

THE LORE OF THE SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OZARKS

CLARENCE BONNELL, HARRISBURG TOWNSHIP HIGH
SCHOOL, HARRISBURG, ILLINOIS.

Almost every natural geographical division of every state has some of its history recorded in song or story. With the exception of Dickens' rather uncomplimentary reference to Cairo, and a brief story of the adventurous days of flat boats on the Ohio over a century ago in the story of *Virginia Rose* by E. R. Roe, little or nothing of legend or history concerning the Southern Illinois Ozarks has gotten into literature, either classical or otherwise. This is not for lack of material. The setting is fine and the wealth of story awaits only the imaginative mind.

The mound builders left their story in great monuments of earth in which are embedded earthenware water vessels, images, and trinkets. The Kincaid mounds in the bottom lands of southern Pope county, though scarcely touched except on the surface, have yielded an excellent collection of these. Numerous mounds, large and small, in the vicinity of Shawneetown, abound in pottery of fine design and often of large size. Two water pots found by Mike Robinson, of Shawneetown, but now owned by the Museum of the American Indian in New York, show good design. One holds one-half pint less than fourteen gallons, is fifty-nine inches in circumference and sixteen inches high. The other holds over eight gallons. Fragments of hundreds of others have been found scattered over a wide range, but so distributed as to indicate the vicinity of Shawneetown as near the center of this ancient pottery. One piece owned by Mr. Robinson is the arc of a circle of a vessel four or five feet in diameter at the mouth.

Excavations in Shawneetown reveal an ancient Indian village peopled by men who made a less perfect type of pottery. Skeletons and implements of war occur here and in more elevated places nearby in great profusion. Plumb bobs of hematite ore, as heavy as iron and of perfect proportion, a highly colored earthen-ware whistle, and charm stones of beautiful natural colors are among these. Every

neighborhood in the Illinois Ozarks has its collection of arrowheads, plows, axes, etc. Some of the many in Mr. Robinson's collection are as choice as will be found anywhere. An old gentleman of Shawneetown, who died a few years ago, had learned the art of shaping flints by pressure and had attained to a fair degree of skill in making arrowheads.

It has been suggested that the salt wells on the Saline river near Shawneetown may have been the reason for the centering of man's prehistoric activities here just as they became the Mecca for the early white man. But Indian remains widely distributed point back to other types of Indians. In southern Saline county, we find rock covered graves having stone lined walls.

When the white man came, the Indian population was considerable. Shawneetown gets its name from the Shawnees. Not many tales of Indian adventure are told, for these natives seem to have been given to works of peace, though they were "not too proud to fight," for they once met and defeated an encroaching tribe on a battleground in Williamson county.

The early man left no written record, except one. Magnificent natural features;—cliffs, caverns, natural bridges—none of these inspired him to write, with one exception. Near Ozark, at Gum Springs in Johnson county, the outline of a buffalo was cut and marked on a sandstone cliff. This figure is about one-third natural size. The outline and coloring of the lines resemble those in the supposed Aztec ruins near the petrified forests of Arizona. Mute evidence of a race of builders remains in remnants of the old stone forts—one near Stonefort in Saline county and another north of Makanda. These are protected in front by steep cliffs. On other sides of the semi-circular enclosures, a stone wall ten or twelve feet thick and eight or ten feet high gave protection from foes. Thus the white man found them, only to carry away the sandstone blocks to make chimneys, fire places, and foundations for himself. Today the fragments alone serve to mark the site of the walls. No clew remains to tell who made them or when.

If the grand old lady of stone, whose features stand out fifteen feet high from shoulder to crown looking from a high promontory of the Eagle Cliff fault line in Saline county, could only speak, she could tell wondrous tales of the men who trod the valleys below during the centuries since the mammoth mired in the muck of the Saline valley just beyond the southernmost extension of the glacial drift.

The early white explorers had objectives farther on. The trappers and hunters came and went. Of why and when the French built Fort Massac, little is known. George Rogers Clark came and went on and we think we know his trail. At least we have marked it with monuments.

The Ohio was the natural highway to the south and west and it was easy to go on past the forbidding rocky Ozarks. Yet there were fertile valleys and, in the valley of the Saline near Equality, there were salt wells. Man must have salt, so he came to get it and sometimes to stay. So Equality and Shawneetown date back to a time when Chicago was unthought of, Equality being the industrial center and Shawneetown the fort. All trails and all roads led by the salt wells. Negroes were brought to help in a later day. A bank was established at Shawneetown in 1816 and the building, now used as a residence, still stands.

Robbers and horse thieves came with settlements and industry. The famous cave at Cave in Rock in Hardin county was the scene of many a crime. Flat-boatmen mysteriously disappeared in this vicinity. The famous Ford gang and other gangs of outlaws and thieves were thought to have headquarters here. Following is a quotation from a letter written by Mrs. Kate Reynolds Sears of Whitewright, Texas, in answer to a request from me made a few years ago.

"Wm. McKay Robinson was the grandfather of the writer, her mother, Mary Thomas Robinson, having been his sixth child, and as a small child I have heard my grandmother, Mrs. Wm. M. Robinson, who was Rachel Hampton Thomas, tell the story to my listening ears.

"The uncle for whom my grandfather had been named had been beheaded and an aunt of my grandmother's, Aba-

gal Thomas, who was engaged to be married to Daniel Boone and was on her way at the time to meet and marry him, was taken by the Indians.

"In their desperation my great grandparents, with a friend and helper, bundled together what they could carry in a skiff; she, dear heart, was brave of heart but far from strong, as her infant, my grandfather (their eldest) was about four weeks old at the time; but knowing death was in their midst, yes, very near their home, lurked these savage fiends. After night had wrapt the earth in slumber, they carried their little bundles of clothes, bedding and food to a landing on the river and quietly stole away, to the unknown, but, as they hoped and believed, a place of safety.

"After much care and dodging (for they often felt they heard the paddle of the enemy's oar or a murmur of voices not far away) they landed at what is known as Cave in Rock, Illinois, on the Ohio river near Elizabethtown and after wandering around for a time (which seemed an age to the faint little mother) they espied what seemed to be a wash in a hillside or bank. Upon investigation it proved to be a cave and hearing something nearby they crept into this place not knowing what awaited them as they entered. I do not recall just how long the men remained, but only long enough to make the wife and babe as comfortable as they could under such circumstances and then they left them, promising to return in a few days at most."

Then follows an account of how this woman stayed for weeks in this cave living upon roots and berries, always in fear of discovery. Finally, in desperation, she found a wild turkey quill, tore a leaf from her Bible, wrote with blood a note and pinned it to her skirt which she hung on a bush outside to attract a passing boat. This plan succeeded and she was provided with food, but she refused to leave, so the boatmen left her to await the return of her husband who did not get back for more than two months.

Moonshiners had their stills in secluded places in the pioneer days. Stillhouse Hollow reminds us of those times, and the old stone for grinding the corn lies near. The first settlers were credulous people as are some of their later day

descendants. Lover's leaps, escapes from flood and beast, and unexplored caves with bottomless pits are still subjects of conversation in some sections. Only last week, I found a man who believed that the cave in Eagle Cliff in Saline county had never been explored. I with others have explored and mapped every passage in it, yet once (and only once) when I attempted to refute erroneous statements about this cavern in a local newspaper, I brought down the wrath of an unbeliever, who in his reply said: "We 'over creekers' (country people) are somewhat envious when a party of teachers and professors, who were reared in the city, come to explore, and naturally feel that they expect to accomplish more with their brains than we with experience." This same writer goes on to reiterate his statements that this cavern has bottomless pits and unexplored passages and that it connects with the cave at Cave in Rock, some twenty-five miles away. His attitude illustrates well that of many who cling tenaciously to the traditions of the past. Diggings in the floor of sandstone caves and midnight desecration of old graves point back to the time when treasure was unsafe. Scarcely any tradition has no basis of fact. Much real history otherwise unrecorded can yet be gleaned from the mouth to mouth stories of the older generation still living. A widespread but dim remembrance of the great New Madrid earthquake of 1911-12 still lingers with some of these people. That all of southern Illinois was violently shaken then cannot be questioned. A descendant of a girl named Elizabeth ——— for whom Elizabethtown is said to have been named, tells how the earth was shaken there soon after the party of settlers came. An original record, written by one who had been in Illinois in January, 1912, gives the following vivid picture of conditions at that time. The spelling and punctuation are given verbatim:

Sinsenate State of Ohio

April the 12 - 1812

Dear Brother I now set down to right to you to let you no that I am well hoping that when these lines cum to your view they will find you enjoying the same blessing I will further inform you that I have left the Miss-

isippee through the goodness of God. Altho there is not many of our new England people that were able to do that for they had to stay whether they liked the country or not for the people of this country are so kind that they have given the most part of our Yankies a small piece of groun enough to lay down upon where I left them laying

after I rote before Mr Stevens and myself undertook the bilding of a mill which we were to work uppon when Mr. Stephens dyed after that I continued to carry the work on myself until I was taken sick myself

then I was obliged to quit it & I lay sick myself with the fever & aguer about Eight months in which time I got reduced some so I was so for about four months that I could not tell whether they meant to kill me or not but finding me so tuf they quit the notion and so I got of

I would mention a little of the situation of the Misippee Country at the present time which is very bad ever since the battle that we had with the Indians at the Wabash which I suppose that you have had an account in the newspapers the Indians have bin very troblison They have kild a grate many this spring

But what is much more terrible than the Indians on the sixteenth of December We had a Grate Earth Quake which the Shook the Earth to the senter And Shaking Still continued til I left Kaskaskia which was the twenty first day of Febuary. It has damaged and thrown down almost All the houses down in that county and in many plases the earth has Craked open for a quarter of a mild in length and throwne out vast boddies of sand and water and in several plases there is large tracts of country that is all sunk down and overflowed with water The people are moving out of this country faster than they ever moved into it

As time fails me I must right short I wish you to give my sincere respects to that good old mother of mine and also to all of our family as well as yours. Give respects to my young friend in particular to Zebeus tel them all that I want to see them very much but I cant tell when I shall do it Right to me without fail As soon as you receive this write your letter to Maryette in the State of Ohio for I

think I shal be there in about three weeks and you must not fail of Righting to me for I have not recvd but three letters since I left home and I think you have all forgot me or you would right oftener. Right to me if you have herd anything from my father since I cum away and furthermore let me know if my wife is married or not & so I must conclud by stiling myself
your Brother &c

A. DILLINGHAM.

Stories come to me of an "Underground Railroad" station about four miles southeast of Equality in Gallatin county. Upon a hilltop, stands a large two story frame house conspicuous for its many large windows. It is a plain rectangular block of a house, with a well pitched roof having a deck something like twelve feet wide running the entire length. Just under the edge of the deck there are windows corresponding to the ventilators of a railway car. The gables have large windows. The attic is said to have been reached by a narrow stairway. Along each side of the attic hall just under the sloping part of the roof there are bunks arranged, bunks just as the beds are situated in a Pullman car. One man relates that apparatus resembling stocks were seen in the rubbish of this attic. The story is that it was built between 1838 and 1844 and was owned by Johnny Crenshaw. Some metal ornaments on the house are said to have come from England. Instead of this being an "underground" station for escaping slaves, so the story goes, this one was once used by a band operating as the automobile thieves of today. A free negro or one escaping by flight, if found by this gang, was overpowered and conveyed by night under guard from farther north to this station. Another night journey took him to and across the Ohio river where his word was not accepted in court and where undisputed possession was evidence of ownership.

The price that negroes brought in those days was great enough to justify the risk taken by the captors. Some who have owned this house and lived in it tell this story as true. Others who were children in that day and lived only a few miles away claim no knowledge of such use of the property.

This is explained on the ground that great secrecy was maintained by the owners. True or untrue, here is a story to stir the imagination.

The magic change from water mill and spinning wheel to the modern hum of motors and the busy life in coal and spar mine, all coming within a generation, has so woven the realities of the present with the uncertainties of the past that the poet or writer of fiction could create a classic from the setting afforded by the facts and hearsay, recorded and unrecorded, in Southern Illinois.