

# The History and Legends of the Moccasin Bend of the Gasconade River

## by Dan Slais

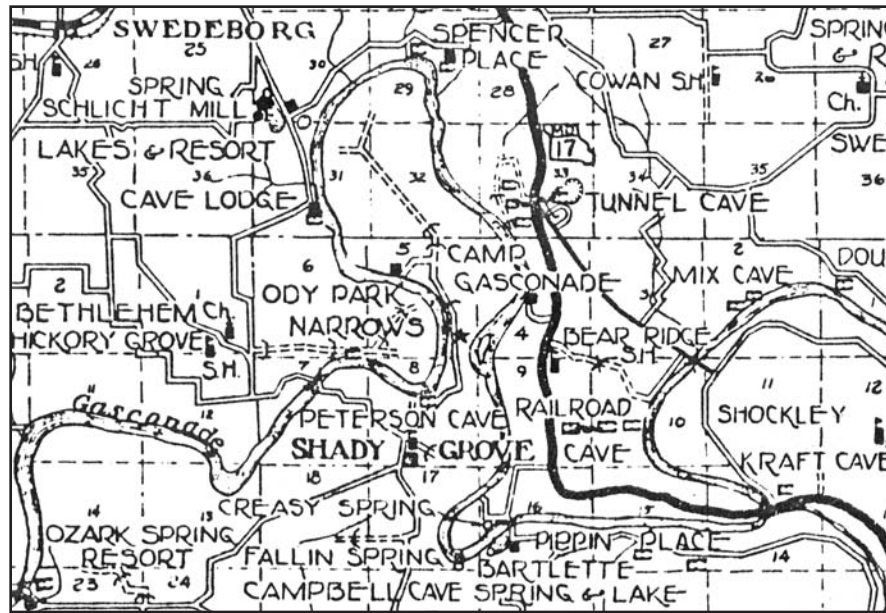
A little iron ore, a skull, outlaws, and perhaps some hidden gold are the ingredients to a major mystery story. Yet, these are the items of interest in some of the history and legends of Moccasin Bend.

The Moccasin Bend of the Gasconade River is a noted Ozark geographic feature. Milton Rafferty in *Ozarkswatch*, Spring, 1988, described "the 8 mile Moccasin Bend which brings the river back within 1000 feet of the beginning of the loop." The 1000 foot Narrows is approximately 180 feet above the river surface with wooded but exposed rock cliffs on both sides. This bend is north of Waynesville, south of Crocker, and southeast of Swedeborg on local maps.

The geology of Moccasin Bend is typical of Pulaski County. The remnants of the Roubidoux Sandstone caps the 300 foot layer of ocean formed brownish gray Gasconade Dolomite. Both strata contain much chert. These layers are Paleozoic Era, which dates them as 480 million years old. Karst topography containing caves, springs, and sinkholes is well developed along the exposed river eroded sections of many parts of these south central zones, Missouri Ozarks. Over one hundred caves are reported in Pulaski County and the Moccasin Bend area has its share.

From the top of the hill, inside Moccasin Bend, one can see the Cave Lodge, former resort area, Schlicht's Mill, the Missouri Conservation River Access, and Tie Landing. Tie Landing, on the northern most point of Moccasin Bend, was a loading dock area for tie rafters trying to reach the railroad. Historically, Black's outpost, a Union lookout, stood overlooking Tie Landing on the bend side of the river. Sections of the stream include Ben Franklin Eddy, a wide, deep 1 1/2 mile stretch just past the Narrows on the west side. This Moccasin Bend area is historic and very legendary in the same respect.

All locations, especially close to the river, contain artifacts left by former Native Americans, or Indians. Larger caves have born evidence of Indian occupancy. As most ground was plowed for corn in the early farming history of Pulaski County, arrowheads were commonly found. Local farmers talk of "gunny sacks" full of arrowheads. Many cave entrances which might have been used for habitation by Indians have been dug for artifacts. Because the bottom fields right next to the river were many times annually covered by high water and new sediment deposits, the high bot-



tom remains one of the best locations to check for artifacts.

The land started its heritage of ownership with multiple folks pursuing the rich bottom fields along the Gasconade. John Thornsberry, a Union soldier in the Civil War, returned to southern Miller, now Camden County in 1865. Working on the railroad near Swedeborg, his land along Dean's Creek was a homestead piece granted to veterans. John bought 80 acres of the Moccasin Bend directly across the Gasconade from the Schlicht Mill and Ford. Clearing was necessary to begin the agricultural task of planting corn. Hunting was also good.

Mattie Atwill, in her book *Thy Will Be Done*, discusses the virgin soil, wide uncleared bottom, and the ability "to cross the river 3 months in the winter on ice." The farming was adequate for survival and John was a well known stockman. Mattie also explains the next significant step in their heritage. "About this time some prospectors came into the county looking for mineral(s) in the Ozarks. A miracle happened. They discovered iron ore in the bluff overlooking the wide valley my parents had cleared out..."

The iron ore was a moderately rich surface vein of hematite. Its source may be Pennsylvanian period filled sink deposits of sedimentary iron similar to the St. James iron deposits. Working only in the summers, an open pit from 50 - 75 yards long and approximately 10 feet deep and 30 feet wide was excavated. It has been assumed the ore had to be taken across a ford to Schlicht's Mill where it was hauled 2 miles up to the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad. Although 2 miles seems a short distance, the trail was an uphill endurance with oxen or mule teams pulling wagons. There is no exact

location for any railroad siding here, but from Schlicht's Mill to the Railroad was too steep for railroad operation. No pictures of these 1870 operations were found. Today, the iron pits are filled and have become part of our green pasture hillsides with only a small margin of the red iron tailings left to note. The John Thornsberry family gained a royalty on the iron. The property was kept in the family through son Levi and Lloyd Thornsberry until 1994.

Iron, especially low grade limonite, is common throughout the Ozarks; ore-grade hematite is an exception. There is evidence of other possible hematite laden areas in the Mark Twain National Forest. The nearest iron mine working may have been in St. James at the Meramec Iron Works.



Although not in Moccasin Bend, this early digging in the southern part of Pulaski County yielded some unknown ore. Photo by Terry Primas.

An actual iron mine in Pulaski County is an interesting happenstance.

Although iron has been a proven commodity for Moccasin Bend, gold maintains a large pile of legendary stories. One involves at least three gold miners coming back from California in the early 1850s who camped supposedly in a dugout between two caves in a section of Moccasin Bend known as Cougar Hollow. It is said they bought supplies in Waynesville with gold nuggets. The 1850s-1860s were historically a harsh period for survival in this section of Missouri. These men were ambushed but no gold was found. Maybe, they buried it somewhere nearby? Even today, this story persists as one of the lost treasures in Missouri concerning caches buried for safety. Internet web site [www.treasurefish.com](http://www.treasurefish.com) explains, "Near Waynesville in Pulaski County a wealthy Forty-Niner is said to have buried \$60,000 in the hills."

Other gold legends surround Moccasin Bend. From Mabel Manes Mottaz, "In early pioneer days there were no banks and if a man possessed any money he was forced to bury it for safekeeping." This continued through the Civil War Era with soldiers and bushwhackers prowling the county. "Jesse James and the Younger Brother were harbored in this county and some think they could have buried the money taken in their train hold-ups." The exploits of the



Quantrill's Raiders, the James Gang, Bloody Bill Anderson, and the Younger Brothers have legendary issues with Moccasin Bend. Mabel Mottaz says "There are many tales of money buried in Pulaski County, but they are nebulous, indefinite and uncertain. In 1959 an article about buried treasure came out in the St. Louis Globe Democrat, allocating buried treasure in various places, among them somewhat indefinitely within five miles of Waynesville."

One of the legendary tales involves some of Quantrill's Raiders, including Bill Anderson and Jesse James, crossing the Gasconade below Tie Landing. As the river loops now to a north to south run, caves on the east side were notorious prospects for the cache of loot. However, the west side of the Gasconade, inside Moccasin Bend, there was an old log house known as a refuge area for outlaws. St. Louis newspapers substantiated \$50,000 robbed from a bank and \$10,000 more from a private robbery in northern Missouri. This money is still unaccounted. Joe Thornsberry, property owner of these hideout acres until 1999, explained that treasure hunters had contacted him for over 20 years with maps or stories of verbal reference to where the gold was located.

A man's skull and skeleton added interest to the story that members of

the Quantrell gang crossed the river to Moccasin Bend where they buried or hid money and guns in a cave. Supposedly, the man who was hired to dynamite the cave shut did too good a job piling the location with too much rubble. The man, (and his dog), were shot, maybe simply because he knew where the treasure was. The gang left the area, maybe heading west. The thoughts are maybe existing family members were showing up with maps or information concerning locations in Moccasin Bend. New buildings, growth of trees, river floods, including a large one in 1898, which modified an old river slough, may help hold the secret of the location of buried treasure.

Eight or nine serious treasure hunters, including several locals, have brought heavy equipment and spent several dollars looking for the treasure. Joe Thornsberry was willing to "let 'em dig" for his share of the treasure. Did they go up the river instead of down, turn right instead of left, no one knows. Many times secrets of buried treasure were left to be told on the death bed and sometimes accidents or comas prevented that from happening. To Joe's knowledge, no gold or treasure has ever been recovered.

The Missouri Conservation Commission was set up in 1937. With

ideas of reestablishing deer and turkey populations in the Ozarks, Conservation owned properties were being stocked. Sixty-eight landowners of Moccasin Bend made a cooperative agreement with the Missouri Conservation Commission to allow restoration of the deer herd. In 1947, the deer were released and hence the name Moccasin Bend Wildlife Refuge, which appears on the sign placard at the Old Courthouse in Waynesville. In 1953, wild turkeys were released. At a time when corn was the major crop for all, release of deer presented a direct conflict with the farming operation. With some sacrifice by the landowners, the refuge management was considered a success.

John Reed, local Conservation agent, was a helpful liaison between the Commission and the local people. It also helped that he lived on Moccasin Bend. The thinking was that the bend was land locked and except for deer, turkey, and humans who might cross the river, the area was a great place for research and truly a refuge. The Moccasin Bend properties have all reverted back to private ownership. Some of the property today, like Bill Ransdall's, contain Missouri Conservation timber and wildlife stewardship management programs.

The Gasconade River at Moccasin Bend is known as a good float trip

section, starting or ending at the Conservation Schlicht's Mill Access. Fishing can be good, too. Gasconade Christian Service Camp, now located just west of the Narrows, runs campers on float trips that take out at the Access. Today, typical Ozark oak woods cover some of the area and fields now have reverted from the cornfields of the early twentieth century to fescue pastures for cattle. Rumor has it that some of the large paw-paws presented at Waynesville's Paw-Paw Days have come from Moccasin Bend.

The history and legends of Moccasin Bend somewhat intertwine. Mostly tales of getting along on a small Ozark farm. Roy Fritts, a former resident, says, "There was always something going on - neighbor helping neighbor activities." A little iron, but no known gold or treasure have been found in an area full of Native American artifacts. The Moccasin Bend of the Gasconade seems to have created an interesting part of the fabric of history in Pulaski County.

Dan Slais is a retired teacher from Waynesville. Dan's knowledge of another local stream is apparent in his recently published book **The Roaring Roubidoux**.