



# SQUIRE JOHN FERGUSON

## IBERIA'S GRAND OLD GENTLEMAN

By Peggy Smith Hake

Squire John Ferguson was one of the most colorful figures in Iberia's past history. He lived to the advanced age of 101 years and was a noted and respected citizen of the Iberia community.

John Ferguson was born on Christmas Day in 1838 in the small village of Dumfries, Scotland. As a young boy, age 8, he started working as an apprentice to a local village shoemaker. He did not enjoy this type of work at all.

So, he quit and became an apprentice to a painter. He worked as the painter's apprentice learning this skillful trade for the next few years until he reached the age of fourteen years. When he was six years old, he began his schooling. These Scottish children were taught from the Bible and hardly anything else. At that time in history, the churches and the schools of Scotland were under the control of the government.

When John was fourteen years old, his father decided to bring his family to America. They left Dumfries in 1852, going overland to Liverpool, England, and departing from Liverpool in September 1852. William Ferguson and his wife, Isabella Hunter Ferguson, their son John and daughters Martha and Elizabeth began their long sea journey across the Atlantic.

Unfortunately, John's father did not live to see the shores of his new homeland in America. He died on board ship and was buried with the usual procedure at sea. He was sewn in a canvas bag with a large piece of lead at his feet, lowered over the side of the ship and, after a brief funeral service, was lowered into his watery grave.

Two other emigrants died on the same ocean voyage before the ship harbored in New Orleans in October 1852. The name of the ship in which the family made their journey across the Atlantic was "Colonel Cutts."

Isabella Hunter Ferguson and her three children did not stay in New Orleans very long. They boarded a boat called "The Sovereign of Pittsburg" and went up the Mississippi River, arriving in St. Louis the latter part of October 1852. Isabella had a sister and brother-in-law, the William Dunlaps, living in St. Louis. So, she



IBERIA, MO., Looking West.

Old postcard view of Iberia. Courtesy of Sue Hansen.

and her children went to the home of the Dunlaps and lived with them for awhile.

William Dunlap was a Mississippi River boatman, and he hired John to work for him on the river. Ferguson worked there for about nine years until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

John Ferguson experienced some exciting times on the Mississippi, and was a great storyteller. Several incidents happened in his young life that would make a great plot for an adventure story. During the Civil War, he was a witness to most of the Camp Jackson skirmish, which took place near St. Louis. He said one time in an interview, "If it had not been for the loyal German regiments, I believe St. Louis would have been captured by General Jackson and his Confederate forces."

John Ferguson drifted into Miller County in September 1861, but first stopped in Maries County, where he had relatives living. I believe they were some of his mother's Hunter kinsfolk. He moved westward to Miller County and began working on a farm about six miles west of Iberia. In June 1862, John married Dorcas Canzada Shelton, daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Shelton, who had come to the Big Richwoods from McMinn County, Tennessee. John and Dorcas were married by Reverend Abraham Castleman, who was a captain of a Confederate troop during the war. In order to get Rev. Castleman to come and marry them, John had to ride ten to twenty miles to get him, and then had to accompany him back

home because Rev. Castleman was afraid of the "bushwhackers" roaming the area, who might be seeking him out.

John's mother, Isabella Hunter Ferguson, came to Miller County prior to 1880. She was living near the Madden community in southern Miller County during the

census taken in 1880, and was listed as a seamstress. A descendant of this family believes Isabella is buried at Madden Cemetery, although no tombstone marks her grave.

During the war, John joined Colonel McClurg's Osage Regiment at Linn Creek, Camden County, and later enlisted in regular service in Company M, 3rd Missouri Cavalry Volunteers, where he served with the Union Army until the close of the war. It is interesting to note that his wife's relatives were from the South. Her uncle, William Rankin Wright, was a lieutenant in the Confederate Army in Miller County. This was typical of many families who were torn apart during this terrible time in American history.

Squire John and Dorcas (Shelton) Ferguson were parents of fourteen children, two of them dying in infancy. Those who survived to adulthood were William, Charles, Fred, George, Edward, Jack, Harry, Frank, Laura,



# Bank of Iberia



**Community Owned**  
**To Serve Our Community**  
**"ANYTIME MONEY"**

**24 HOUR ATM**

**DRIVE-UP HOURS**

8:30 AM - 5:30 Monday - Thursday

8:30 - 6:00 Friday

**LOBBY HOURS**

8:30 - 3:00 Monday - Friday

8:30 - 12:00 Saturday

**573-793-2224**

MEMBER F.D.I.C.







Belle, Elizabeth and Martha.

After his discharge in New Orleans in 1865, Squire John and his family made Miller County their permanent home. Over the next

74 years, John was a prominent man in the Iberia area. For many years, he was post commander of Miles Carroll Post 111 of the Grand Army of the Republic in Iberia. He was instrumental in keeping the post in active service. He very seldom ever missed one of the encampments, both state and national, and over the years he filled most all stations in that highly honored organization. On May 16, 1928, he was elected Department Commander of the G.A.R for the State of Missouri at its 47th annual encampment held in Springfield. John was active in the religious,

political and public affairs of Miller County, and was a justice of the peace at Iberia for over fifty years.

In 1940, Iberia lost one of her most remarkable and unforgettable citizens, Captain John Ferguson, who was also called 'Squire.' He had reached his 101st year. There are many folks today who remember him so vividly and can still reminiscence of those long ago days when he could be seen on the streets of Iberia with his snow-white hair and long white beard much like a patriarch of old. There are many descendants of Squire John

Ferguson who still live in central Missouri in the counties of Miller, Pulaski and Camden, as well as those who have moved all over America.

Peggy Smith Hake has published an historical and genealogical newsletter about the Miller County area for over fifteen years. The newsletter, *Seeking 'N Searching Ancestors*, is published six months a year. Those interested in receiving it should send a membership due of \$9 annually to Peggy Smith Hake, 270 Brushy Creek Road, St. Elizabeth, MO 65075.

## WAY IT WUZ IN MILLER COUNTY

Ben Roark was a spry 90-year-old Miller County historical figure when interviewed by a St. Louis newspaper reporter in 1925. Born in Kentucky, "Uncle Ben" came to Missouri with his parents when he was 4 years old. Settling first in Cole County, the Roarks moved southward some six years later to the Eldon vicinity in newly formed Miller County.

"When I came here, there

nothing but prairie and timber with mighty few houses, and here and there a store. But for the most part, we had to walk thirty or forty miles whenever we wanted to provision up.

"I remember one day I was along the trail to Jefferson City and I saw a deer standing about seventy-five yards away. I hauled up my old gun to shoot him and

many toddies as he could hold. Fighting was the natural result, and I guess in many cases men traveled fifty miles to vote and became so engrossed in upholding the dignity of dear old Kentucky or Tennessee that they forgot to vote. We had no ballots in those days. (We) merely told the clerks and the judges what our preferences were. I don't remember that a vote was ever

challenged.

"Pretty soon the railroads came through and various towns sprang up. Tuscumbia in the old days was a mighty lively little town. The Osage River was used then for shipping, but when the railroads came, Eldon became an important commercial center, and I have seen it grow from nothing to a city of more than three thousand inhabitants."



was little else but tall grass and timber," he told a *St. Louis Globe Democrat* reporter who came to visit him in Eldon. "I have picked wild grapes and melons where the main street of Eldon now runs. I have shot deer down the slough through which that Missouri Pacific train is now passing.

"Yep, come to think of it, I guess I have had some experiences. I have hunted and fished all over this Ozark country. I've fought the Indians and traded with them. I've been chased by wolves that wanted to tear me to pieces. I have felt the pinch of hunger and know what the tribulations of the early settlers of the territory were. I walked a hundred miles through the forest to Westport Landing, four miles south of Kansas City, and signed up to drive an oxcart over the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico. I did it, too.

"Those were happy days at that. Of course, there were few villages in those days. There was

durned if the hammer wasn't busted off and I had no way to fire the cap. I wanted that deer, so I whipped out my hunting knife and held it up against the cap and struck it with a flint. I got a spark all right and the ball sped true into the deer's heart. That was some shooting and, what's more, I can prove it.

"(Election day was) just an excuse for some good old-fashioned fights. Miller County, you see, was settled almost exclusively by Kentuckians, Virginians and Tennesseans. Each man was fervently loyal to his state; and, if a Kentuckian got into a row with a Virginian, it simply meant that all the Kentuckians would line up and fight it out with the Virginians. And so it was when any of them mixed. The fights started early. Long before the balloting started, a keg of whisky and a sack of sugar were set on a box under a shade tree and every man was permitted to mix as



Postoffice workers displaying sacks of mail in front of the Iberia Postoffice. Courtesy of Sue Hansen.