

# The 'Portuguese' of Portuguese Point

By Gary Knehans

Several Pulaski County place names can be traced back to prominent pioneer families and to names of French origin, such as Gasconade and Roubidoux. One, however, seems puzzling. Why was Portuguese Point so named? As far as can be determined, none of the early settlers of the area came from Portugal. Nor would the early French explorers have tolerated any other nationals in their territory.

One answer is suggested by the history of John Anderson Smith, who brought his wife, Mary Harmon, and their five children to Missouri in a Conestoga wagon from Kentucky in 1858. The family first settled near Nebo in present day Laclede County. But, after a short duration, the Smiths pulled up roots and resettled in a rich valley along the Gasconade River in Pulaski County south of Dixon. Overlooking this beautiful vista from the east is an area of rugged, steeply rising cliffs, which nowadays is called Portuguese Point.

Smith was of native American ancestry, being one-quarter Cherokee through his mother. In those days, such heritage was kept a closely guarded secret. And so, because he and his children had

some Cherokee features, Smith told everyone who inquired that he was Portuguese. That deception apparently worked, as few if any of the county's other early pioneers had ever seen anyone of this nationality.

Smith served in the Confederate army under Burbridge and Mitchell. Sometime after retiring from the battlefield, he and a helper were ambushed by bushwackers, who made off with the stolen cargo. The companion escaped into the woods, but the attackers seized Smith, hanged him from a nearby tree, and left him for dead. Fortunately the bushwackers left quickly and the swinging man's partner rushed out of hiding and cut Smith down in the nick of time.

Bushwackers also are said to have torched John and Mary's home during a looting foray. The woman repeatedly tried to retrieve some fine goosedown pillows from the fire. But every time she carried the pillows or other items out of the house, the raiders tossed them back into the fire.

In addition to five children of their own—Winchester, Emily Jane, Polly Ann, James Harvey, and Rebecca Ellen—the Smiths raised nine grandchildren after the death of parents and gave a home to a



JOHN ANDERSON SMITH at 110 Years of age. Courtesy of Benita Jones, a great, great granddaughter.

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nephew and his two children.

John and this extended family farmed the rich bottomland of the 'Bend' much of his life. The Gasconade forms a sharp bend in its flow at this point, prompting some people to call Smith the "King of the Bend." He enjoyed good mind and body up to the end, dying of dropsy on August 30th, 1922, at his son's home near Sheppard Church on highway 28 south of Dixon. He was buried in nearby Sheppard cemetery.

The old man's published obituary listed his age as 110 years, 5 months, and 29 days. Family members, however, say he was 116 years old when he died.

"Uncle John" once told a reporter that he didn't recall his date of birth, but recalled having "voted twice for Henry Clay; once when he was running against Polk and Dallas."

"I don't know who ran against him the other time," he admitted. "I wasn't quite 21 the first time—my birthday was in February—but they

let me vote anyway."

The reporter described the centenarian as "a big craggy six-footer, with the shoulders of a blacksmith and a boom in his voice that carries like a bleating horse."

And the columnist said "Uncle John" had a swarthy complexion with smooth skin and an unusually formed nose.

"He is very brown and his face shows less wrinkles than that of many a man of fifty," he added. "This detail is particularly noticeable on the back of his neck and on the backs of his hands and fingers. He fills out the old Ozark summary, 'Round as a log and much of a man.'"

The reporter said Smith still had five of his front teeth and was sound of sight and hearing.

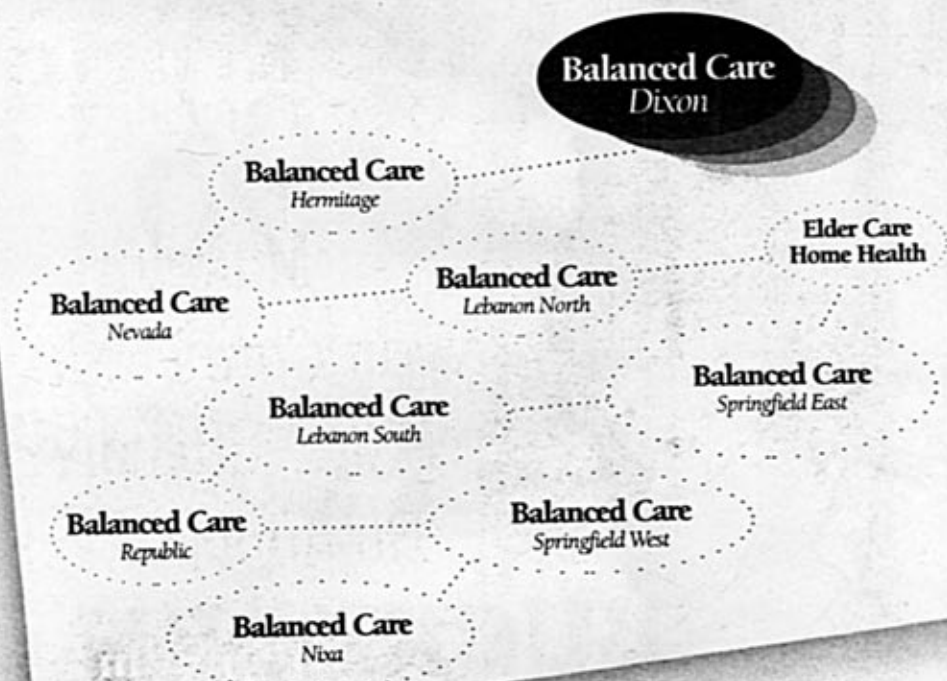
Smith's longevity came naturally, as his maternal grandfather lived to a ripe old age of 110 and his paternal grandfather lived 105 years. When asked for his prescription to a long life, the oldtimer replied with a chuckle, "Don't die."



SOPHIA PREWETT, a granddaughter of John Anderson Smith, inheriting the family trait of longevity, lived past her 100th birthday. Courtesy of Joyce Jennings, one of Sophia's granddaughters.

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