters, newspaper articles, and handwritten field notes are opened under scrutiny with white gloves and read with care using a magnifying glass. These are the tools and practices of the author of *Finding the Butterfield: A Journey Through Time in Indian Territory*, Susan’s recent book on the Butterfield Overland Mail Stagecoach Route across Oklahoma.

As of this writing, she is studying field sketching in the jungles of Costa Rica. It all began with her retirement from a professional career in healthcare administration. Her education includes degrees in business administration, journalism, and biostatistics. Research was part and parcel to her working life, but post-professionally, she has turned her energies to retracing the explorations of some of our country’s premier trailblazers. The spark was ignited during evening reading sessions, while we read such works as S.C. Gwynne’s *Empire of the Summer Moon*. The story of Comanche Chief Quanah Parker set us off to explore southwestern Oklahoma and the Llano Estacado aboard our BMW GS Adventure motorcycle and in purpose-built, four-wheel-drive overland rigs. The rest, as they say, is history. (BD)

Finding the Butterfield was eight years in the making, after researching and exploring the portion of the Butterfield Overland Mail Stagecoach Route that ran through Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Now that the book is done, does it feel like that chapter of your life is closed?

It is actually the opposite. The entire length of the Butterfield trail from St. Louis to San Francisco was designated a National Historic Trail (NHT) in 2023, and a national association was created about the same time to help promote and preserve the trail. I am serving as president of the Oklahoma chapter of that group, working with members of the community, representatives of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations, property owners, historic preservationists, archaeologists, and the National Park Service (NPS) trail planners who are developing the implementation strategy for the NHT. I had the opportunity in December of 2024 to escort the NPS team across Oklahoma and coordinate some of their site visits with property owners and managers. Another development I’m excited about is a grant from our State Historic Preservation Office to conduct noninvasive archaeological surveys at Butterfield station sites in Oklahoma. Under the grant, the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey is examining five Butterfield sites over the winter of 2024–2025. I’ve had the privilege of going out on their visits, facilitating with property owners, and providing background



Reaching Mount Everest Base Camp at 17,598 feet was a big accomplishment, staving off the challenges of high elevation. | Sunset on the Canadian River provides a colorful setting for vehicle photography. | All forms of travel are on the table; the gnarlier, the better. Traveling through the San Juan Mountains of Colorado on this Ural with a sidecar blended past and present. | **Opposite:** Susan’s irresistible attraction to slot canyons began with this small narrows in Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada. | **Opening page:** This old flour sack on display in Pampa, Texas, sparked a roadside stop near the beginning of a long motorcycle trip in the American Southwest.



research. Their findings will inform updates to National Register [of Historic Places] listings and contribute to a second edition of my book when I get around to it.

You have a deep appreciation for history. How does it manifest in your everyday life?

It's both time travel and treasure hunt, translating to my penchant for historical travel, especially when there is an opportunity to shed new light or provide a different perspective on a historical place or event. Nearly all my reading is nonfiction, history, or adventure, by contemporary authors like Mitchell Zuckoff and Erik Larson or by others more obscure, published long ago. I just finished Erik Larson's *The Splendid and the Vile* about Churchill's first year as prime minister at the beginning of World War II, and am currently reading *Ten Years in the Saddle: The Memoir of William Woods Averell, 1851-1862*. Most of my story ideas come from my reading. Averell's story has an Indian Territory connection that I plan to write about. I have [always] been an avid reader, and [my interest in] history and biography began as a teenager. My grandfather was a huge inspiration to me. He was a great reader, writer, and collector of books and would often talk about such things as the coming of the Katy Railroad, the first railroad into Indian Territory, and share interesting observations from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, an influential official in the English government in the 1600s. I have his copy of Pepys' Diary now, which I cherish.

How I view the events in our world may be different from the perspectives of those not so steeped in history. It requires some knowledge of the past to have an awareness of long-term cycles and trends, to understand that things were not always like they are and will not continue to be so, to acknowledge the constancy of change, to perceive the struggles for power, and even the behavior of people. Look at the past if you want to predict the future.

We are not that distant from our ancestors in time. A century sounds like a long time, but I knew my great-grandfather, who lived to be about a week shy of 100. Having been born in 1879, his father was undoubtedly living during the Civil War. That's only one degree of separation between me and the 1860s.

Have you always made time for your historical research?

While in college working on a broadcast/film degree, I began working for a newspaper and ended up being more interested in print journalism. I had learned photography and darkroom work in high school, so writing and photography comprised my first [choice] as a career, but practical matters took me into a more secure job at a hospital. In the last seven or eight years before I retired as vice president of quality for Integris Health, Oklahoma's largest health system, I began writing again. [My husband], Bill, and I wrote for a couple of motorcycle magazines about our adventures, sometimes collaborating and other times working independently of each other. After a few years of this, I branched out, writing about my hiking adventures. Very little of this had a significant historical component until I started writing for *Oklahoma Today*, the publication of the Oklahoma Department of Tourism, which has been around since 1956. My first work for them was a col-

laboration with Bill about Comancheria. We saw an opportunity to combine travel and history into a nice piece for the magazine. My second article for them was a love letter in the form of a photo essay to the structures built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Oklahoma as part of Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. I became a regular contributor, with history and historical travel being my specialty. That launched me into the work I am doing now.

How did growing up in Okmulgee, the capital of the Muscogee/Creek Nation, form you?

In the 1830s, the federal government forced the nations called the Five Civilized Tribes to give up their ancestral homelands in the southeastern United States and move to what was designated Indian Territory, the geographical equivalent of present-day Oklahoma. The Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles migrated to Indian Territory in different waves in the Trail of Tears, during which many of their people endured terrible hardship and loss of life. Each nation settled on a different tract of land in Indian Territory, re-establishing its government and society. The Muscogee (Creek) Nation was located west of the Cherokees and north of the Choctaws, and after the Civil War, it designated its capital as Okmulgee, named for an important town in their homeland in present-day Georgia. They built a log council house for government proceedings in 1868 and replaced it in 1878 with a capitol building of native sandstone, which still stands today on the town square. It has been the centerpiece of downtown Okmulgee for the entire history of the community. The existence of that building made my awareness of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation ever-present, and it was always a source of pride.

Oklahoma has always been my home, although I moved from eastern Oklahoma to central Oklahoma nearly 40 years ago. Like many people in the state, my great-grandparents came here from Arkansas, Tennessee, and the like shortly before statehood (1907). My DNA says I am nearly 100 percent from the British Isles, but I do have a great-great-grandmother who was supposed to have been half-Cherokee and a descendant of a famous Cherokee chief named Pathkiller. I think it's true, but regardless, it's definitely the sort of "Indian legend" Oklahomans like to perpetuate.

Knowing the history of the land where we live has a big part in how we feel about it and the connections (or lack thereof) made. Are there other parts of the country or world that pique your interest?

The entire American Southwest is a place of fascination for me. Our travels have taken us to Texas' Big Bend country, into the



Susan is an accomplished motorcyclist, and worked with her husband, Bill, in their business, Dragoo Adventure Rider Training (D.A.R.T.) for many years. Here, she demonstrates proper body position during a training session. | It's good to be small and to cling to your sense of humor. In this case, Bill stuffed Susan in a drawer in the bed of the Tacoma to drill holes and tighten bolts. | **Opposite:** If you want to get dirty, take your 4Runner into the backwoods of Arkansas after spring rains and drive as far as you can, then get out and walk through some mud.



The summit of Mount Valahnúkur offers a stunning panorama of Thórsmörk and the surrounding area after finishing Iceland's Laugavegur trek. | Between Cedar Mesa and Valley of the Gods, the switchbacks of Moki Dugway offer breathtaking views and breath-catching drop-offs during a ride in southern Utah. | Anywhere is okay. Nowhere is just as good. At the end of the Road to Nowhere, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Texas.

canyons of the Colorado Plateau, and to many ruins of the Ancestral Puebloan culture. My favorite author in this area is Craig Childs, particularly his book, *House of Rain: Tracking a Vanishing Civilization Across the American Southwest*. In combination with the historical aspect, that part of the country is my favorite place to hike, especially in slot canyons. I've probably been to Buckskin Gulch four or five times. Then there's my addiction to hiking in the Grand Canyon. Every year since 2021, I have done a major hike below the rim, and I'm going back in 2025 for a multi-day rim-to-rim-to-rim.

I've loved the historical aspects of exploring London, Rome, Spain, and Baja California. Bill and I had so much fun seeking out the Spanish missions in Baja, especially the ones in ruins that were hard to find. I wrote a story about it for *Overland Journal*, "Mission Driven" [Winter 2020], and it's one of my favorites. So, while Oklahoma and the surrounding area are convenient, my interests are pretty wide-ranging, and I am fairly opportunistic in that wherever we travel, I am going to look for something historical to explore.

What was your first in-person, deep-dive, historical adventure, and how did it come about?

Our work on Comancheria was the first deep dive into historical travel. Bill and I wrote articles on that topic for several magazines based on S.C. Gwynne's *Empire of the Summer Moon* about Quanah Parker and the twilight of the Comanches. That was so much fun that I began to actively look for historical trails to pursue. One of my best resources is the Oklahoma Historical Society. I enjoy browsing their bookstore and searching their archives. The *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, the quarterly of the society, has been published since 1921, and all of the back issues are online, so it's a real treasure trove of ideas.

There are definitely aha moments when a historical topic becomes a potential exploration project. I ask myself, *Has anyone done it? Is the route known/re-traceable? Is there an adventure story? How close to home is it?* The proximity is a factor because these things take a lot of time. I started going out on the Oklahoma segment of the Butterfield in 2016, and I can't count the number of trips I've made down there since then. But even on just that 200-mile segment, there is more to discover. One trip is rarely enough to do justice to a topic, so I consider how much time I want to invest in it. I prefer topics with some physical remnant attached to them because I enjoy being able to touch something that connects me to the past. One of my favorite experiences in that regard has been drinking from the spring at Walker's Station, the easternmost Butterfield station in Oklahoma and the site of the 1832 Choctaw Agency. That same spring has been enjoyed by travelers for close to 200 years, and by the Indigenous people who lived there long before that. Drinking at that same spot felt almost mystical.

How did botanist Thomas Nuttall's failed attempt to find and map a waterway through the Arkansas River Valley to the Rocky Mountains capture your attention?

Thomas Nuttall's story is such a great one. I can't remember exactly how I stumbled across it, but in 1819, he was the first European scientist to visit Oklahoma, and his journal left a vivid record of his harrowing and sometimes comical experience. I read everything I could find by other authors about him and thought I could bring a new spin to his story by going out and experiencing his journey firsthand. My question was, *Could I still see any of the same scenes he saw?* The thing about doing a story with a research question like that is that the answer doesn't have to be yes, because even if the landscape has changed to be unrecognizable, there's usually a good story in the search for it.

Your work as a historian goes beyond the academic, often with physical hardships. Are these sacrifices or part of the thrill of the hunt?

Oh, that is part of the thrill. I don't mind it at all. Thomas Nuttall really suffered, traveling through central Oklahoma in the summer with sweltering heat, maddening insects, and a severe thunderstorm. His horse died, and he had nothing to eat or drink; he barely made it back alive to the trading posts at Three Forks (present-day Muskogee). I went out to the same places during the same time of year to try to [reenact] those respects. Trudging across the sands of the Arkansas River in the heat of an August day is not pleasant but is exhilarating in a weird sort of way. I discovered so many wonderful things in the process. On this project, for instance, I got to experience, on another hot summer day west of Okmulgee, an old-growth post oak forest, which is a remnant of the Ancient Cross Timbers. Some of those trees would have been there when Nuttall passed through more than 200 years ago. It's worth the discomfort to make those connections.

What did your work on researching the California Trail entail?

The California Road project was my introduction to Captain Randolph Barnes Marcy, whom one historian called the 'explorer par excellence of the Southwest.' I began with an article from the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* and then found Grant Foreman's book, *Marcy and the Gold Seekers*, which tells the story of Marcy and the group of argonauts he escorted from Fort Smith to Santa Fe in the spring of 1849. Their route went along the Canadian River on the 35th parallel from east to west, right across Oklahoma, passing just a few miles south of where we live in Norman. Thanks to Foreman's work and markers placed by the Oklahoma Historical Society, I was able to correlate Marcy's route with present-day locations. I did some excursions on my own to seek out some of the trail, and eventually, Bill and I took a trip to explore the route more thoroughly. In western Oklahoma, we came across a home-made concrete marker for the California Road bearing the name "Art Peters." I looked Art up, and it turned out he had mapped the trail from central Oklahoma to the Texas border and had been researching the trail for something like 15 years. Art ended up helping me with the project, and Bill and I traveled with him on the western segment of the road during a through-drive we did of the entire Oklahoma segment from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to the Texas border. We have become friends with Art, and I even ap-

peared in a documentary produced by our local PBS station about the California Road, which starred Art. Doing the California Road story laid the groundwork for my work on the Butterfield.

You and Bill have a purpose-built Gen 5 Toyota 4Runner that you use for exploring, as well as a vintage Toyota FJ40, alternating between four wheels, two wheels, and human-powered. Do you have a favorite way to travel?

My favorite way is on foot, but given that's not always practical for hundreds of miles, my favorite vehicle is the 4Runner. It is reliable and will go anywhere. It is also easier for me to drive than the vintage FJ40 when I go out solo to explore. Bill absolutely loves his 1976 Toyota FJ40 Land Cruiser, and we used that vehicle for the Butterfield story I did for *Overland Journal* [Spring 2019]. The idea was that it was primitive and somewhat unreliable, and to some degree, would help us connect with the rough ride and uncertainties experienced by stagecoach passengers. Bill has since done quite a bit of work to make it more comfortable and reliable. I also have a 1970 Honda CT90 motorbike that I intend to ride on the Oklahoma segment of the Butterfield. I call the project 'Seven Horses on the Butterfield,' a play on the horsepower of the Honda and the four- to six-horse or mule teams used to pull the stage wagons on the Butterfield.

You've hiked through Iceland twice and been to Mt. Everest Base Camp, among others. What stands out as your most memorable achievement on this front?

I never heard of hiking when I was a kid, but I loved to explore in the woods on the edge of town. As an adult, I became a walker for exercise, but it was not until later that I turned into a hiker after joining a club sponsored by a local outdoor store. I've hiked extensively in Oklahoma and Arkansas, backpacking our long-distance trails, the Ouachita Trail and the Ozark Highlands Trail. Mount Everest Base Camp is probably the hardest thing I've ever done, not because the hiking is so difficult, but because of the effects of high elevation and my propensity for acute mountain sickness. But I made it to Base Camp, and that was a huge achievement. We also hiked a seven-mile segment of the Great Wall of China and China's Tiger Leaping Gorge, both of which were extremely memorable. The Laugavegur Trail in Iceland was wonderful, but it was not difficult. The hiking I have done in the Grand Canyon has been among my most significant accomplishments. A couple of years ago, I did a rim-to-rim day hike with my oldest son, Mark Fields, and I treasure that memory.

You recently trekked the Camino Portugués. Aside from being a beautiful way to see the countryside, it is a centuries-old Christian pilgrimage route. Did the journey have any religious significance for you?

I thought it would, although I am a Christian of the Protestant persuasion and was curious as to how I would process this Catholic pilgrimage and what aspects of it would be meaningful to me. As it turned out, the primary spiritual aspect for me was gratitude. Accompanying me were my good friend Mary McDaniel, my



daughter-in-law Jessica Fields, and my granddaughter Sophia Fields (13). Jessica survived breast cancer the year before, and this trip was, for her, part of making the most of every opportunity life has to offer. I loved seeing that and was thankful we could experience it together. Something I did not expect, which again I have immense gratitude for, was [observing] Sophia no longer as a child but as an amazing young woman, calmly confronting all the Camino had to offer.

How long did it take? And what were some of your notable experiences?

We did the last 100 kilometers of the Portuguese route of the Camino de Santiago, and it took us a week. One of my favorite experiences was when we were in Caldas de Reis, which is known for its hot springs and is said to have been a spa town for the Romans. The four of us were sitting with our feet immersed in the warm waters, surrounded by other pilgrims from all parts of the world, talking about where they were from and why they were doing the Camino, [resulting in a] blending of cultures that afternoon.

It turned out the route we used was along a first-century Roman road, and there were places where you could still see the stones of the original road and the ruts worn into it over time. I have to confess that was a thrill.

You've written many stories for *Overland Journal* over the years, from Butterfield route escapades to exploring routes through Arkansas and the Ozarks to historical features on explorers such as Martin and Asa Johnson. What is your current story pursuit?

I mentioned Randolph Marcy in the context of the California Road, but he left a larger legacy of exploration, part of that involving his journey to locate the headwaters of the Red River at a time when no other American explorer had done so. Retracing Marcy's 1852 expedition to the source of the Red has been a major focus for me recently, and it is fascinating to see how the unexpected has presented itself in the process. Anyone who has driven Interstate 40 through the Texas Panhandle can testify that the scenery is not the most appealing, but the key is realizing there is a lot more to it. My work will reveal the side that is unseen.

For me, one project seems to naturally lead to another, as something I learn spurs my curiosity and stimulates more research. I enjoy the process of discovery and seeing what unfolds next. My goals are to keep moving, keep writing, and never stop exploring. 🌐

Deep in the woods of central Oklahoma in winter, there's no place like home.

