

Stub Borders and Other Ozark Backwoodsman

By Gary Knehans

When the early pioneers of these parts discovered that a ridge running from northwest of Tyrone down to Cabool in what is now Texas County defined a watershed for Roubidoux Creek, the Big Piney River and the Gasconade, the way was established for harvesting our vast timber resources and developing communities in this unsettled area.

As early as the spring of 1820, the Big Piney River was reported to be full of rafts of logs and lumber. Timber mills sprouted in advantageous areas along the Piney and the Roubidoux.

The men who cut the timber, operated the mills and rode log rafts some 160 miles to St. Louis were often as colorful as they were rugged. Their adventurous stories have been mostly lost through the passage of time. Fortunately, however, local author George Clinton Arthur preserved a slice of this rich Ozarks heritage by writing and publishing a book called *Backwoodsman* around 1939. Arthur's writings were

based on the recollections of four aging backwoodsmen that he knew—Nathaniel 'Stub Borders, James Henson, Frank Henson and Perry McCowan.

According to Arthur's book, James Henson's brother Nathan had earned the reputation of being the strongest man among the local backwoodsmen at that time. He known as the "best man" and "one-lick Nathan" because he only needed to deliver one blow to knock out any opponent in a hand-to-hand fight.

"He was always a hard-working man and a fair fighter," Arthur wrote. "During many fights, he hit a man when it was thought at the instant that his opponent was killed, so powerful was Nathan. His arm muscles were equal in size to a leg thigh of the average man. Nathan and his brother, Jim, were great tie rafters.

"But about 1877 Nathan and Jim Henson were working at the iron works at Ozark, Missouri, on the Little Piney River in Phelps County. Once while these two men were standing near some box cars on the railroad there, George Luke, who was considered, it had been told, a bully, and was

tormenting a cripple boy somehow. Nathan Henson watched him until he could not bear it any longer, and Nathan told George to leave the cripple alone. This, of course, caused an argument, and Nathan struck George Luke one blow with his fist, which landed on the side of George's head, which sent him several feet away and piled him up underneath a box car. The people there thought George was dying and sent for a doctor. George lived, but he always stayed clear of Nathan Henson afterwards.

"Long afterwards, Nathan and Jim were engaged in making ties and rafting them. Jim Henson was

also a great fighter, but he was more dangerous than his brother, Nathan, because Jim would fight with rocks, clubs, knives. Just any way suited him. And these two men were branded as the best men in the Ozarks, and a few men were jealous of them. And it is said that one in particular was Jim Hornbeck, who was a very powerful man in strength. Hornbeck was loading ties at Jerome, Missouri, at the tie hoist, carrying ties into railroad cars. Jim Hornbeck and his younger brother, John, with their father, John Hornbeck, it is said, was waiting for a chance to fight the Henson brothers, but just how they were to approach them

Belshe, father, and sons Ovid H. and Arlie, grandfather, father, and uncle of Horace. Dr. Henry C. Murphy was a member of the congregation and I remember when former pastor Henry Clark returned to conduct his funeral. I have certainly laid myself open for criticism by indulging in names. I beg forgiveness from those whom I should have remembered but

failed to recount. However, I ask that consideration be given to the passage of eighty years.

Although each congregation vied for the winning position, this was truly a case where winning was not important. The enthusiasm for religious education was the community reward for all the effort expended.

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was another problem, because they were afraid of "one-lick" Nathan."

According to Arthur, the Hornbecks' opportunity came one night in the summer of 1886. The Henson brothers decided to attend a dance at the house of Tom Brooks somewhere in the Arlington area. But, when they arrived there, none of the women would agree to be their partners. That's because Jim Hornbeck had arranged with the women not to dance with the Hensons. After Nathan angrily told the crowd, "If I can't dance here, nobody else will," Hornbeck responded by issuing a challenge for a fight with \$25 riding on the outcome. Henson wanted the fight to be fair, but Hornbeck was said to spurn this kind of combat, wisely concluding that "One-Lick" Nathan would dispatch him early in the fight. Unable to agree on the terms of a fight for money, the two men separated into their respective group of supporters.

During this respite from confrontation, Jim Hornbeck secured a rock the size of a big fist and wrapped it in a handkerchief. Then, when Nathan Henson was observed looking away, Hornbeck approached him and delivered a hard blow on the head with the rock. "One-Lick" fell unconscious

to the ground. That left the odds in favor of the Hornbecks three-to-one against Nathan's brother Jim in an all-out battle.

"But Jim Henson saw what Jim Hornbeck had done to Nathan, and he was a wild madman," wrote Arthur. "Jim Henson quickly pulled his pocket knife, and made a fierce attack on the Hornbecks, stabbing Jim Hornbeck, and during their struggle, Jim Henson brought Jim Hornbeck to the ground, the latter being on the bottom. Jim Henson stuck his knife into the chest high near the neck, and Henson could feel the hot blood gushing forth on his wrist as he jerked and pulled, trying to split the breast bone of Hornbeck, but failed. But he put great gaps into his knife blade trying to do so. Jim Henson would have split Hornbeck's breast if it could have been done, because Jim Henson was a mighty man in strength. Jim said afterwards that no man could split a man's breast bone with a knife, because 'I tried it.'"

"Before the struggle was over, Jim Henson had literally slashed Jim Hornbeck with his knife, cutting one of the large muscles in two near the backbone. But when Nathan became conscious, he got up fighting. There was a pile of old tie binders in the yard, and



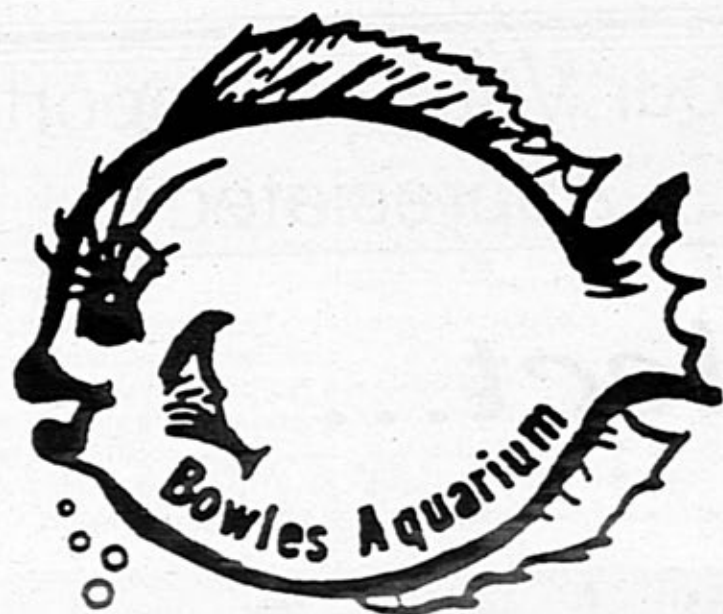
7226 An Old Landmark - the Gasconade River, at Jerome, Mo.

*This belongs to
Susie Hively*

Two unidentified men pose between tent and old cabin in a postcard scene labeled, "An Old Landmark on the Gasconade River, at Jerome, Mo." Submitted in memory of Susie Hively.

John Hornbeck and his father were fighting Nathan. All were armed with the binders with the spike nails in them. During this fight, father Hornbeck received a hard blow around the eye, and passed out of the picture. Somehow Nathan received a hard blow from a binder on the shoulder, which broke his shoulder down, but he would not give up. He still fought fiercely until the Hornbecks left the

battle ground, wobbling off toward Jerome, a short distance, just across the river; and when they had gone as far as the bridge, Jim Hornbeck fell in his tracks. His boots were full of blood, and when his belt was loosened and his shirt removed, large chunks of clotted blood fell upon the ground. Jim had made his last step that night. He had to be carried on home to Jerome, and he was lucky to have



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escaped death, because of the heavy loss of blood. Jim Hornbeck was bedfast for a long time, and that was one fight that Jim Hornbeck never forgot. Jim Henson gave him some of his own medicine. If he would have fought fair instead of the way he did at first, the fight would have ended shortly, and Hornbecks knew it. They wanted to get rid of Nathan, because they were afraid of him, but his brother, Jim, proved a great fighter, and he never got much more than a scratch, and the Hornbecks never wanted any more trouble with the Hensons. They all became friendly afterwards. Jim Henson said afterwards that there would not have been much of a fight if they had not knocked Nathan out with that rock. This was the bloodiest fight ever known among tie men."

Another interesting character from these days was Nathaniel Borders, who was born in 1873 on "Tom Suck Creek" in another county. When he was twelve, his mother packed up and left, leaving Nathaniel and two of his brothers with their father. Two years later, the father departed and left the boys to fend for themselves. Nathaniel moved around from place to place and found various employment for a dollar to a dollar twenty-five cents

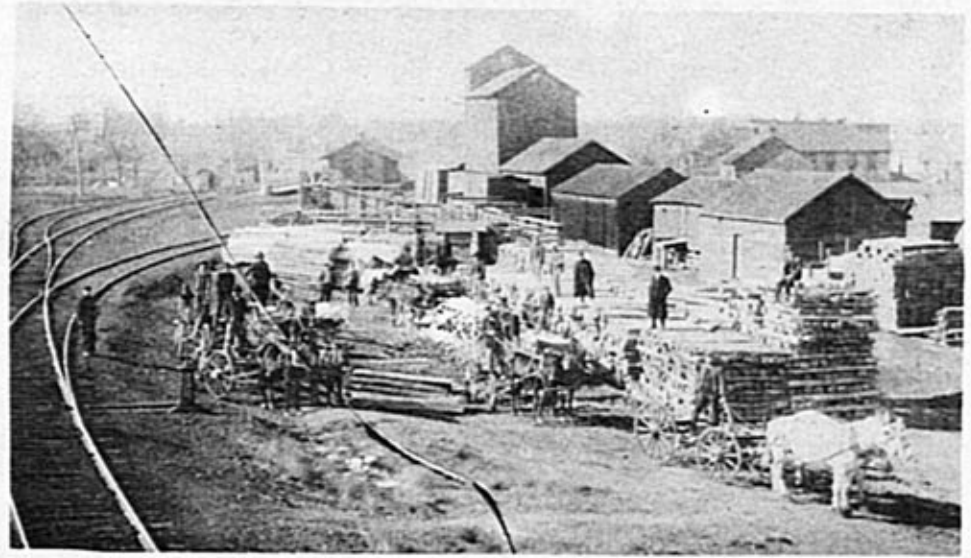
a day.

Nathaniel's mother had moved to a place near Spring Creek in Phelps County.

At the age of sixteen, he and his brother David ran their first raft of 200 ties from Spring Creek to Arlington for John Pillman. After working and living in that area for a while, the teenager experienced wanderlust again and traveled down to Arkansas, where he worked for a while. A short time later, Nathaniel went to the mining area around Piedmont, where he was seriously injured by a dynamiting accident.

"His right hand had been blown completely off above the wrist bone, and his left eye had been blinded, a toe bone had been broken, and pieces of rock were taken from practically all over his body," Arthur wrote.

While everyone thought Borders would succumb to these seriously injuries, he surprised everyone and was well enough to walk again in about a month or so. But when he went to visit his brother Bill in Arcadia, Borders collapsed from the strain of attempting to walk the last mile into town. He was treated by a local doctor and placed on a passenger train bound for St. Louis. Once there, he was helped on to a westbound Frisco train, and



The tie yard of E. E. Stone and Company in Dixon is stacked with four thousand ties on January 1908. Courtesy of Lewis and Carol Miller.

his only thought was to return to the area of the Big Piney River, where he had spent some of his happiest moments.

"When he arrived at Newburg, Missouri, he got off there during a twenty-five minute stop and bought another pint of whiskey, and boarded the train again," Arthur recounted. "The next station was Arlington, Missouri, where he left the train and borrowed a horse from Fred Pillman. He tied the suitcase on the saddle horn, mounted, and started out on his journey toward

Spring Creek, a distance of twelve miles.

"When he had gone as far as Willie Webster's place, about half way of the entire journey, it began to rain. This, of course, added much discomfort to his hardships and suffering. He began to chill. He then started drinking whiskey, which probably saved his life. When he arrived at John Pillman's place, on Spring Creek, he was a terrible looking sight, after riding six miles through the downpour of rain, but he had finished one pint of whiskey,

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which, strange as it may seem, had no intoxicating effect on him.

"His step-brother was working for John Pillman, and when Nathaniel rode up, he yelled at the top of his voice, but his loud yells could not be heard due to the heavy rain. Finally he decided to dismount. He was now suffering something terrible. When he dismounted, his broken toe was injured again, and other parts of his body also, which almost caused him to collapse, but he wobbled to the house and knocked on the door, and when the door was opened, there before them stood a pitiful looking sight. John and Nathaniel's step-brother couldn't believe their eyes, as the injured man had never notified them of his mishap. He was bandaged from head to foot, and his appearance seemed that of a ghost. He was then quickly taken care of. But the strange part of it all is that this man never took cold, nor did he feel the effects of the whiskey.

"The following morning, Nathaniel proceeded on to his home just across the river, and after about ten days had passed, he went to Waynesville, Missouri, where another operation was performed by removing a toe bone. There he remained one week under the doctor's care. Then he returned to his home,

where he remained for a period of one year, without doing any heavy work."

The Old Settlers' Gazette believes the accident in Piedmont took place some time in May 1898 and the aforementioned operation in Waynesville followed in June of the same year. Borders appears to be the subject of the following account published in the Rolla Herald on July 7th, 1898, although his name is misspelled and other specifics are in variance with the account in Arthur's book.

A young man by the name of Borden, of Spring Creek, Phelps county, came to Waynesville last Monday evening to have Dr. Tice amputate part of his foot. Borden is a physical wreck caused by the explosion of a gun in his hands some time ago in Taney county. He lost one eye, one arm, one foot was seriously hurt, besides his side was badly wounded. He had run the muzzle of his gun in the mud in falling, thus stopping it up without his knowledge, and when he fired the gun later it exploded both barrels. Drs. Tice and Claiborn performed an operation by scraping the diseased bone in his foot and will thereby save that member for him.



Alfred Miller, who was a fishing guide for Perry Andrus, helps haul in a fish from the bountiful Gasconade River for an unidentified man. Courtesy of Tom Miller.

Because of Nathaniel's stub arm, people began to start calling him "Stub." This physical handicap, however, did not permanently sideline him. After about a year of recuperation, "Stub" went to Newburg and surprisingly got a rafting job.

"He then went to Newtown and was given a job rafting, and the fact that his arm was not well did not keep Stub away from the rafting business," wrote Arthur. "He manned a raft of 300 ties single-handed. He started from Miller Springs on the Big Piney and

passed other rafts on the way. When he had gone as far as his home near Spring Creek, he decided to wait for the other rafts. At nine o'clock the following morning, the other rafts came in sight, and when they came closer, Stub asked one of the men if he thought that he could make a hand for him. The other eagerly replied, "Yes."

"Stub" never let the handicap keep him from pulling his weight in running a raft. Maybe it was because of this that he was well-known to be fearless, and

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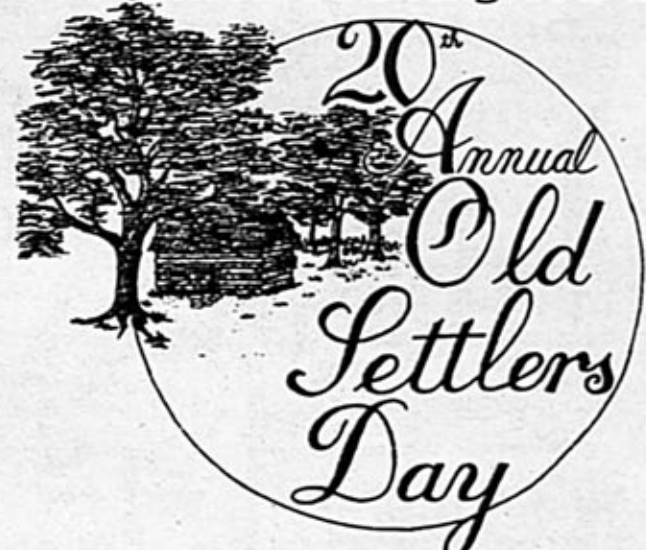
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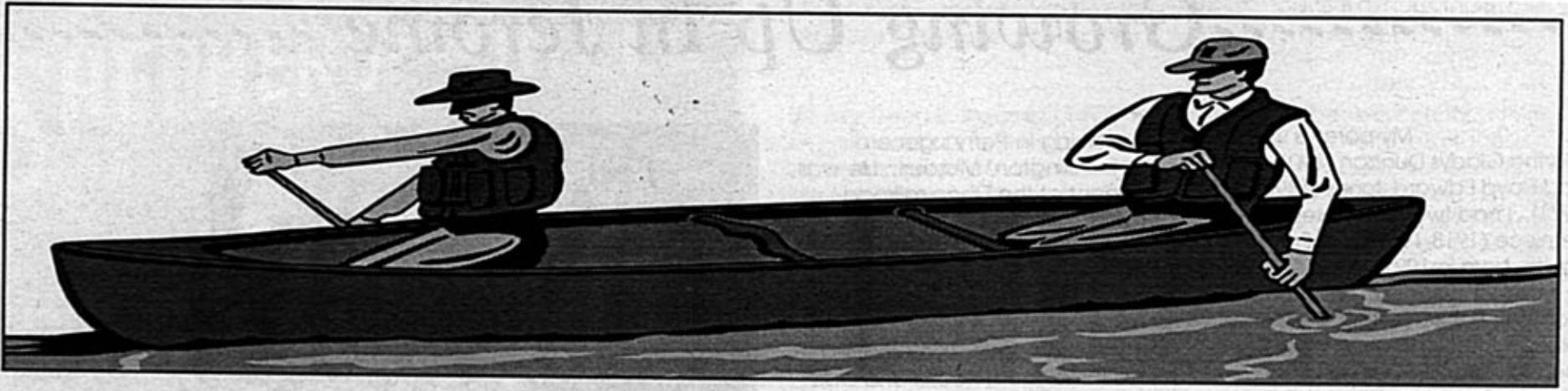
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some would say, foolhardy.

"One time while the river had an eighteen-foot rise on it, Stub picked four experienced rafters to help him run a raft of 1200 ties to Arlington," Arthur recounted in his book, *Backwoodsmen*. "They were John Henson, Dave Borders, Ike Hefflin, and Devis Wade. When they had gone as far as the mouth of the Big Piney and entering the Gasconade, the front end was manned by Stub, and headed out over snarling, angry waves. The muddy water was dotted with logs and brush. Despite Stub's accuracy, the cross-current quickly whipped the raft around headed down stream, breaking 500 ties from the raft, which were lost completely. John Henson and Ike Hefflin, being on this part of the raft, were then

compelled to swim as it began to crack up among the trees which were far in the river due to the big raise. These two men had climbed an elm tree, where they undressed themselves of everything and swam to shore, which was also a dangerous undertaking, due to the swift water. These men walked on through the brush and over rocky hillslopes, nude and bare-footed. Their feet were red with blood upon their arrival at Jerome, where they managed for some clothing. But in the meantime, Stub and the other two men were on the remainder of the raft, and when they had gone as far as "McGee Bend," the raft hit a sycamore tree sidewise, causing it to run against

the bluff there, breaking part of the raft up, and Stub was forced to swim. Stub tried to swim to shore, but due to the swiftness of the water and the bushes along the river, he was unable to do so. He swam down stream a distance of one mile to Boiling Spring, where he was determined to land. The sleeve of his shirt on the stub of his right arm caught on a snag underneath the surface, and the swift water pulled him under. Dave Borders and Devis Wade saw him submerge as they were passing by on the remainder of the raft and thought he had drowned.

"After awhile Stub was strangling, and he gave one hard jerk which tore the shirt from his body, freeing himself. He then

struggled desperately among the bushes until he had reached the shore, where he remained for some time. He narrowly escaped death."

"Stub" at one time was engaged to marry three different women all on the same day, but wound up marrying just one of them, Anna West, in Rolla, Missouri, on June 4, 1904. His colorful career included a short stint in prison and many other remarkable brushes with death.

Special thanks to Bill Debo for calling our attention to George Clinton Arthur's book, *Backwoodsmen*. Spiral-bound reprints of this book are available for \$15 each from Business Graphics in Waynesville.



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