

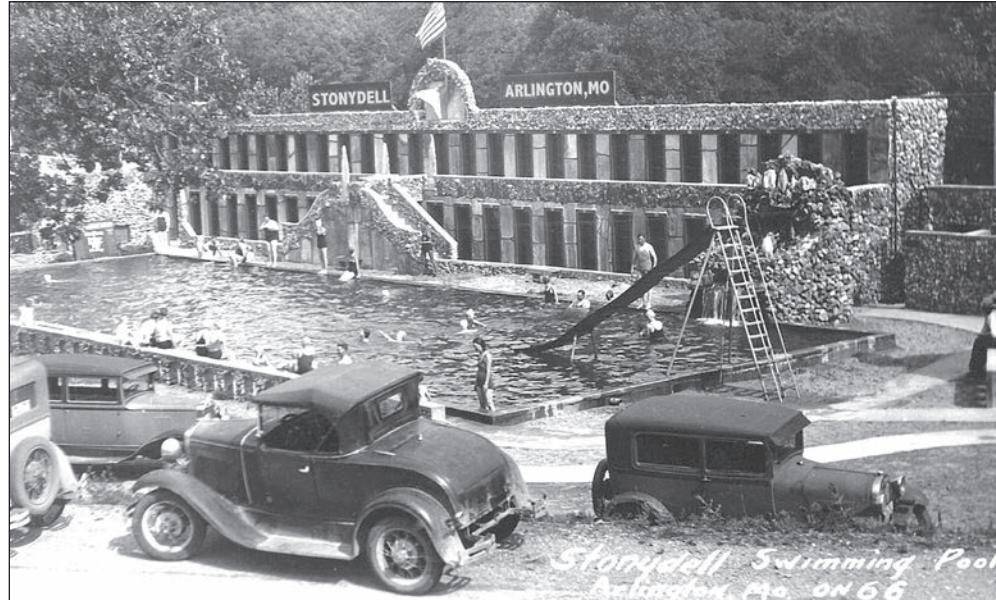
Native Stone, Concrete Swimming Holes, and “The One and Only” Stony Dell on Route 66

by John Bradbury

Fourteen miles from Rolla and west of Arlington on Route 66, the commercial development at Stony Dell was this area's greatest example of building in native stone. It was meant to be a commercial attraction on the new highway but the combination of swimming pool, restaurant, rock garden, and rustic cabins represented more than just building in stone. It was a work of folk art as well, built in a time when things local were still in vogue. Vern Prewett's creation at Stony Dell was the latest example of things to see and do in the Ozarks.

Years of railroad and good roads advertising had already attracted a generation of urban visitors to Gasconade resorts. During the first decade of Route 66, local colorists joined commercial promoters to boost the country's scenic beauty, local history and lore. Those themes inspired anthologies of poetry and prose such as those published by the Gasconade Writers Guild. It was the era when George Clinton Arthur, a member of the Guild, drew from tales of the Civil War and rafting along the Gasconade and Piney rivers to publish his regional classics, *Bushwhacker* (1938) and *Backwoodsmen* (1940). Vern Prewett was a businessman, not a local colorist, but his creation at Stony Dell was an artful appreciation of the most common natural resource in the Ozarks. The medium was durable rock rather than the printed word. Ironically, the Stony Dell structures lasted not quite forty years. The books have lasted longer.

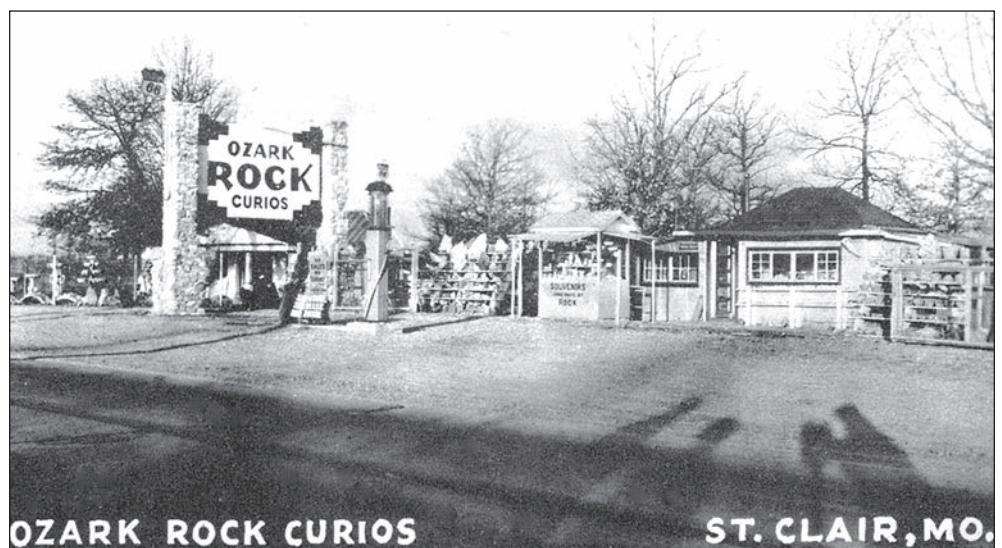
Stone seems to have its own allure, so Stony Dell might also be considered another example of the human race's preoccupation with rock and stone. Since prehistoric times, people have named geologic features and identified deposits as resources for metallic ores, tools, building materials, funerary art, and



jewelry. They also have collected, traded, and sold rocks for their variety and beauty. Humans have long lugged rocks home from vacations as momentos or curios to be placed along walkways and in gardens, fireplaces, and private collections. People have even hauled rocks back from the Moon. Making good things better, craftsmen have long incorporated eye-catching stones into lamps, birdbaths, and other furnishings known as novelties.

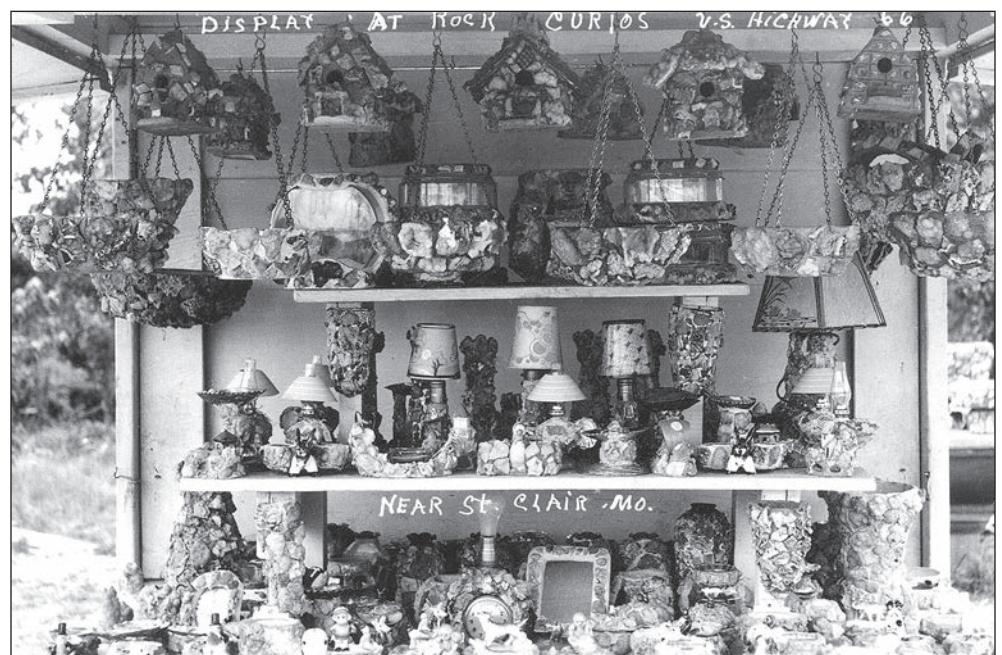
Rocks were a natural preoccupation for anyone in the Ozarks. The trade in stone, by the ton and in individual rocks, lent itself to Route 66 and the highway was dotted with rock shops back in its heyday. In Missouri, Ozark Rock Curios at St. Clair was among the most widely known enterprises. Until recent years, Rolla's rock and mineral shop, close by the old road and the Mule Trading Post, was a vestige of a once-common connection between rocks and Route 66. Gift shops along the historic route also frequently offered local specimens of quartz, calcite and pyrite alongside Indian relics and exotic items such as fossils, petrified wood and turquoise and silver jewelry from the Southwest. In this context, Vern Prewett

had the area's greatest local rock collection, artfully arranged into buildings. He also sold “flag stones” of various hues and colors “delivered anywhere” from Stony Dell. In 1935 he opened a picnic ground with a rock garden as its centerpiece, free to all visitors. Today, nothing remains but fragmentary ruins of Prewett's work in native stone at Stony Dell, but just up Highway D to the west, the late Larry Baggett's restored memorial to the Trail of Tears keeps alive the neighborhood's heritage of building in stone and rock art on Route 66.



OZARK ROCK CURIOS

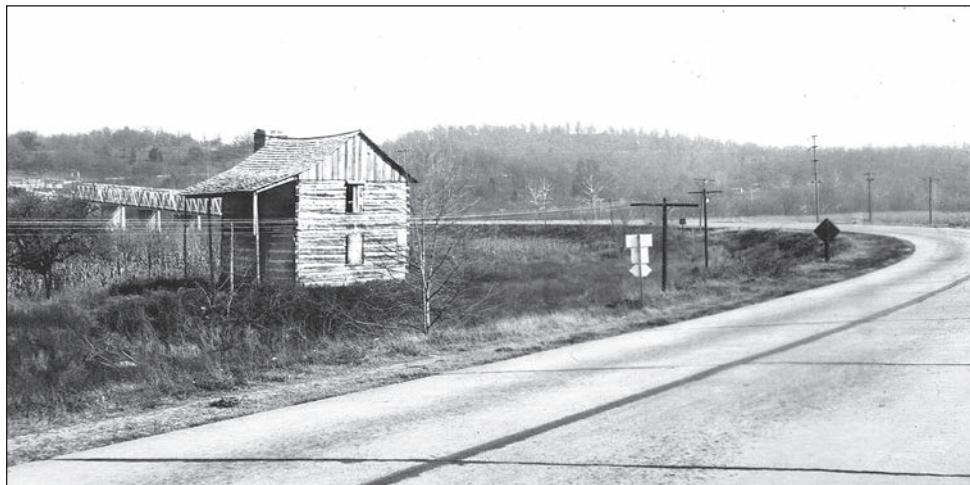
ST. CLAIR, MO.



Ozark Rock Curios, located 3 miles west of St. Clair, Missouri, was one of the best known establishments for rock hounds in the heyday of Route 66.

Whether or not local citizens knew or cared much about folk traditions, the décor lent itself to Route 66 and offered other opportunities to make a living. Stony Dell was foremost a business proposition. By way of native stone, Prewett created a unique commercial attraction on this

stretch of the new avenue through the Ozarks. Historically the area had long been oriented to commerce. James Harrison's 1819 log home was the first permanent structure and first "courthouse" in Old Pulaski, and was a longtime landmark on the St. Louis-Springfield road. It still stood only a few hundred yards east



James Harrison's cabin was the first permanent structure and first courthouse in Old Pulaski. It was located on the St. Louis-Springfield road near Arlington and Prewett's stone development.

of Prewett's development. Farther east, the villages of Arlington and Jerome dated to the brief era of John C. Fremont and the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad. Later they became well known as hubs of lumber and tie-rafting and Gasconade River resorting. But tie-rafting had ended in the 1920s and the summer resorts were getting long in the tooth when Prewett envisioned his enterprise on the new highway. Bypassed by Route 66, the villages began the transition to the "historic" status they have today. There were a few filling stations from the Route 14 days, but a cluster of new automobile and tourist-related businesses soon developed on Route 66 between Sugar Tree Road and Devils Elbow. Prewett's Stony Dell was the newest and most memorable. It became a Route 66 landmark and a reference point for other locations along the highway.

Clarence Vernon Prewett was Stony Dell's builder. Known as Vernon or Vern, he was a Phelps County native, born in 1907, the youngest child of George Grant and Sarah Hagen Prewett. His father, George, was a prosperous farmer and merchant with business interests in Arlington, Jerome and Newburg. Vern set out early to make his own mark, he is said to have been only fourteen years old when he hopped trains and hitchhiked to the West Coast. He worked in a number of construction projects and perhaps picked up masonry skills then. By 1928 he was back in Arlington, driving a truck three times a week to St. Louis, and hauling truckloads for local farmers and shippers. He must have been planning his development by then.

Construction began soon thereafter on land owned by Vern's father and adjacent to George's

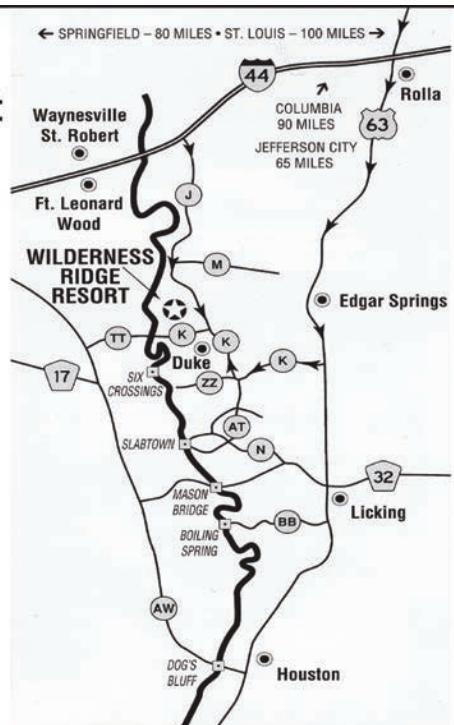
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RELATIONSHIPS KNOWN AS THE 4-WAY TEST, WHICH ASKS THESE QUESTIONS: Is it the

general store and filling station. Vern began with the rustic cabins on the north side of the highway, built probably in 1928-1929. The swimming pool and restaurant came next on the south side of Route 66

and east of his father's business. The pool was completed and in use locally by 1931, a full season before its grand opening to the public.

As yet the enterprise had no name. The immediate area was



George Prewitt's Hi-Wa Trading Co. was the first business in the Stony Dell neighborhood. James Memorial Library Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri.

known as Tater Hollow after the local schoolhouse and was later occasionally referred to as Prewett's Resort. In 1931, the Tater Hollow correspondent to the *Rolla Herald* floated the name Hiwa (pronounced "highway") for this stretch of road, named after George Prewett's Hi-Wa Trading Company store. The local reporter used the name several times in the Tater Hollow neighborhood news on April 23, which included items such as these: "Vernon Prewett of Hiwa has brought his bride home. We wish Vern and Zelma many years of happiness and will welcome them with a hearty greeting just as soon as we can get the Tater Holler gang together....Vern Prewett has just put up some fine rustic scenery and a waterfall at his swimming pool at Hiwa....Our genial merchant George Prewett of Hiwa, is a very busy man, these days

getting his place of business put in a presentable condition since the highway is completed." On July 2, 1931, the correspondent noted: "The swimming pool at Hiwa is proving very popular [in] this very hot weather."

"Hiwa" never caught on. By the time of its grand opening to the public in May 1932, Vern Prewett had settled on the far more descriptive "Stony Dell Swimming Pool." That Prewett intended the name to be two words was evident in his newspaper advertising, but in practice, even in newspapers, it was sometimes rendered as a single word, "Stonydell." Usage of Stonydell seems to have prevailed after World War Two and is commonly accepted now. Such pesky details bother antiquarians and local historians but didn't much matter then. One word or two, everyone knew the place. For our purposes here, we mostly

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use the original Stony Dell.

Prewett's earliest known advertising referred to "the One and Only Stony Dell." True enough in Phelps County, it was certainly not the first use of the name. "Stony" is a natural physical description and "Dell" is an archaic word for a small forested valley. Cursory search in [newspapers.com](#) brings up items such as a two hundred year-old historic farm named Stony Dell near Hagerstown, Maryland, neighborhoods or locales named Stony Dell in New Jersey and Wisconsin, and the Stony Dells along the Eel River in Indiana. In 1941 a greyhound named Stony Dell was an also-ran at tracks in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. Maybe Prewett had seen or heard the name somewhere in his travels. In any case, it was entirely appropriate.

Nor was Prewett's pool the first concrete swimming hole in the area. L. D. Templeton's Cool Brook Natatorium, "only 20 minutes" on Highway 63, five miles south of Rolla, had that distinction when it opened in 1922. Cool Brook was the only public pool in Phelps County until the summer of 1930 when Dave Gentilini opened his pool at Knobview (renamed Rosati in January 1931). Gentilini seems to have shared Vern Prewett's interests in concrete swimming holes and building in stone. His two-story hotel, still in use as a residence,



Cool Brook was the first natatorium built in this area in 1922. It remained in business until the 1970s but shed natatorium in its name along the way.

is a fine example of native rock architecture. Gentilini did not extend the technique to his pool on the new federal highway. The pool was the first to open along this stretch of Route 66. Although Portland cement had made concrete box reservoir pools possible, an increasingly mobile public and better roads allowed them to become popular. Bathing and swimming in the Gasconade were old hat, anyway, and the resorts and river were filled each summer with hundreds of vacationers from St. Louis. For the next generation of local residents, Stony Dell was the focal point of the neighborhood. For Route 66 travelers, it was one of the most unique places on the road between St. Louis and Springfield.

It was hard to miss. When it

opened in 1932, Stony Dell included the pool, an impressive two-story bank of individual dressing rooms,



Dave Gentilini at Knobview shared Vern's interest in rock architecture and concrete swimming pools. His two-story hotel still stands in Rosati as a private residence. Photo by Susan Dunn.

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and a restaurant on the south side of Route 66. Immediately opposite on the north side of the highway a

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Rolla Herald, August 21, 1930

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Rolla Herald, August 21, 1930

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C. V. PREWETT

Rolla Herald, July 20, 1935

stone archway framed the driveway to a group of rustic cabins, the ruins of which are visible yet today. Nearly everything was built or faced with native stone and slab rock. Along with the dressing rooms and restaurant, stone appurtenances included a waterfall delivering water from an artesian well to the pool, a star symbol in rock for lighting fixtures, stone balustrades, and a fence separating the parking lot from the pool. Prewett followed no pattern book, but the style vaguely resembled that of Appalachian tourist areas. He never described the place as "hillbilly," even if some of the entertainment was.



Prewett proudly described himself as the owner, builder and proprietor of Stony Dell, but the scale of the enterprise required some help. Dallas Wells, the "Stone Man" at Hooker, is said to have had a hand in construction, as did a "Mr. Andres" (probably Russ Andres at Jerome, owner of the Andres Resort and a colleague of Vern's). Robert Badger, later of Rolla, also talked of working with Vern at Stony Dell. No doubt other neighborhood folks found temporary employment during construction and operation of the pool and also in the restaurant where Mrs. Prewett offered iced

tea, and ginger ale, and beer after Prohibition ended in 1933. The cold drinks, sandwiches and dinners "at reasonable prices" were served amid rustic décor with hand-crafted and highly-polished cedar furnishings.

Over a thousand people came to the public opening on Sunday, May 22, 1932. The one hundred-foot long pool was the main attraction. Swimming was the order of the day for most, even if the 1,800 gallons of artesian water was a bit cold yet. Big crowds also attended Prewett's exhibitions by professional swimmers and divers at Stony Dell in 1935, 1937, and 1938. "The Human Seal" led the bill in 1935. For 25 cents admission, the "Dazzler of the Deep" demonstrated upside down swimming, Egyptian

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Sunday, July 21st—Let's Go!

STONY DELL SWIMMING POOL

ARLINGTON, MISSOURI

C. V. PREWETT

Rolla Herald, July 18, 1935

floating, and a variety of other swimming styles. There was also a "bathing beauty" contest, an open air broadcast by a Kansas City announcer, an entertainer, and music by Homer Chambers of Jeff City's Hill Billy Band. Swimming lessons were free, as they were again in 1937. Billed as "the greatest swimming and diving exhibition ever held in the west," Lefty Goldstein, the "Man Who Does Three Dives in One," was the featured professional. A team of women demonstrated formation swimming, and "Clown swimmers" including some local talent provided comedic entertainment with their antics. Professional Jack Simmons of St. Louis headed a similar bill over the Fourth of July



Bobbing heads were a common sight in the summer months. Known as "shute-the-chute," Vern installed the slide in 1932.

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1938. Featured refreshments were cold beer (fifteen cents), Dr. Pepper and Orange Crush.

The pool was most popular with the younger crowd. Stony Dell became the place for pool parties, annual school picnics and various social gatherings. Prewett also tried to put Stony Dell on the map for non-swimmers, day-trippers and other travelers. On July 5, 1934 the *Rolla Herald* reported he had built a small zoo of sorts near the pool, where he kept an African lion, native mountain lion and wolves, a baboon with a baby delivered after Prewett acquired it, raccoons (presumably native and perhaps some volunteers) and three alligators. Small menageries, sometimes no more than a peacock or two, were common enough at touristy places along Route 66. Prewett's might have been the first along this stretch. But the zoo must

have been a troublesome money-loser as no further mentions of it or the animals have been found.

Prewett opened Stony Dell Park in June 1935 behind the pool. A driveway crossed a wet-weather creek and encircled a pyramidal display of native rock and stones. The surrounding picnic ground included a sand beach, swings,

and totter boards for youngsters, and there were plenty of tables and benches (in stone) under shade trees. The attraction had hardly opened when a violent storm lashed the region on July 10, inflicting \$3,500 damage at Stony Dell. It filled the pool with debris and wrecked a dozen of the dressing rooms, giving rise to the discrepancy in

the sources as to the number of changing rooms (cited variously as fifty-seven or fifty-four). Prewett rebuilt all but three after the storm. Flash-flooding also tore out the road to the park but the biggest loss there was Prewett's tools, washed away by the creek. Nevertheless, he had the premises back in order for his first swimming and diving exhibition on July 21.

Stony Dell quickly became a destination for highway travelers and weekend sightseers. It attracted scores of private picnics, wedding parties and disparate groups from the surrounding region such as Rolla's Girl Scout Troop No. 5, the Mill Creek Community Club, Home Economics Clubs from Owensville and Rolla, Young Democrat Clubs of Phelps and Pulaski Counties, and the employees of United Telephone Company centrals at Rolla, Newburg, Salem, Hermann,



Stony Dell Park opened in 1935. It was immediately popular and expanded Stony Dell's appeal to non-swimmers, tourists, and daytrippers.

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Paid for by Roger Graves II for Pulaski County Coroner.

Chamois, Morrison, and Gerald. Notwithstanding that the restaurant served beer, Stony Dell was a respectable establishment for all, hosting even church and Sunday School groups. In September 1934, fifty-two enrollees and twelve visitors of the Missionary Women's Union attended the Phelps County Association encampment at Stony Dell. After naming the camp "Big Chief Horse," the assembly raised Christian and American flags over the cottages and sang *America*. Swimming, stunts, and dinner followed.

The era of public aquatic extravaganzas ended in 1938, and Vern Prewett left Stony Dell after the season of 1941. Like so many others, he entered the service of the government, but not as a soldier or stonemason. The Rolla newspaper noted his movement in various defense plants in Maryland, Illinois, Alabama, Tennessee, and

Washington. The locations raised no eyebrows back home. We know now they were atomic bomb-related sites where Vern wore plainclothes in duty of some sort of secret service that he never talked about much even years later.

Divorced before the war began, Prewett in 1945 married Sarah Bowman, whom he had met in Tennessee. The new family lived at Stony Dell, Arlington, and Rolla, but he no longer managed the property. Instead, he went into the stone business full time, building dozens of commercial structures, properties, walls and walkways in Phelps and Pulaski counties into the early 1960s. There is no known catalog of his work. He built many residences in the northeast part of Rolla, perhaps a dozen or so still exist. He also worked for wealthy customers in St. Louis and delivered stone as far away as Chicago. He taught his masonry techniques to

relatives and friends as well, so there may be buildings descended from Vern that we know nothing about.

Years of exposure to rock and cement dust took its toll on Prewett. He developed an ailment similar to miner's lung and spent most of 1963 in the state sanitarium at Mount Vernon. The family afterwards moved to Tennessee. Unable to work any longer in masonry, Vern operated a bicycle shop for a decade in Kingsport, where he died in 1977.

George Prewett sold Stony Dell about 1950. New owner, W. R. Brown, coincidentally owner of the Rolla swimming pool, advertised the entire complex for sale in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* in 1957. Fred and Esther Widener bought the property and operated "Stonydell" it as long as it lasted. Hundreds of people still bobbed in the pool during the season although Cool Brook and the Rolla pool (built in 1945) captured much of the

patronage from the county seat. Stonydell was still the neighborhood place to beat the heat and enjoyed considerable highway business. On the north side of the highway, Fred had an office/gift shop and a goldfish pond for the tourist trade. Whether or not he sold rock specimens is unknown, but the pond, stocked occasionally with "Missouri alligators" (hellbenders or water dogs) was reminiscent of Vern's short-lived zoo.

War scattered many of the old Tater Hollow crowd, leading to a "Homecoming" of friends and relatives at Stonydell in August 1949. Andreses, Jeters, Phillipses, Loughridges, Gilmore, Zorumskis, Smiths, Lambeths, Meracles, Gaddys, Maces, Falkenraths, Hivelys, Glovers, and Campbells assembled for basket dinners, singing and a lot of conversation. There was talk of making the Tater Hollow reunion an annual affair, but



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it never happened again at Stony dell, at least not formally or in such numbers.

The road made Stony Dell possible but ultimately killed it. The state highway department acquired the

south side of the property in 1965 as part of modern improvements for Interstate 44. When finished, Route 66 became Highway D. Contractors used the area as a staging area for construction, but when it

was finished, they demolished everything on the south side of the "One and Only" at Stony Dell, to the detriment of everyone who has passed by since.



Rolla Herald
1935



Sources and Acknowledgments

The author visited Stony Dell in its last days but never swam there, only because Cool Brook was closer. I think I bought an Indian head penny at the gift shop. Much of the detail in the present essay comes from the *Rolla Herald*. Other items appeared in the *Rolla New Era*, *Bland Courier*, *Gasconade County Republican* (Owensville), *Houston Herald*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, all available from the State Historical Society of Missouri. A search of *Newspapers.com* yielded other uses of the name Stony Dell in Florida, Indiana, New Jersey, and Wisconsin. Closer to home, Van Beydler covered "Stony Dell Swimming Pool" in the *Old Settlers Gazette* (1991), archived online at the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation's website.

Susan Dunn and Mike Siemens

contributed photographic and geologic help. Carole Goggin of the State Historical Society of Missouri's Rolla office went beyond her duties to help a forgetful researcher. In 1993, I interviewed the late Robert Badger and Fred Widener. I believe it was Fred who first told me about his "Missouri alligators." More recently, I talked with Robert Vernon Prewett, Vern's son. He supplied many details of his father's life and his own time wielding a trowel for his dad. Robert was able to confirm that many of the sandstone slab houses still standing in the northeastern part of Rolla were Vern's work. That information seems to have been largely forgotten in modern times and was a real revelation to those of us interested in such weighty things. We are indebted to Robert for his help.

Postcards from Stony Dell

Upper left The waterfall delivered 1800 gallons of water per day from the artesian well.

Left The restaurant on the west end of the pool served up sandwiches, cold drinks, and beer after 1933. It was also a tavern in the Widener era.

All of these postcards (this page and the next) are dated from the 1930s and 1940s. They became scarcer during the next two decades.



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The cabins here appear to be nearly brand new when I. J. Baumgardner, Rolla's commercial photographer, made this image. It is not known to have been offered as a postcard. Baumgardner photo, State Historical Society of Missouri.



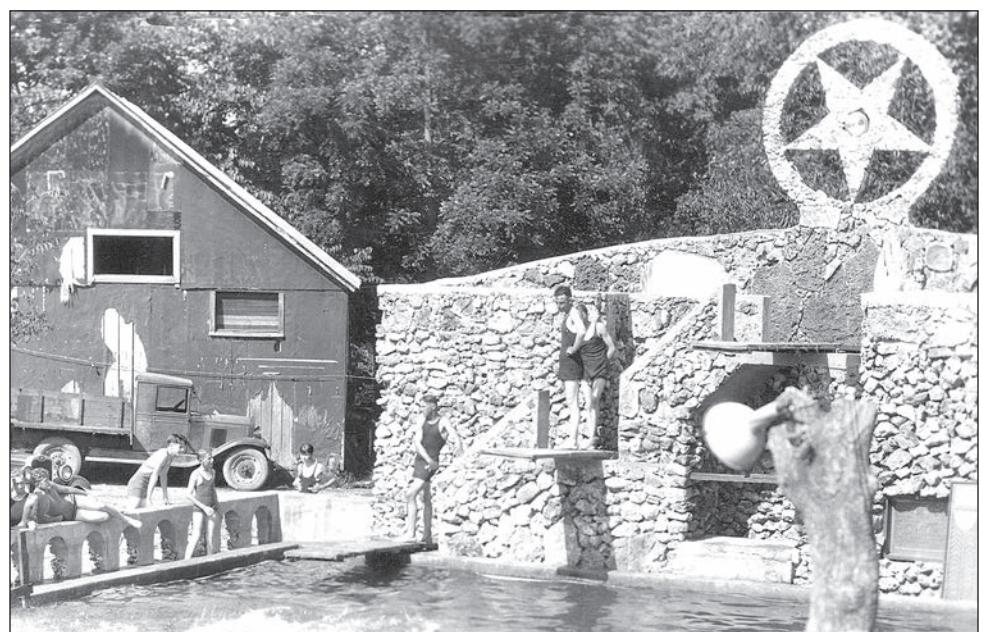
This wide-angle picture of the pool was taken from the roadside of Route 66, which is in the foreground, in the 1940s.



This view shows the arched driveway to the cabins, postmarked 1934.



Vern feeding baboon in his zoo near the pool.
Courtesy of State Historical Society of Missouri.



Appurtenances in stone included not only the waterfall but decorative effects such as the star for lighting, along with stone fences and benches alongside the pool.

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