I likely was immersed in Pre-Enduro Preparatory Procedures when Fess Parker died a few weeks ago. I was not aware of his passing until a syndicated newspaper columnist’s light-hearted tribute to the retired actor and the simpler times when he was a mainstay on weekly television appeared in my local newspaper today.

I was actually not yet born when the Walt Disney Company filmed the five-installment story of Davy Crockett in the early 1950’s (I believe I just mentioned that it was a simpler time). The multi-part TV movie was probably at least ten years old by the time I saw parts of it for the first time on black-and-white (no racial reference) TV. At the time, as far as I knew, Fess Parker was Davy Crockett. What I had trouble figuring out was why he kept calling Jed Clampett “George Russell” and everybody else didn’t seem to notice the mistake. I would find out later that Buddy Ebsen had an acting career prior to The Beverly Hillbillies.

One of the first books (with pictures, no less) that I recall ever becoming really fond of was a short story about Davy Crockett. It was only a year or three later that I saw the Disney movie (in living color) that was actually a fabrication of three episodes of the old TV series strung together to make a theatrical-issue product. By that time, I was old enough to be developing ‘heroes’ (most of whom were rugged outdoorsmen like Davy Crockett or some TV cowboy who rode hard, shot bad guys and apparently never had to take time out to go to the bathroom).

A few years later “Davy Crockett” suddenly turned out to be “Daniel Boone” and was on TV every Thursday Night, apparently still wearing the same coon-skin cap. By this time, though, I was beginning to comprehend the concept of ‘actors’ playing various roles and only pretending to be the character they played at any given time. Somewhere along the way, I discovered that Daniel Boone really never wore a coon-skin cap, but that did nothing to tarnish my ‘hero-worship’ of either Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone (as portrayed by actor Fess Parker). I am fairly certain that, given a few minutes to search through the Full Moon Historical Archives Storage Facility (climate-controlled, no less), I could probably find the coon-skin cap (fake of course; wouldn’t want to chap a bunch of Animal Rights Lunatics) that I have had lying around since a ‘post doctor’s appointment’ shopping-trip to a “Five & Ten-Cent Store” when I was in the Fourth Grade. But I digress…

It can be somewhat troubling when the heroes (or more specifically, the actors who played them) of one’s youth die off. It can be just as depressing to consider that many of those formerly fit and trim actors (the ones who didn’t live hard and die young) have been really old men for a long time. It can make someone of my general age-bracket stop and take note of how Time is draining youth away from so many of us.

A few minutes after learning of the recent passing of 85 year old Fess Elisha Parker, Jr., I was motivated to do something that took me (if only for a short time) “sort of” on another leg of a sentimental journey, almost back to the time when Fess Parker brought
the adventures of Daniel Boone into our living room every week. It has been what seems like a really long time since the days when I could kick-start my dirt-bike in the back yard and, rather than load it into the truck to haul it to a Riding Area, simply ride off down the road to a nearby favorite trail. Perhaps it was the mental trip back to the simpler times of black-and-white TV and riding out of the yard and into the woods that took shape after I read the news that inspired me to “just fire it up and take off” like it was 1971 again. Whatever the precise motivation, the couple of miles of black-top between my house and the Full Moon Institute’s Off-Road Recreation Area was just enough to get the juices flowing before turning off the road, down-shifting and pinning the throttle across the open field and into the pine needle “tunnel” along the first long straight beside the fence.

It was nothing compared to the ‘bigger-than-Life’ adventures that Fess Parker (as either Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone) took me along on as a kid watching TV. However, just taking off on a Thursday Afternoon (breaking all sorts of traffic-laws regarding Speed-Limits, licensed vehicles on highways, etc.) and putting in a few miles on my YZ, with no one else except God along for the ride, was adventure enough in these more “civilized” times. While I justified the time riding by labeling it “Pre-Hare-Scramble Trail Lay-Out Procedures,” it would be breaking one of the Ten Commandments to claim that that was my only motive. I simply couldn’t resist the urge to try to bring back the old feeling that was so much a part of my first few years as an avid trail-rider. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett had a “whole new world” to explore in their day. By the time I came along, a lot of what they originally explored was covered by concrete and asphalt. While Fess Parker, playing those great frontiersmen, gave boys of my generation some insight into what we had missed by being born too late, we had to “make our own adventure” in our own time. One aspect of my “exploring the frontier” in my part of the world in the early 1970’s was finding new and thrilling places to go on a dirt-bike. It was an almost limitless “frontier” when I began riding. Most people riding today likely never got to experience the vast riding opportunities that my associates and I had almost 40 years ago; much like we never got to experience the wilderness (the real kind, not the modern version that is “wilderness” simply because a piece of paper at the Forest Service says so) the way Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone did in their day. For a little while, at least, I was ‘transported’ back in time this afternoon, to a time when dirt-bike trails were easier to find and a few minutes on a Public Road without every required document was not such a large deal.

The days of limitless trails to ride, like the days of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, are a part of the past. But every once in awhile, when just the right balance is struck between The Real World and whatever “other dimension” may be out there, if we are paying really close attention, some of us get to slip away from the rut that is Life and be a little bit adventurous, if only in the same sort of ‘imaginary manner’ that came with pretending to be Daniel Boone and acting out the plot from the previous night’s episode. Real “adventure” would likely scare me to death if I ever actually find myself involved in it.
Of course, I can still pretend to be a rough and rugged ‘tough guy’ when the need arises. A few years ago, I found myself working alongside a number of hard-working Mexicans (all legal, I’m sure) who, like me, enjoyed bestowing an occasional bit of light-hearted sarcasm on their coworkers. One particular “incident” had one of my south-of-the-border associates “messing with” me a little more intensely than usual. It was then that I recalled the story of Davy Crockett and his associates fighting for Texas Independence from Mexico. The first concept I ever had of that effort came from watching Fess Parker portraying Davy Crockett in the Disney movie from so long ago.

I looked my rather short Mexican associate directly in the eye (first, I got him to stand on an upside-down five-gallon bucket) and, in the most cordial tone of voice I could muster, I told him “You really don’t want to mess with me, Pancho. If I had been at the Alamo with Davy Crockett, Texas would extend all the way to the Panama Canal today.”

He was rather quiet and looked a little nervous for the next couple of days…