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Frenchman's Spring Is Rich In Local History

AUGUST 08TH 2011 BY NEWS

Frenchman's Spring Is Rich In Local History

By Annabeth Miller

Our area is a crossroads of history and often-overlooked treasures. I like taking the crossroads, because you never know what might be around the next bend in the road or over the next hill.

Take, for instance, Frenchman's Spring. Located just south of Dexter about a mile west of Highway 25, the area played a significant role in the region during the War Between the States. Our area is also a crossroads of history and often-overlooked treasures.

Frenchman's Spring was a gathering spot for soldiers fighting for the Southern cause. Military units camped at the spring, and it was a place where Southern groups recruited new members. In fact, in July of 1861 more than 2,000 soldiers from 15 counties in the Show-Me State met and organized. The result of their encampment was the formation of the First Division, Missouri State Guard, a pro-Confederate state militia. The stone that stands today at Frenchman's Spring states that on July 25, 1861 the men elected M. Jeff Thompson as commander.

Meriwether Jeff Thompson was born at Harpers Ferry (the home of John Brown's infamous raid) and into a family that had a strong military tradition. He moved to Missouri in 1847 and in 1848 he moved from Liberty to St. Joseph. He worked as a store clerk, and eventually took up surveying and was the city engineer. He was mayor of St. Joe from 1857-1860 and presided over the ceremony marking the first ride of the Pony Express on April 3, 1860. Thompson had the distinction of having a ship in the

Confederate Navy named for him.

Thompson commanded the First Military District, which included our "swampeast" corner of the state. The battalion soon became known as "Swamp Rats" and Thompson as the "Swamp Fox of the Confederacy." (Aren't you glad DHS is the home of the Bearcats, and not Swamp Foxes!!)

In October 1861 Thompson led a cavalry attack on the Iron Mountain Railroad bridge near Blackwell in Jefferson County. After burning the bridge, Thompson rejoined his infantry in Fredericktown. He was defeated at the Battle of Fredericktown and withdrew, leaving the Bootheel in Yankee control.

Thompson engaged in a number of battles before returning to Arkansas in 1863 to accompany Gen. Marmaduck on his raid into Missouri. Thompson was captured in August in Arkansas, and spent time in St. Louis' Gratiot Street prison. He was exchanged in 1864 for a Union general, and joined Maj. General Sterling Price's expedition into Missouri. After the war he moved to New Orleans and resumed work as an engineer, helping improve the swamps. He died in Missouri in 1876 and is buried in St. Joe.

The line of hills in which Frenchman's Spring is nestled is full of naturally flowing streams.

The pond adjacent to June & Cliff Manlove's place on South Walnut Street is fed by a natural spring on the hillside. Cliff has said that the original deed for the property dates back before the war and mentions the springs. Apparently crews on the railroad would stop near the property and would walk from the tracks to the spring and fill buckets with water and tote them back to the train for the steam engines.

You can drive to Frenchman's Spring by going south out of Dexter on Highway 25 and turn right (west) on County Road 632. Stay on the gravel road until you come a curve (north) in the road. The monument and springs are to the left on that curve.

The monument was placed <images/Blog Images/NewsAugust2011/FRENCHMAN5.jpg> at the site in 1996 by the A.C. Riley Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. I visited the site for the first time at the dedication.

I visited the spring just Saturday as part of a geo-caching day with a friend. I actually found my first cache at the spring!

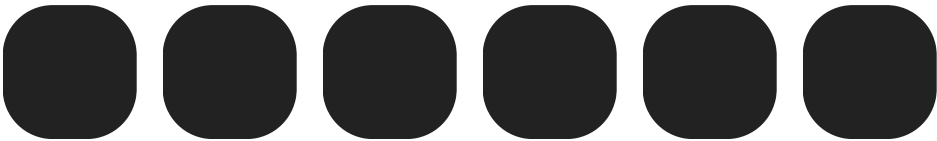
There are two rock homes near the spring and folks live down there. I have been there when it was a cat-lover's paradise!! They roamed around the area like they owned the place, drank from the spring (that still flows), and enjoyed sunning themselves in the "sun puddles."

Annabeth Miller is the editor of the ShowMe Times and a lifelong resident of Dexter.

LAST UPDATED ON AUGUST 08TH 2011 BY NEWS

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