

# Roark family tragedy



**Unveiling** -- Members of the Roark family unveil the highway sign marking the massacre of the James Roark family. (Charlotte Williamson photo)

**By Charlotte Williamson**

Nearly 220 years after it happened, a tragedy of pioneer Tazewell County is being remembered.

Family members unveiled an historical highway marker near Roark's Gap in Baptist Valley Oct. 9, identifying the site of the massacre in 1780 of the James Roark family.

In freezing temperatures and windy conditions, the marker was unveiled by Roark descendant Chuck Gross, of Marietta, Ga.

Roark family members and other visitors completed the into Yost Chapel Freewill Baptist Church to continue the dedication ceremony.

The marker is located near the site of the Roark cabin where Roark's wife and seven children were massacred by native Indians March 18, 1780. The sign was placed by the Virginia Department of Historic

Resources and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT).

The dedication ceremony was arranged by the Tazewell County Historical Society, which has been instrumental in preserving and commemorating historical sites in the county. Dr. Tom Hatcher, president of the society, spoke to the group and expressed appreciation for all who helped to make the marker a reality.

In his remarks, Hatcher stressed the importance of documenting and preserving local history.

Also speaking was Dr. Doris Thornton, retired professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and president of the Roark-Conner Association, sponsor of the marker. She is also a descendant of James Roark, who lived from about 1740 through 1792.

Thornton thanked the society for its support and indicated

that the association had goals similar to those of the society: preserving and documenting the great human story of the pioneer families who settled the American frontier.

Thornton said that while the Roark family is happy the marker has been erected, feelings of sorrow are there too.

"This is a sad occasion for our family," she said.

Thornton recognized local residents Pat and H.S. Surface and Bettie Byrd St. Clair for their work with the historical society in gathering information about the Roark incident.

She said the Roarks came from another country to start a new life here.

"They were trying to find a new land, to find freedom."

She went on to say that the Native Americans, who lived here at the time, were also struggling.

"The Indians were displaced people," Thornton said.

# 7 remembered



**Awarded --** Pat Surface and Tom Hatcher, both with the Tazewell Historical Society, accept an award for their role in placing the highway marker. (Charlotte Williamson photo)

She added that when the newcomers arrived in the area, it made for a clash of cultures.

"These Native American people suffered, too (when the incident happened). I understand there was not enough corn to eat. Both cultures suffered. We cannot understand their pain. But we are here today to honor our family. They had a commitment to family and a will to work. We dedicate this marker to the memory of their lives."

According to the history that has been gathered, James Roark, along with other pioneer families - Wittens, Cecils, Peerys, Harmans, Hankins, Skaggs, Walkers and others - settled on the Clinch River and in Baptist Valley in the early 1770s.

With the coming of the Revolutionary War, Indians from north of the Ohio were incited by the British to attack the frontier settlements as a

means of driving back the frontier and pressuring the Colonies along the Atlantic Coast.

Defenseless except for their own resources and militia, the frontier families survived six years of horror and stress.

At the time of the Roark family massacre in 1780, James Roark was hunting game with his two oldest sons since corn was scarce in the Clinch Valley and food was in short supply.

A heavy snow was on the ground and Indian raids normally did not occur at such times. However, on that particular day, an exception occurred. After killing the mother and seven children, the Indians escaped with stolen horses.

After the dedication ceremony, those attending drove to a nearby Roark cemetery. After the cemetery tour, they contin-

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## **ROARK**

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ued on to the home of Dr. Roy and Dorothy Wright.

The Wright home was built in the 1700s and carvings on a log in the home reveal interesting markings that may be from the Masonic Order. There is also a carving that seems to be part of the Roark name.

To conclude the dedication events, lunch was served at the Pisgah Church.

At the church, John J. Roark of Dallas described the conditions under which the early settlers lived and suggested