

EARLY CHRISTIAN COUNTY MINING

By Wayne Glenn, 2009

After finishing a book on Christian County's first 150 years, this author decided to look into an element of the county's history that I had become aware of when doing research for that book.

I had seen a few references to the county's mining past, but I had no idea how significant the search for gold, lead, iron ore, coal, zinc, copper, etc. were in helping settle the southeast quarter of Christian County.

Having time for additional research, I quickly came upon many 19th century references to mining in future Christian County (before 1859) and even more detailed information about local mining after the county was established. It is even likely that the search for minerals played a role in the movement to create Christian County from already existing counties.

In my book on Christian County's 150 year history, we recited passages from geologist Henry Schoolcraft's monumental writings on his 1818-1819 trip to future Christian County and its surrounding territory. In reality, American-born Schoolcraft (1793-1864) came to southwest Missouri Territory to learn about its mineral potential. While Schoolcraft took a wide-angle look at everything he saw, his area of greatest concern was the existence and volume of minerals in the area. He wrote of his first hand observation of primitive mining and smelting that had been done by the Osage Indians in future Christian and Greene Counties. He stated in a book he wrote on Missouri mines that he believed valuable lead mines were about 20 miles above the junction of the "Findley River" (Finley Creek) and the larger James River. Schoolcraft believed the Osage Indians had been "procuring lead for bullets at that place." He also observed the evidence of zinc in the region.

Schoolcraft's writings had a noted effect on future explorers and pioneers who would be considering various options as they prepared to move westward looking for treasure. His books tended to encourage readers about the possibilities of finding riches in minerals in the southwest part of Missouri Territory. Henry Schoolcraft did not emphasize many positive attributes about the soil and farm potential of what one day would become Christian County. As a result, few, if any, future farmers would come to this area based on the writings of Schoolcraft.

When Schoolcraft visited southwest Missouri, the Delaware Indians were in the process of being moved to their new village headquarters on the James River (west of future Nixa) at a site to be known as Delaware Town. This event scared most potential white settlers away from the entire area, and very few whites came on a permanent basis until after the Delawares were moved further westward into Kansas in 1830-1831. And while whites did start entering the districts of future Christian County after 1830, Osage Indian hunting parties migrated annually back into their old home grounds along the James, Finley, and Flat streams until finally being forced out by a state enforced Missouri Militia

in the winter of 1836-1837. Springfield attorney Charles Yancey, Chesley Cannefax, and Captain Henry Fulbright led the militia in ridding the area of the Osages.

Most of the first white settlers of Greene and Christian Counties would be pioneer stock from places like Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and the Carolinas who were looking for good farm land and found it along the river bottoms of the James and Finley streams. Once the top quality land was spoken for and homesteaded the adjacent rocky hillsides and flat prairies were left to be settled later and last. While the flat prairies of future Christian County often provided rich top soil, there was often little or no fresh water for the pioneers' families and their livestock on that flat land. So the rough and rocky hillsides alongside Swan, Bull, and Bear Creeks became more attractive to folks because they could be guaranteed fresh running water, an abundance of timber for dwellings and out buildings, and loads of wild game. Still, few farmers coming westward to southwest Missouri would be satisfied with poor land, if they could find a way to obtain better soil. Historically, most of the first settlers in the often rough and poor soil districts of the southeast quarter of future Christian County were lured to the area for one primary reason----the promise of mineral wealth!

While a few families settled in the southeast quarter of future Christian County before 1850, the larger population expansion occurred shortly after the California gold rush of 1849. Those first families had naturally homesteaded the best land along Swan and Bull Creeks. Most of the next push of frontiersmen and their families came as a result of the published rumors of valuable minerals hidden in these Ozarks' hills!

The first mines dug by white men in future Christian County were likely the Rassieur Mines which were started in 1850 near Swan Creek in an area that would later be known as Minersville---just west of the future store and post office at Keltner, Missouri. In 1850, this area was in Taney County. The general area was about 25 miles southeast of Springfield, Missouri and 12 miles southeast of Ozark.

In an 1890 article Drury college geologist—scientist Doctor Edward Shepard wrote that the first “modern” mine shaft in future Christian County was dug by David Porter who went 20 feet and stopped!

Who was David Porter? Census information tells us he was born in Kentucky around 1822. He was living near future Sparta by the time of the 1850 census when he likely began a search for valuable mineral resources. By walking the creeks and observing washed out ledges and bluffs, he pinpointed spots that he believed might hold large lead deposits, and he started digging. Surely, he also gambled that (maybe---just maybe) there would be something even more valuable like gold or silver! In 1853, he legally became a third partner in a new local mining venture started by two other Greene County promoters and investors named Calvin D. Bray (B. 1814, NC.-1881) and William C. Price (B. 1816, VA.-1901). (NOTE: more on these other two partners later.)

In partnership with Bray and Price, in 1856, David Porter seems to have turned over the tough personal digging of shafts to James McFadden, who had been born in Kentucky

around 1804. McFadden and Porter were brothers-in-law. Meanwhile, Porter went on to homestead land just west of future Oldfield, Missouri on Bull Creek in Sec. 6; Twn. 26; R. 19. After purchasing said land, Porter and his majority partners Bray and Price built the first smelter in Taney or Christian County on that land on Bull Creek (on land now owned by Carol Todd in 2009).

The building of this smelter and the digging of 30 shafts three miles to the southeast of the smelter was widely reported by newspapers all over the nation. By 1857, these mines were generally identified as the “Bray Mines”. In 2009 many of those mines and their shafts remain visible just off Bray Mine road to the southeast of Oldfield, off “T” Highway.

In 1858, David Porter married a local girl from the Hopedale community (north of Ozark) named Mary Walker. Mary was born around 1838 in Tennessee to Addison H. Walker and his wife Jane Walker who were both natives of Tennessee. The Walkers had arrived in the area around 1845, when they homesteaded land east of Hopedale.

James McFadden worked the Bray Mines for a while, digging the main Bray Mine shaft to 30 feet below ground level. Then in 1859, McFadden bought his own land in Sections 1 and 2; Twn. 26; R. 19. near future Keltner on Nance Hollow.

Meanwhile, land promoters were placing interesting stories about the Swan Creek mines in major newspapers. On February 13, 1857 the Springfield Advertiser reported, “C.D. Bray in reference to the new mines on the head of Swan, in Taney County, is gratified to be able to announce that these mines promise a rich yield. We learn from Mr. Bray that they have struck a solid bed of mineral, about 70 feet below the surface, which appears to be inexhaustible. It is said 10,000 pounds can be taken out in one day from a single shaft. These mines are no humbug.”

The Springfield Tribune published a long piece on Taney County in its December 4, 1857 issue including this reference, “This County is conceded to be one of the richest in the state in mineral resources. Lead ore is found there in abundant quantities. In every instance where the miner has sunk his shaft, he has found the mineral. Mr. Bray is working his mine successfully. He is raising a large amount of mineral and with but very few hands. Capital is all that is now wanted to develop the richest lead diggings in the United States. Taney County will be a paradise to the miner.”

On June 22, 1858 the St. Louis Herald wrote that a gentleman from Taney County had spread the word, “that gold in large quantities has been discovered in that county. He informs us that one man found a thirty pound lump. We expressed a doubt of this latter statement, but he assured us that is correct.”

Major “hype” was taking place in this era which led to many men and sometimes their families moving to Christian County to be in on a “find” that would make them rich like the “49ers” out in California.

Mr. George Swallow, the official geologist for the State of Missouri reported in 1858 that future Christian County had 14 different mining sites, with five mines actually being worked for lead. Swallow, who was considered a very reputable source, wrote that 200 tons of ores were mined in the 1850s, in this district, with 140 tons of metal.

Virtually all the mining being done in this 1850s era was in future Christian County on land that was then in Greene and Taney Counties. This fact likely played a hand in the eventual formation of the new county in 1859. As early as January 1854 the Springfield Advertiser newspaper had urged the formation of a new county with land to be taken from Greene and Taney Counties.

Who were the two partners of David Porter in those first mines just east and south of future Oldfield, Missouri?

His primary partner was his neighbor Calvin D. Bray who lived next to Porter at the time of the 1850 census. Bray was a native of Chatham County, North Carolina. He had first wed Mahala Tyson Womble in 1835 in Chatham County. In 1842 he secondly married Harriet Primrose Avent (1821-1888). An energetic gentleman, Bray was a freight hauler through the Cumberland Gap between Virginia and Tennessee before moving to then Greene County, Missouri in 1844 with many of his Bray family. The Brays settled all around future Sparta, but particularly just to the west of the future village. Here, blacksmith Calvin Bray was noted as a singing master who was an early member of the Prospect Baptist Church. Calvin Bray was also a proud Democrat who owned slaves (as did most of his family) and was outspoken in his intentions on keeping those slaves. The Brays came to this new developing land with other North Carolina families such as the Wisners, Vaughans, Marleys, Clapps and McDaniels. All of those clans were related to each other through numerous marriages.

William Cecil Price was the third member of the original 1853 mining partnership that also included Bray and Porter. Price was born in Russell County, Virginia and came to Greene County, Missouri with his father and relation in 1836, when he was 20 years old. Also from a wealthy pro-slave family, Price went back east to Knoxville College in Tennessee for his higher education which led to a formal and rare (for that day) law degree. In his 20's, Price returned to Springfield where he worked in a store and "read law." In 1840 Price was appointed a deputy sheriff for Greene County. As a deputy Price likely served under Sheriff Thomas Neaves who was a Greene County sheriff in the mid 1840s. It would be Neaves who was influenced by his wife to "push" for the formation of what became Christian County.

In 1847, William Price was elected a Greene County probate judge. Moving to greater power and prestige, Price was elected a Missouri State Senator in 1854, serving in that capacity until 1857 when he became a circuit court judge. After James Buchanan became President of the United States, Mr. Buchanan appointed Judge Price to the high position of United States Treasurer!

So while David Porter and James McFadden provided the elbow grease and management of the expanding mines between future Oldfield and Keltner, Calvin Bray and William Price used their considerable political powers and money to promote the so-called “Bray Mines”, hoping to force the values of future Christian County land up! It should be noted that both Bray and Price owned hundreds of acres of land in future Christian County in the years right before the coming of the Civil War. Price, in particular, had bought land near future Billings. It is highly likely that Price would have been in a position to know that a major railroad would soon be coming through the west end of what is now Christian County. Such a railroad would raise the values of land in that thinly populated area dramatically.

But the start of the Civil War, about a year after Christian County was actually established, destroyed the plans of Bray, Price, and Porter. All three became members of the Confederacy. Bray was a Confederate Captain, while fanatic Price began his military career as a private serving under his close cousin Sterling Price. William Price was captured at the Battle of Pea Ridge and imprisoned at Alton, Illinois. After being released from prison by the Union forces Price resigned the military and moved his family to the friendly confines of Batesville, Arkansas where he farmed until the war had ended. Price then moved to St. Louis where he practiced law until returning to Springfield more than a decade after the close of the Civil War.

During the Civil War, the Bray Mines were nearly shutdown, although the sympathetic owners encouraged Confederate soldiers to get whatever lead they could from the mines, so that they could be molded into bullets to shoot at the “Yankees!”

By the end of the war, David Porter had died forcing his widow to eventually sell his interest in the Bray, Price, and Porter Mining concern to Ozark, Missouri attorney James R. Vaughan (who would have been a likely cousin of Calvin Bray) in 1877. Shortly after buying the land Vaughan and wife Barbara Weaver moved to Springfield where Vaughan became a noted area judge.

Defeated and disgraced, Calvin Bray moved his large family away from Christian County as soon as the war ended in 1865, although one of his grown daughters Emilette Mahala Bray (1837-1911) stayed in the county, where she was married to Linden, Missouri’s Doctor William Allred, Joseph Wrightsman, and William Roberts through her long life. Calvin and family moved to Lafayette County, Missouri; but he did not sell off all of his land back in Christian County immediately.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that he still believed in his Christian County mines’ future. Bray’s only reason for not continuing to dig on his land near Swan Creek was the lack of capital!! He had gone from being a man of considerable wealth to a fellow having to start “life’s race” all over again. Nine years after the conclusion of the Great War, Bray sought to generate some capital for more Christian County mine work by forming “The Bray Mining and Smelting Company of Christian County” which was incorporated in Jefferson City on May 20, 1874 with supposed capital of \$100,000!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This maneuver must have been on paper only for little mining would

ever take place again at Bray's old sites near Swan Creek----at least with Bray in charge. It is true that in 1876 Bray signed agreement papers with a Doctor Garland Hart of St. Louis whereby Bray would pay Doctor Hart \$1.00 for the right to mine his old Bray Mines with no boss but Bray himself.

You see, Bray's old partner, lawyer William Cecil Price (who was now practicing law in St. Louis) had sold his interest in the Bray Mines to Dr. Hart for \$1,000 in 1876 (which included 400 acres of land that Price owned in Christian County).

So David Porter was dead, William Cecil Price has sold his interest in the mines, and Calvin Bray is living in Lafayette County with no money to continue work on his dream. On August 20, 1876 Calvin Bray, for \$1.00 relinquished all his rights to "a certain mining lease unto Miles Day, his heirs and assigns." The said lease was on the old Bray Mines site in Sec. 9; Township 26; R. 19.

Were these 1876 transactions and events the end of the mining fever in eastern Christian County? Certainly not, there were many more men prepared to "stake" their claim on land in the southeast districts of the county!!

James O. Jones was employed by Calvin Bray as a miner when the Civil War began in 1861 and when the war ended Jones returned to the Bray mines to renew a prospective dig that he had started in the spring of 1861. Jones had been born in Tennessee around 1837. He was in northern Taney County by 1857 for in that year he homesteaded land on Swan Creek near the future site of Keltner. By 1860 he was married to Elizabeth (maiden name unknown) and they had one son named Oliver Jones. Jones was one of the few permanent residents of the area who considered himself a full-time miner, for in 1870, he told the census taker that his occupation was that of a miner. From 1870 into 1874, James O. Jones was the postmaster at Minersville which was a store site just west of future Keltner where Jones was doing most of his prospecting. When the diggings did not go well there, Jones and family moved further south on Swan Creek to an area that he named Swansville in Marion Township. Jones sold lots in this new village to folks like William D. Brewer and Hiram Teal of Douglas County in 1872, but the town never "took off" and no major mine finds were discovered in that district. Briefly in 1884, James O. Jones was the postmaster at Garrison. In 1889, Elizabeth Jones died and was buried at Old Boston Cemetery beside their son Oliver Jones who had passed away in 1876, in his teens. The date of Mr. Jones' passing has not been documented.

Newspaper publicity for the area continued unabated no matter how far from reality the news reports were. The July 24, 1867 Jefferson City Peoples Tribune printed that the "Springfield Leader has received specimens of lead ore from Messrs. Root, Thomas, and Company, the proprietors of extensive lead tracts on Swan Creek, in Christian County, some 25 miles south of Springfield. This firm works some thirty hands, and take out about 20,000 pounds of lead a month."

While historically the Bray Mines were early and interesting in Christian County's development, the really important mineral strikes took place well to the west of Swan

Creek around Elk Valley just a little more than a mile south of downtown Ozark! The first man to discover lead in that territory was Terrill Duncan who homesteaded a farm southwest of Ozark and northwest of future Selmore in or on little Elk Valley in 1859. Like Calvin Bray, Duncan was a native of North Carolina and may have been related to the Bray clan.

In the era before the Civil War this Elk Valley district was not mined much but on February 12, 1869 a “rich discovery was made” which quickly developed into the “Weaver or Valley Mines.” Lead “holes” were dug with success all around the Elk Valley district from near where it empties into Finley Creek just above Riverdale back east toward Ozark and the Prospect Baptist Church. The really hearty find was in Sec. 35: Twp. 27; Range 21 which was the first full section of land straight south of the Ozark square and the town’s city limits! Those major mines to the south and southeast of Ozark were labeled the “Alma Mines.” From the early 1870s forward, the Alma Mines district provided jobs for as many as 300 hearty men.

One of those men who came to the Ozarks to work in the Alma lead and zinc mines was Zack Johnson (born in Indiana in 1851) who arrived as the Alma boom roared forward in 1873. Young Zack liked the area and stayed to raise a family even when the mining craze subsided. A tough fellow with a firm work ethic, Johnson was well known enough to be elected Christian County’s sheriff in 1885. It was Johnson who would have the duty of hanging his three bald knobber friends on the Ozark square in 1889.

A large smelter was installed and eventually the Ozark Mining Company was formed with Thomas Robertson as president and John C. Rogers as secretary. Both Robertson and Rogers were prominent young Ozark, Missouri businessmen who had money to invest in such endeavors in those days. Each man made himself available to local and regional newspapers to sing the praises of these mines which were sure to bring wealth to many? Each man was also involved in the selling of local real estate, which would go up in value when more mineral strikes were made.

Things were going so well in the Alma Mines territory that in 1877 a village was created and incorporated at that site, as “Alma.”

Some of the other mines that were operating in Christian County from the 1870s forward included: the Burkhart Mines (opened 1872); the Elk Valley diggings (owned by L. C. Lee); the Lang Mine (discovered in 1879 by John McGuire); the Miller diggings (discovered in 1878 and operated by W. H. Miller); the Finley Creek Mines (northeast of Ozark operated by Thomas McClellan); the Harper’s Mine (discovered in 1873, just east of Petelo); Hornbeak diggings (which included the Purdom mines which had been discovered in 1854 near Bruner); the Haver diggings (discovered in the 1850s); Boaz Mines near Keltner (discovered in 1853 by E. Melton and James McFadden, who is noted earlier in this article); the Turkey Creek Mines (east of Chadwick) which included the Isaac Adams diggings, the Roberts diggings, and the Barber Creek diggings); and the Armstrong diggings (on Bull Creek near Bulls Mill).

But the Alma Mines were the biggest source for lead ever in the history of the mining business in Christian County, for Thomas Robertson reported to Drury Professor Shepard that as of 1894 the Alma Mines had yielded 2000 tons of lead.

The large number of mines around Ozark, Sparta, Swan Creek, and future Oldfield and Chadwick played a hand in the coming of railroad service to that area in the early 1880s. The village of Reno, south of future Spokane, was indirectly created as a result of the mining and treasure hunt craze that was so prevalent in southwest Missouri in the 1870s and 1880s. An article in the Jefferson City People's Tribune for June 8, 1881 explained the treasure hunt tie in.

It seemed that "early in July last (1880) a party of explorers came upon what appeared to be the remains of an old mining claim in the shape of an irregular ridge of earth and stone, nearly five feet high and extending for twenty feet along one of the northern spurs of the Ozark range of mountains. After digging away the earth and stone for some distance, they perceived the entrance to a small cave which had been closed up with earth. This they cleared away, and were surprised to find water gushing forth in a large stream from a spring situated about five feet from the mouth of the cave. Near the spring was found a stone on which was cut: t Francis Reno, 1764 t.

The discovery was soon brought to the notice of Dr. Patton, an old resident of Highlandville, in Christian County, who is known to be familiar with the early history of the region. Dr. Patton relates that the existence of a spring in the vicinity, endowed with remarkable curative properties has been long a matter of tradition, and that Father Reno was one of the heroic band of French Jesuits who carried the gospel to the savages of the far west in the early part of the eighteen century. It is said that Father Reno received information of the existence of a 'Fountain of Youth' located in the Ozark mountains, from a friendly Indian, and made its discovery the object of a special exploration. The stone found near Reno Spring attests the success of his search, but as the brave priest was never again seen alive, it is believed that he was murdered by the Indians. The savages thereafter with characteristic jealousy, before leaving the region carefully concealed the entrance to the cave by filling it up with earth and stone and eradicating all signs of both spring and cave. The town of Reno was founded at the spring and contains nearly a thousand inhabitants. The Fort Scott and Memphis railroad will soon be built to this point, so that travelers will be able to reach the spring directly by rail. The scenery in the immediate neighborhood is bold and grand."

What a newspaper story!! Your current author is skeptical of the whole affair. I suspect that the Doctor Patton referred to in the 1881 article is one John R. Patton who was actually a miner and promoter who was prospecting around future Keltner in this era. (No Doctor Patton shows up on any Christian County census records before 1990!). But such stories in newspapers throughout the region and beyond helped allow the Christian County village of Reno (on Bear Creek) to thrive for a couple of years, and then rapidly fade to a small store, blacksmith shop, and post office.

As for Christian County's general mineral boom, it hit a few highs and numerous lows from the early 1850s into the World War II era when it completely collapsed. In 2009, it is increasingly difficult to find the physical remains of the old shafts and dirt mounds, although a few of the holes and heaps are still visible if the interested party knows where to look.

