



## History of the Cross Timbers Forest

### Pre-History

Human beings began to establish themselves in the Cross Timbers region approximately 7000 years ago. Research has shown that Native Americans sustained themselves by hunting, fishing, and gathering food. Though the perception is that the Native American peoples preferred the more open prairie to the wooded areas there were those tribes that not only frequented the woods but also settled there. The Caddo and Tonkawa both settled along the edge and in the forest with the Tonkawa eventually totally retreating into the safety of the woods. The Comanche and Pawnee were known to venture into the woods after game; however it is believed that they preferred the more open prairies and plains as-well-as areas that provided more reliable water sources.

### Early Explorers

The first non-native explorers to write about the Cross Timbers were the Spaniards. Their initial attempts to make their way through the woods proved to be quite frustrating, leaving one explorer to state, *“The forest was so impenetrable that we could not pass through on horseback without cutting down some trees with axes and knives. We lost two knives. We advanced seven leagues with great difficulty, arriving in the afternoon in an open spot, that God had placed there for us to rest after such a painful journey.”* Francisco Xavier Frago is regarded by many to have written the first accurate description of the Cross Timbers. French explorers made many trips into the Cross Timbers region, however Spain persisted in their attempts to claim these lands and continued to produce increasingly accurate maps of the area. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 which included lands north of the Red River began to bring new interest into the area from the United States. Naturalist Thomas Nuttall is credited with writing the first descriptions of the vegetation in the Cross Timbers in English.

### Early Settlers

The earliest settlers in the area could be considered the members of the United States Military. It was the responsibility of the military to continue to survey what future frontier lands for citizens of the United States. In doing so they would also help to create the wagon roads that would connect these future settlements. Settlement began in the Cross Timbers region in the late 1840's. Both Dallas and Fort Worth were established during this time frame. The Lower, or Eastern Cross Timbers lays between the two communities with the much larger Upper, or Western Cross Timbers to the northwest of Fort Worth. Over the next ten to twenty years much of the forested areas began to be

cleared for farmland. Also, other small towns around the Cross Timbers began to develop. Towns such as Sherman, McKinney and Bonham. Many of the earliest settlers arrived via foot, horseback, wagon, or steamboat. Settlement placed a severe strain on the Cross Timbers as wood was used as fuel for cooking, heat and steamboats; construction of homes and tools. To most settlers the Cross Timbers seemed to be a supply that could never be exhausted.

### **The Present**

Much of the present day Cross Timbers is now recognized as urban forest. Surviving on small pockets of undeveloped land and struggling to hold on in areas that are under rapid urbanization. Unfortunately, the species most commonly affiliated with the Eastern Cross Timbers (Post Oak) is also the species that has the lowest tolerance to development. Many communities in the Eastern Cross Timbers region have begun to realize the importance of these remaining locations and have put into place zoning ordinances that penalize developers for clear-cutting of land and reward them for preservation. Also the State of Texas has taken strides to preserve these sites through state parks and nature preserves.

**NOTE:** We acknowledge Richard Francaviglia's, *The Cast Iron Forest*/ University of Texas Press/ Austin, TX © 2000, for its contribution.