Early History of Pulaski County

Pulaski County, as the name implies, was organized in 1848 and named after the Polish Patriot Count Casimir Pulaski, hero of the Polish-American Revolution of 1794, and later a U.S. Army General and Chief of Cavalry under George Washington.

In 1853, Pulaski County's boundary included all of what later became Laclede and Wright counties and much of Dallas, Webster, Phelps, Texas, Maries, Cundeen, and Miller counties. It wasn't until 1859 that Pulaski County's present boundary was defined.

The "Old Settlers" reported that Pulaski County was abundant with springs and the valleys were generally narrow and embraced with the choicest and most productive agricultural lands, with the soil being a heavy sandy loam. The early inhabitants were also aided by the beautiful Gasconade River bluffs. At one time, Pulaski County was the state in most caves within its boundary. At the base of the Roubidoux Creek, which empties into the Gasconade River, a cave lies partially hidden behind an overgrowth of weeds and trees. Arrowheads, stone pipes, a skull and other artifacts found within have given it the name of "Indian Cave."

The cave is a beautiful formation of huge caverns that geologists say were first caused by the shrinking of the earth's crust and later carved out by underground waterways flowing through the limestone ledges and fissures. This erosion eventually formed the rooms, tunnels, passageways and caverns which make up Indian Cave. A balanced rock, unattached to either wall or ceiling, perch precariously above the cave's huge mouth. Weighing several tons, the stone appears ominous to all who enter.

The first record of Indian Cave is a report of its discovery in 1816 by three men from Missouri. In their search for potassium nitrate (Saltpeter) to make gunpowder, they discovered the cave and named it Saltpeter Cave. In the early 1800's, it was known as Stout Cave, later as Pike's Peak Cave, and then finally by its present name.

For a short time, the cave was commercialized by a former owner, Gilbert S. Wagner, who drapes electric lights for a quarter of a mile to conduct tours, a complete tour of the cave took as long as seven hours! In the mouth of the cave, Wagner set up picnic tables to serve meals to visitors. Today, the entrance of the cave is hidden from the highway, but the wonder of its formation is there as mute testimony of the underground caverns that honeycomb the Ozarks region.

Pulaski County's heritage is rich. In 1860, Jefferson Strain struck out from Tennessee in search of a new frontier. With his tools strapped to his horses back, he followed the old Kickapoo Trail to Pulaski County. It was here he found his place. In a secluded Ozarks hollow, on a spring that runs into the Gasconade River, Strain began building a mill. With no one to help him, it took him four years to cut and shape the timbers for the building's foundation. These blocks left over he used to build a dam across the spring fed mill pond. The hand-hewn beams in the mill were made by Strain from large oak trees nearby. These beams were mortised and tenoned together, then wooden pined. When he finally completed his project, Strain returned to Tennessee for his family. For the next 22 years this family operated the Gasconade Mill, but the outcome of the Civil War saw the mill sold to John Hensley. Hensley kept the business until 1876 when it was taken over by John Schlett. The Schlett family retained the mill, except for its closing, and the name was changed to Schlett's Mill.

Schlett was an emigrant from Germany who made his way to America in 1866. He soon became known for his brother Frank and his mother, who fled to this country to escape the strife of the German wars. John was the eighth generation of millers in the Schlett family. A progressive businessman, Schlett added two more water wheels and a second pond to the mill. He invented a roller mill machine and invented his own flour bleaching process.

These improvements soon brought farmers from as far as forty miles away to have their grains processed. Activity resulting from the mill encouraged the growth of a small community which included a general store, a tavern and a barber shop. The mill became a post office as well, and "Schlett's Spring Post Office" now remains.

Water from the spring was channeled through the General Store to keep eggs and milk fresh and cool. The whiskey served in the tavern was made in the Schlett's basement. That building stands on a hill overlooking the mill.

After John's death, his son Charles took over the mill and kept it running until he died in 1945. The mill had been in full operation for 105 years.

Dr. William Schlett, nephew of Charles, inherited the mill and restored the buildings. After his death, his son, Sherman, remained on for a while. In 1976, Sherman sold the mill to Bernard Schermers, a wholesaler and distributor from St. Louis. Today, the area is overgrown. The pond is filled with algae and surrounded by weeds. No longer do the wheels turn. No longer do people gather there with sacks of feed to ground. Instead, the buildings sit in quiet desolation.

Early settlers found the 1809's equivalent of a modern-day stop in what was known as the Waynesville Stagecoach Depot and Tavern. In their haste toward the Mississippi, pioneers traveled along the route known as the "Old Road." This route is the path of Interstate 44, but during the Civil War, it was bordered by telegraph wires strung from Rolla to Fort Smith, Arkansas. A union attempt to keep abreast of the telegraph act along the way. At the end of the war, the wires were taken down, but for many years, the old poles stood from Cassville to Springfield.

Those early pioneers whether journeying by stagecoach, covered wagon, or mule train, stopped along the way to rest and relax in places such as Waynesville's Stagecoach Depot and Tavern. The two-story hotel/tavern, built in 1850, has remained virtually unchanged since then. White wood siding now hides the original frame of the hand-hewn logs, but the wooden rafters and beams are still clearly visible within. Fireplaces stand at each end of the first story, and from its Veranda an outside chair leads to the porch and sleeping rooms above. It was in these rooms that injured Union soldiers were treated when those forces commanded the building for a hospital in 1862.

At the war's end the hotel reopened and remained in operation for close to a century. Although the old depot is showing its weather beaten years, it hasn't beyond repair. Recently, members of the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation created under the auspices of the Community Betterment Council, have started efforts to restore the stagecoach stop. In its day, the California House was used as a stagecoach stop on the "Old Wire Road," a halfway house from Richland to Waynesville, and a tavern serving hot meals to weary travelers heading west. It was built in the 1850's during the California Gold Rush, and such as the gold miners was used for pay construction. Although the exterior of the building has changed considerably through the years, the old log walls placed there in the 18th century are still behind the modern facade. The interior reveals wide door jams of original wood, and a staircase leading to the second floor has remained unaltered.

The California House was once the site of a small carbarnish. Although the (Continued On Page 5)
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Pippin Place now sits in quiet dignity in a thicket of tall clover and the pine trees that grew at the time when it was filled with the bustle and laughter of people. Those were the days when it was a private home and the guest rooms were used as a resort, one of the first in the Ozarks.

The house was built by Bland N. Pippin, who bought the 40-acre tract of land from his Uncle Sol Bartlett, a pioneer domesticated in this area and soon considered to be a community and one of the first shipping points in the county, serving Wayneville, Iberia, Brumley, and Hawkeye.

The shipments consisted chiefly of poultry, eggs, furs, hides, and wild game. The depot which is a Crocker way is now used for storage.

The present Pulaski County Courthouse is the same as that built at the junction of the county since its organization in 1818. Built in 1903 in Romanesque Revival style, this structure was submitted to the National Register of Historical Places.

The first courthouse was built in 1860 on a tract of land donated by William Thomas. The first county judge was appointed by a stake drive done in sinner of said lot. Construction workers camped out for two weeks to complete the two story house that held a single glass window and office space for the judges and clerks.

In 1863, Wayneville was involved in the Federal Army due to the Civil War, but after the war, the county was divided in their allegiance, but they still held on to their Confedera- tion.

On June 7, 1862, Colonel Franz Sigel and his Union troops, who took over the courthouse and the old stagecoach line, built a road to house their wounded. Almost immediately, the courthouse was used to work on a Fort south of town to hold off any advancing Confederates. The ruins of that fort are still visible within the last 25 years. At the war's end, the soldiers left, and Pulaski County began putting itself back together. Almost demolished by the soldiers, the windows were torn out and new ones were added and some buildings were restored.

Flowers with the Lake of the Ozarks Commission of Local Government, this is an example of the courthouse. Circuit Court Judge Elijah Perry entered a $7,500 bond which put the building back on its foundation and made it safe as a place for holding court.

The Pippin Place and the General Assembly of the State of Missouri paid for the destruction of the courthouse. The money was used for building a new courthouse on the public square in town.

In 1853, Pulaski County courthouse was located in Wayneville. But that third Pulaski County courthouse court met on the lawn in the town of Wayneville.

The June 14, 1903 issue of the pulaski County Courthouse, home page in the local interest in moving the County seat to Richland after the following week. Just as it was sometimes reported that all of this was idle talk, but it didn't even want the County seat.

At the first session following the fire, the county court met on the lawn of the square in Wayneville to consider the matter. Present at that session was an architect, H.H. Hoppesil. When the subject was raised, the court was that the "sawdust is worthless and unfit for repair and that sawdust and wood were repaired." Based on that report, the county court Judges Berry, Curtis, and Miller drew up a contract to build a new brick courthouse. The new courthouse, fourth for Pulaski County, was completed that June. When the county began operation in its new red brick building, it became a matter of pride for the county to be opened to the public. The building would remain open at all times to any religious sects, as long as they believed in the "Doctrines of the Holy Scriptures."

The building has remained virtually unaltered during its years, but the ceiling has been added and some ceilings were dropped to accommodate new central heating but the original wood frames, trim and baseboards remain.

The Pulaski County Historical Society won the battle against the English Oak ceiling of the courtroom upstairs when the ceiling was cold and the room was not heated. This look at Pulaski County history is reprinted by permission of the Pulaski County Historical Society.

Pulaski County Organizes; Wayneville is County Seat

TWO ANNUAL OLD SETTLERS DAY PICNIC, JULY 23, 1983.

COMMUNITY BETTERMENT COUNCIL

10 A.M. Settler’s Day Picnic begins, opening statement by General Charles J. Fiala, Representative Jim Mitchell and Mayor George Wheeler. Gun salute by the Kickapoo Trace Muzzle Loaders; Signal gun by the Kickapoo Trace Muzzle Loaders; Sing up for horseback riding in the horseback pit.

11 A.M. Revival by the Fort Leonard Wood Chaplains; Demonstration of crime dogs by Wayneville Police and Military Police; Horseback pitching contest begins.

12 NOON Costume judging contest. Creative circle will hold a drawing.

1 P.M. — Sack races for the children; Revival by the Fort Leonard Wood Chaplains.

2 P.M. — Dog demonstrations by Wayneville Police and Military Police.

3 P.M. — Revival by the Fort Leonard Wood Chaplains; Sing up for horseback riding in the horseback pit.

3:30 P.M. — Sink Creek Bluegrass Music.

5 P.M. — Flying Fez is giving away a vacuum; Revival by Fort Wood Chaplains.

6 P.M. — Creative circle give away.

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