

Information about early roads

HISTORY OF RANDOLPH COUNTY

three-up." Thomas Johnson was the first prosecuting attorney. An interesting thing to be noted in the record of the first and second terms of Randolph County Circuit Court was the frequent appearance of the names of the leading citizens of that day on the docket. It seems that even though they occupied places of prominence in their communities and were often situated in responsible positions, they did not fail to defend their side of the questions involved, even to the extent of being hauled into court and charged with "assault and battery" and "creating an affray." The people who lived a hundred years ago were, of necessity, of the rough-and-ready type who often scorned conventional things and were not much for formality, relying a lot on impulses and looking at things for their true worth and nothing else.

Of the above list of the first grand and petit jurors who served in 1837, twenty-four of the names are still represented in Randolph County at the present time.

THE OLD MILITARY ROAD

What has been known as the "Old Military Road" for many years is that old road which entered Randolph County from Missouri at Pitman's Ferry and ran by way of Supply, Maynard, Attica, old Jackson and across Spring River into Lawrence County. This old road was first known as the Natchitoches Trail and had been used by the Indians from time immemorial in their travels from the north to the south and from the east to the west, as the route runs in a north-eastern-southwestern direction. The route is a natural location for a road. It ran closely along the foothills of the Ozarks from the north to the south and is above the early flooded lowlands but near enough to be accessible to the Indian and wild animals to travel in going to and from the higher lands to the northwest.

After the coming of the white man the road was a general route of travel from St. Louis by way of the old French settle-

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ment of St. Genevieve to the southwest, across Arkansas into Texas and Mexico. Evidently it was used by early hunters and traders soon after the close of the Revolution. Some of the hardy pioneers of the east desired to explore the great unknown wilderness of the Mississippi Valley. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 quite a number of these people brought their families and settled in this section. Many years before this a road had been opened from the east to St. Genevieve, on the Mississippi south of St. Louis. The Military road is an extension of this road. Around 1800 a ferry was established at what is now Pitman by William Hix and was known as Hix's Ferry. This is ample proof that the old road was being used by enough travellers to make a ferry a profitable undertaking. A few years later the ferry was purchased, together with the farm, by P. R. Pitman, who later became the first county judge of Randolph County, and was known thereafter as Pitman's Ferry. About this time the route became known as the National road, but when Congress began to spend money to improve these frontier roads to be used for military purposes it became to be known as the "Military Road."

The first quarter of a century after this road and others like it were opened, there was no work done on them except what the travellers did as they went along. Sometimes they were changed as the conditions required, and as settlements grew up on or near them.

On March 2, 1831, Congress appropriated \$15,000 to be used "on the road from Washington, Arkansas Territory, to Jackson in said Territory." On July 3, 1832, \$20,000 more was set aside for this purpose. On February 24, 1835, another appropriation was made by Congress for work to be done on the old Military road. Lieut. R. D. C. Collins and Thomas Baker were given the contract to improve that part within the present Randolph County. The price for the work is recorded as follows "From Jackson to Elevenpoint, \$14.00 per mile; from Elevenpoint to Fourche de Thomas, \$18.75

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per mile; from Fourche de Thomas to the Missouri state line, \$8.50 per mile."

The present bridge at what is now known as the Foster Ford on Fourche creek is the third bridge at that point. This is the old Military crossing. The first two bridges were of wood. This is the old "Columbia" or "Fourche de Thomas" settlement (more will be said about this place later). The next crossing was on Elevenpoint River and a ferry was established here also. This ferry was established in 1815 or soon thereafter by David Black and is still known as Black's Ferry. The crossing on Spring River was at the place known in later years as the Miller Ford.

Some of the early maps show the road going by way of Davidsonville. The first road which was really the original Natchitoches trail did go by Davidsonville, but the road known and recognized as the National road or Southwest Trail and finally as the old Military road did not go by this, Randolph County's first postoffice. The lack of ferrying facilities and the flood plain on the south and west side of Davidsonville made it in a very hard spot to be located on an early road.

Many noted persons have travelled down this old road in the past century and a half, besides all the grand old pioneers who lived a life of usefulness "unhonored and unsung." Among the notables were Sam Houston, David Crockett, General John C. Fremont, Henry R. Schoolcraft, Nuttall the explorer; Moses Austin, his son, Stephen Austin, later to be known as the "Father of Texas"; Gen. Archibald Yell, Gov. James S. Conway, James Woodson Bates, Gen. Sterling Price, Gen. Joe Shelby, President U. S. Grant and many others. The first mail route in the state of Arkansas was over this route. Some historians say the route ran from St. Louis to Monroe, Louisiana, by way of Pitman, Fourche de Thomas (Columbia), Davidsonville, Polk Bayou (Batesville) and to Arkansas Post. Houck's History of Southeast Missouri states that

the mail was first carried from Harrisonville, Illinois, by way of Potosi and Fredericktown, Mo., Pitman, Columbia and Davidsonville to stop at Batesville. This latter route evidently was of a later date than the St. Louis-Arkansas Post route. But at any rate both came through Randolph County and furnished mail to the county's first postoffices, Fourche de Thomas (Columbia) and Davidsonville, and possibly Pitman. After the decline of Davidsonville in 1829 when the county seat (of old Lawrence County) was moved to Jackson, a few miles northwest of the old town, the road was discontinued by Davidsonville to take the route described above. This mail was carried on horseback once a month. Taverns were built along the old road and many weary travellers, in the years after the road became well established, rested their weary bodies inside the walls of these buildings which were the forerunner of the modern hotel, or actually more like the tourist courts along our modern highways. From 1820 until the turn of the present century hundreds of families per year travelled over this old road in their trek south and west. Dr. Englemann, a noted German scientist who traveled this road from St. Louis to Little Rock in March, 1837, tells of spending one night and two days at Columbia (Fourche de Thomas) at the home of David Plott, waiting for the high water to run down. He states in his diary of the trip that several families of immigrants were detained at the same time and that in their haste to get across some of them drove their teams and wagons into the stream and the wagons were overturned by the swift current.

Many travellers from the east who had actually started to Texas or farther west, upon reaching this section decided to stop here and make it their home. This accounts in part for the fact that this section of the state was settled before that farther west and south. A few pushed on, and not finding what they wanted, came back and settled here. The first telegraph line to run through northeast Arkansas was strung along the old Military road. Only a few years ago a man

living out northeast of Maynard told the writer about cutting a tree which had one of the old insulators imbedded in its trunk.

A branch of the Military road was opened in the early thirties from Jackson west, by way of Smithville and other points to Fayetteville. This is the road over which the Indians were taken in the removal from their home east of the Mississippi to the Indian Territory which is now the western part of Oklahoma. We have all heard of the hardships, cruelty and suffering borne by these Redmen at the hands of the Government agents who contracted to move them. They were paid sufficiently to have transported them in comfort and safety but the story persists that they were unscrupulous, hard-hearted fellows who drove them on, through bad weather, sickness, etc., which resulted in many deaths and much suffering.

If it were possible to project on a movie screen the vast panorama which moved along the old Military road during the years from 1820 until 1890, we would see depicted before us one of the greatest living dramas of all ages.

OTHER EARLY ROADS

Besides the old Military road described above, there were several other roads opened in Randolph County during the first years of settlement. On date of July 4, 1836, James Houston and Ransom Bettis reported to the county court that they had viewed the route from the west end of Broadway in the town of Pocahontas west seven miles to Black's Ferry, and recommended that this was the most practical route from Pocahontas to this ferry.

On this same date, John Boran, John Gullett and Daniel Plott were appointed to review the road from Stephen Eldridge's on Fourche at the Missouri state line over the most practical route towards Pocahontas "until it intersects the old road from Dr. Pitman's to Davidsonville," near the residence of Andrew Kelly (later at Daniel Plott's).

Ber Janes, Coleman Stubblefield and Joseph Spikes were appointed to lay out a road from the road between Cal Stubblefield's and the Spring Island ford on Elevenpoint, over the most direct route to the bridge on Fourche Dumas creek, on the Military road. All this was in July, 1836.

The next year a petition was filed by a number of citizens to the court, requesting that a road be opened from the ferry on Black River at Pocahontas down the east side of the river toward Litchfield, to the Lawrence County line. This road became later to be known as the Pocahontas-Jacksonport road. The first road mentioned above was what became known as the Smithville road and possibly earlier was the Black's Ferry road. The road from Stephen Eldridge's to the Military road was the old road which ran down the west side of Fourche creek and was later known as the old Belview road, although the route was changed in part in later years. This old road crossed the Military road a short distance west of the old Foster ford (or Fourche de Thomas military crossing) and ran on south to Pocahontas, coming into the road

now travelled out of Pocahontas to the north exactly between the forks of the Warm Springs and Maynard road. This old road ran out by way of the old Kibler farm, the old Biggers farm on up across Mud creek at the "Dock Ingram ford." This is the old road which this writer travelled in coming to Pocahontas from western Siloam township when a child.

The road from Elevenpoint to Fourche bridge on the Military road was later replaced by a road which ran more directly east and west. It was located a few miles north of this road and was known as the Warm Springs-Corning road and crossed Fourche at the Phipps Mill ford.

The old Thomasville road, for which Thomasville Avenue in Pocahontas was named, ran from Pocahontas to Thomasville in Oregon County, Missouri. Its route was on the east side of Elevenpoint River. The very first road which ran up Elevenpoint travelled near this route but the road which connects Warm Springs and Pocahontas at the present time was used a great lot during the early days in travelling from the "Irish Wilderness" country on upper Fourche creek into Randolph County. Another old-time road ran down Janes creek to Ravenden Springs over much the same route that the present-day road travels. At one time, about the middle of the last century, the mail was carried from Doniphan by way of Dry Springs (which was a postoffice on the state line between Poynor, Missouri, and Middlebrook, Arkansas) across the hills to Janes' store on Janes creek, according to an old mail route record. Just how the route ran is not known. It possibly ran by way of the old Fourche de Thomas postoffice or the old Mud creek postoffice, which was on the old Mock homestead, and then across the hills to near the present town of Ravenden Springs. The 1836 term of Randolph County court licensed Ranson Bettis to operate a ferry at Pocahontas (\$2.00 per year), Peyton R. Pitman at Pitman's ferry (\$5.00 per year), and Thomas Black at Black's ferry (\$2.00 per year). The fee charged would suggest that there was a lot more business at Pitman

than at either of the other ferries. This was possibly caused by the heavy stream of emigrants who were moving over the old Military road on their long journey from the older states to the east and north to Texas, what is now Oklahoma and also the southern part of this state. Operating a ferry was one of the first industries in this section. We hear a lot at the present time about getting money from the tourist trade. The old river ferrymen of a century ago were the first to cash in on this source of revenue. However, the traveller of today is usually out on a business or pleasure trip, but the old pioneer largely made only a "one-way drive." He travelled over the road one time to stop at the end of the way, to establish a home for his family and live the remainder of his days at that end of the line. The part played by the early roads of our nation cannot be overestimated. Their importance and the stories and traditions associated with them almost make them ribbons of sacred soil criss-crossing our country, through lowlands and over hill and dale.

EARLY LINES OF TRANSPORTATION

The very first white man who came into this section of the nation, together with his family and possessions, came either by boat or overland in covered wagon. The easiest way to bring merchandise or household goods was to travel by flatboat. The routes usually followed was down the Ohio, then into the Mississippi. This built up such early settlements on the river as St. Genevieve, Cairo, New Madrid and others. With the coming of the steamboat they did not stop altogether on the Mississippi, but ran their boats up the smaller rivers. During the first days of settlement of Randolph County, Davidsonville was the chief river town in north Arkansas. Steamboats from the Mississippi River ports came here with merchandise for the settlers. Pocahontas became an early steamboat landing and many boats went on up Black River several miles and up Current River as far