

E. A. STECKEL: THE MAN WHO PUT RICHLAND (AND TURKEY RIDGE AND THE OZARK SPRINGS RESORT) ON THE MAP

by John Bradbury

There was no busier man in Pulaski County than E. A. Steckel from 1909 to 1928. He was variously a real estate developer, sawmill operator, founder of the Turkey Ridge community, mayor of Richland, proprietor of the Ozark Springs Resort, school board member, and Methodist class leader. Steckel promoted good roads and schools, fruit growing, a Richland pickle factory, and economic growth generally in the northern part of Pulaski County. As if he were not busy enough with business and civic interests, Steckel staged fairs at Richland, managed the champion Turkey Ridge baseball team, organized picnics and horse shoe pitching contests, and introduced the new-fangled (at least in this part of the Ozarks) game of croquet for competitive-minded vacationers at the Ozark Springs Resort. He also organized and directed construction of the first bridge across the Gasconade River at Mays Ford ("Mays" was always rendered without apostrophe in newspaper accounts). The bridge figured in Steckel's untimely death by drowning in 1928. Tales of sharp business practices, hard feelings, and homicide in connection with his death exist today, but have no basis in fact and are less interesting than the man's real story.

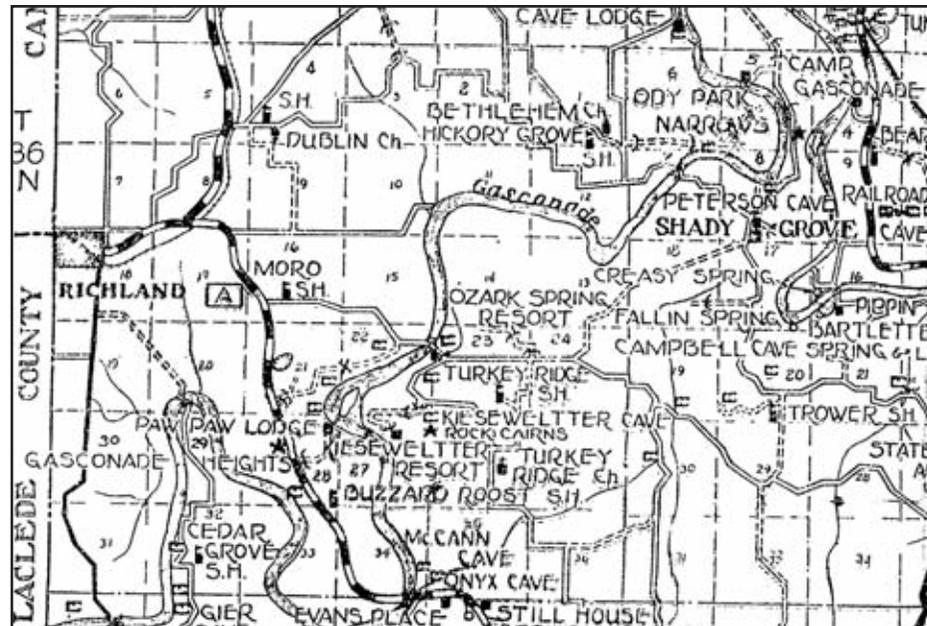
Edmund Albert Steckel (invariably "E. A. Steckel" in the newspapers) was born in East Prussia on August 31, 1878, one of several children of William and Caroline Steckel. The family seems

to have been ethnically part of the eastern German population known as Volga Germans after their settlement in Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great. Many of those Germans later left Russia and immigrated to the United States to form farming settlements on the Great Plains. It was to such a community around Woodbine in central Kansas that the Steckel family arrived about 1884.

Not much is known about Steckel's early life, but he seems to have gotten a good education and was close to his sister, Lina, and brother, Herman. With his siblings Steckel probably learned the virtues of farm life and hard work. He may also have decided that farming lost its appeal, for he spent some years after 1900 in Colorado, perhaps in the sawmill business. He must have made



Steckel sent this postcard to C. E. Beals in Lincoln, Nebraska, with the following notation: "Richland Mo. 9/7/1914 Turkey Ridge ball team, 1914 champions of Pulaski Co. E. A. Steckel." Steckel is front and center. Courtesy of John Bradbury.



Turkey Ridge-Ozark Springs Resort area near Richland. From the 1935 WPA Tourist Map, courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.



E. A. Steckel, 1878-1928, immigrant entrepreneur and founder of Turkey Ridge and Ozark Springs. Portrait courtesy of The Cave Restaurant and Resort (formerly Ozark Springs Resort).

some money, for by 1909 Steckel and his wife, Minnie, were residents of Pulaski County and owners of several thousand acres of forested upland on the east side of the Gasconade River about four miles south of Richland. Steckel's holdings stretched south and east from the county road river crossing at Mays Ford toward the community at Laquey. The area had been generally known as Center Point after the school in Liberty Township. On one of Steckel's hikes across his land, a chance encounter with a venerable gobbler led him to dub his new enterprise Turkey Ridge.

TURKEY RIDGE

Steckel began selling land in the Turkey Ridge Colony and the town of Turkey Ridge (platted as such) in

1911. He appealed to urban dwellers and hourly-wage workers who dreamed of owning their own homes and working for no bosses but themselves. Small farms seemed to be the answer, available from the Steckel Land and Development Company in five to ten-acre tracts with four-room cottages for only \$385 on monthly payments. For those desiring to live in the community center, the company offered two-room cottages on town lots in Turkey Ridge proper for payments of only five dollars a month. The wholesome aspects of rural living also had its attractions, and, of course, there was the obvious appeal of the beautiful Ozarks. Turkey Ridge was only a ten-minute walk to the Gasconade and Steckel touted the lovely scenery, pure air and water. At an elevation of 1,400 feet, Turkey Ridge was free of lowland

miasmas, fruit of all kinds grew in abundance, and there was "no more congenial place in the U.S. for raising poultry and eggs." With good neighbors, a school and church, it was a good place for people to raise families: "Every payment they make on their little farm is just so much saved for their future....While you are raising the children right you are making yourself independent, too."

The scheme to develop small family farms on large upland tracts was not new. The Frisco railroad's immigration and land departments had been selling small farms along its lines in the Ozarks for decades—Swedeborg, near Crocker, is an example of its efforts. The railroad promoted fruit culture, progressive agriculture, and good roads as means to develop local markets and generate exports by the carload. There were similar large upland tracts developed close to the railroad in fruit "districts" near Lebanon, Springfield, Monett, and West Plains, and the Frisco's support had already made the railroad towns across the northern part of Pulaski County (in order of population: Richland, Crocker, and Dixon) more populous and prosperous than the historic county seat village of Waynesville. Indicative of the growing development of the northern communities was Crocker's failed attempt to usurp the county seat from Waynesville after the courthouse burned in 1903. By the time of Steckel's arrival, Richland had edged out Crocker as the largest town in the county. His Turkey Ridge speculation was only a few miles from the rail line at Richland, versus ten to fifteen miles from the tracks to

TURKEY RIDGE
PICNIC
Friday, July 30, 1915
FINE SHADY GROUNDS
BALL GAME
Richand vs Turkey Ridge

Refreshments of all kinds served on the grounds
 Lunches will be served by the Turkey Ridge S. S. ladies

Races! Races! Races!

For boys: Sack Races, Potato Races, Foot Races, For ladies: Egg in spoon Race, Egg Rolling Race, etc. Men usually monopolize the entire program at affairs of this kind, but not here, there will only be just one stunt for men at this picnic and that will be Money Spending Race. Liberal cash prizes for all races.

Largest family on the grounds	50c
Person coming longest distance from within the county	50c
Finest riding horse	50c
Best team horses or mares	50c
Best team of mules	50c

Class: Q. Robison, constable, with a number of deputies will be on the grounds to keep order. Drunks will be run in as fast as they show up. Good order guaranteed.
 If you intend to come tell every one you meet. If you can't come say nothing about it.
 By order Turkey Ridge Baseball Team

Edmund, Jr.) and cottages for Turkey Ridge buyers. He also sawed lumber for the county's McCain Bridge over the Gasconade and a new schoolhouse at Turkey Ridge. He seems to have leased the sawmill to the Klitz (also reported as "Clitz") Telephone Bracket Company in 1914. The firm sawed thousands of brackets for telephone poles, enough that Steckel built a 650-foot chute to transfer logs "from the top of the hill to the mill below" and put men to work cutting several hundred cords of stave bolts for the factory. The firm shipped several carloads of brackets from Richland and the bracket

Steckel managed the Turkey Ridge baseball team 1913-1915. *Richland Mirror*, June 24, 1999.

Waynesville. Largely undeveloped forest land and without a bridge across the Gasconade River, the acreage was inexpensive relative to agricultural bottom land and property closer to the railroad. Economically and socially, Turkey Ridge would be connected to Richland. Steckel became a leading figure in both places.

The first development at Turkey Ridge may have been a sawmill by which Steckel got the lumber to build his own modest cottage (by 1911 the home of Minnie and the first of four children: Naomi, Edna, Prudence, and

factory was probably the first paying proposition around Turkey Ridge beyond the real estate game.

Steckel was a competitive businessman but must have been a personable man as well. The *Richland Mirror* noted his frequent visits and reported on his various business and civic enterprises. In fact, the *Mirror* supplies most of what is known about Steckel's activities. Beyond real estate matters, those gambits in 1913 included significant road improvements at Turkey Ridge (on what is now Highway W) in response to a statewide "Good Roads"



Richland City Hall, 1913, where Steckel carried out his mayoral duties from 1919 to 1923. Both pictures courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

Richland was an attractive place for an ambitious businessman in the early 20th century. It was the largest and seemingly most prosperous and progressive of the growing railroad towns. Founded in 1869, residents were going to name it

Lyon's Station in honor of the Union general but that name was taken. It was named instead for G. W. Rich, a Frisco director. The town became a shipping center for the area livestock and farming surplus. Richland also became a tie-buying center for the railroads.



One of the many fine buildings in Richland in the early 20th century. It burned in 1927.

promotion, organization of the Turkey Ridge baseball team, and baseball games on a field at Mays Ford. Steckel doesn't seem to have played himself, but with enthusiasts in Richland, Crocker, Pleasant Grove, and Turkey Ridge, he helped form a Pulaski County baseball league. He managed the Turkey Ridge ball team, the local champs in 1914.

Better roads and a winning ball team helped promote the real estate market at Turkey Ridge. The market seems to have been good, too, with over three hundred lots reported sold by 1915 to people from all over the Midwest. Some removed to Turkey Ridge immediately, built homes and developed farms. Others built retirement cottages on town lots and there seem to have been a number of absentee owners of lots who intended to relocate later. Although he kept a large farm at Turkey Ridge, Steckel himself moved to Richland, reportedly to take advantage of a better school for his daughter Naomi, but probably also because he realized that his interests at Turkey Ridge were better promoted

from the growing railroad town.

His ceaseless energy and promotions quickly made an impact on Richland. He became a school board member and class leader at the Richland Methodist Church. In addition to forming the baseball league and providing a ball field, Steckel organized and apparently paid for the first county fairs at Richland, including the "Richland Races" in October 1915, an extravaganza that featured footraces, baseball games, an airship, and parachute jumps. He was the main cog in organization of the Clover Leaf Fair Association, founded in 1917 to take advantage of state aid for developing fairgrounds. Steckel was an early automobile owner (he favored Ford touring cars) and advocate of good roads. Along with other northern Pulaski Countians, he lobbied the Ozark Trails Association for the inclusion of Richland, Crocker and Dixon in the primary auto road network developing quickly in the Ozarks. The efforts paid off in 1917 when the association located one of the main auto "trails" in the northern Ozarks through the three towns.



Steckel promoted Turkey Ridge through the mail via postcards and, in this case, with some humor. The message on the right side of the card reads, "Fish are so plentiful here that we decorate our houses with them. On the reverse side of the card, addressed to Mrs. Dora Rand of Kansas City, he wrote, "Turkey Ridge Farm. This is photo of my home with a few of the neighbors who had been hunting and fishing on Thanksgiving. Note the possums on porch floor. If at all interested in the beautiful Ozarks or my proposition, let me hear from you soon. E. A. Steckel" Dated December 20, 1910. Courtesy of John Bradbury.



This is a more flattering picture of Steckel's house near Richland. Addressed to W. O. Bourne of Pueblo, Colo. and postmarked on February 2, 1911, the message on the back reads, "Turkey Ridge Farm. This is photo of the place I call Home! home! sweet home! and be it ever so humble there is no place like home in the Ozarks." Courtesy of John Bradbury.

Turkey Ridge was not neglected while Richland was improved. Steckel could frequently be found grubbing or blasting stumps and graveling the road at Turkey Ridge. In 1915 he sponsored a July Fourth picnic at Mays Ford, and in 1916 he and several other men built a ferry boat for easier access to Turkey Ridge. The *Mirror's* local correspondent described Steckel's development in October 1919 as "four miles long and two miles wide."

Steckel made a big splash in local headlines by offering twenty acres as the location of a fish hatchery under consideration by the State of Missouri in 1915. He got some support for the idea from state representative Albert Crumley as the first major recognition (in the form of state institutional expenditures) of the railroad corridor's importance in Pulaski County. There was stiff competition from southwest Missouri and Neosho ultimately won the honor. Whether or not Turkey Ridge was seriously in the running is doubtful, but it didn't hurt the real estate business to have Turkey Ridge in the headlines, and it established Steckel's development as a place in local consciousness. Indeed, the *Mirror* extolled the Turkey Ridge Colony as a "stroke of genius" and predicted the town of Turkey Ridge proper would grow as a natural development. Steckel undoubtedly furnished clippings to those writing for "the whole Turkey Ridge story," and he was a zealous mailer of picture postcards showing his own modest home and the champion Turkey Ridge ball team.

The next endeavor was a pickle factory for Richland or Turkey Ridge. Steckel led the way in 1916 by planting a peck of cucumber seeds on ten acres at Turkey Ridge. He also contracted for cucumbers and helped to attract Oklahoma City "pickle man," Mr. A. Bird, who built a three-tank salting station at Richland in 1916, each tank holding 700 bushels of cucumbers. Pickling got underway in July and the first two carloads of pickles were shipped by rail in 1917. The D. M. Sears Company contracted for the local cucumber crop in 1918, ensuring operation of the Richland salting station in 1918, but the pickle business was fickle and the operation at Richland faltered later (similar factories at Crocker and Dixon seem to have been longer-lived). In response, the irrepressible Steckel turned to strawberry growing and, later, apple orcharding.

In 1918, Steckel welcomed another daughter, Edna, represented Richland at meetings of the Ozark Empire Fair in Springfield, and touted the Turkey Ridge development at a national realty

men's meeting in St. Louis. His efforts must have impressed people, for in March 1919, voters elected him mayor of Richland over incumbent A. J. McDonald from the old and prominent Pulaski County family. Although the politics behind his election are not known, it may have had something to do with the contested effort to build a county bridge across the Gasconade at Mays Ford in 1913. A bridge had obvious advantages to Richland and Turkey Ridge and the county court approved one, but residents of Waynesville and southern parts of the county objected to county money helping develop (in their estimation) the railroad-rich northern sector. Litigation and an injunction against the county ultimately brought the matter to the Missouri Supreme Court, where justices at first upheld Judge L. B. Woodside's initial injunction stopping construction of a bridge at Mays Ford, then reversed themselves in 1914 to affirm the actions of the county court. However the controversy was enough to bring two new judges to the county court, G. W. Berry and G. W. Payne, who were either anti-bridge or leery of the political furor. In any case the bridge was not built, and the Gasconade remained at times inconvenient or dangerous for travelers.

Steckel's first mayoral act was to proclaim a clean-up day in preparation for Decoration Day in Richland in May 1919. He also developed a free municipal skating park, assuring some doubters that "free means free" before leaving for one of his frequent visits to family in Kansas, where his brother Herman had come back after surviving battle in the Argonne in the U. S. Army, and his sister Lina had just returned to the States after serving with the British Red Cross.

He returned to Richland in time to promote the Clover Leaf Fair in the fall of 1919. The fair was expected to draw the largest crowds in the town's history, prompting the mayor to ask townspeople willing to rent rooms to visitors to advise the city. Airplane rides were among the attractions; Steckel was the first to ascend. In 1920, Steckel presided over the renovation and reroofing of Richland City Hall, going so far as mounting the roof himself to nail shingles. Demonstrating his willingness to make a buck as well as his careful stewardship of municipal money, the mayor advertised the old shingles, perfect for kindling wood, at a dollar a bundle.

His success and prominence in Pulaski County were enough by 1920 that Steckel's name began to be mentioned as a Republican candidate for state senator from the 27th Senatorial District.

The *Mirror* promoted his candidacy, calling him "one of the regular boys" and "a man on the ticket with whom you can win in November." "The man who put Richland on the map" pledged to do as much for the district as he had for the town. Steckel got the nomination, but despite a vigorous campaign, fared poorly as a Republican candidate in a heavily Democratic area.

The senatorial defeat may have dampened Steckel's political ambitions. After wintering in Florida in 1920-1921 (it became an annual event for the Steckel family), he concentrated his efforts on Turkey Ridge. By then it had a new schoolhouse and grocery store, and there was talk of a community hall, post office, and a filling station. Residents organized a community club and a fruit growers association. Everyone

looked forward to lots of strawberries—the local money-making crop introduced by Steckel when pickles played out. In May 1922, Steckel advertised for berry pickers at his Turkey Ridge farm: "Come and camp on the river, pick berries part of the day and go fishing the balance of the time. Have a pleasant vacation and make money at it."

OZARK SPRINGS

The advertisement indicates that Steckel was considering the recreational possibilities of his property, which bordered the Gasconade at Mays Ford. It was only a mile and a half as the crow flies from the river to Turkey Ridge proper, and just a few miles from Richland. Mays Ford was already a

Direct Mail Promotion

E. A. Steckel was a relentless promoter of his Turkey Ridge real estate and when he entered the resort business, he promoted Ozark Springs with the same energy. An inventory of his estate listed printing equipment, either a small press or a mimeograph machine. The *Mirror* reported in April of 1914 that "our land man, E. A. Steckel, mailed out over four hundred letters last Wednesday to people who are interested in Pulaski County and in Turkey Ridge in particular. This should bring us some more new neighbors." Steckel waged a similar ad campaign through the mail for Ozark Springs but on post cards.



Old Rebel Mountain is featured on this post card, with the parenthetical clue that Lost Lake will be found on top of the hill. Below is Steckel's near hyperbolic description of his resort in 1927. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

PSHB
Ozark Springs is located on the Gasconade River, four miles from Richland on Frisco railroad, five miles from Highway 66. Ozark Springs was started just five years ago and already has first class accommodations for 120 guests. Store and restaurant on the grounds, electric lights, finest croquet grounds in the state, tennis court, "Lost Lake Trail", "Skyline Trail", "Diamond Davis Cave", "Cave of the Skulls", "Dancers Cave", "Bloody Mountain", "Lost Lake" on top of "Rebel Mountain", "Two Story Cave", "Old Stony Face", "Underground River", fine bathing, boating and fishing, cleanest and best built resort in the state. New furnished housekeeping cabins rent \$12 per week for 2 people and \$3 per week extra for each additional person in the same cabin. Board and lodging \$2.50 per day or \$15 per week. For complete information write Edmund A. Steckel, Richland, Missouri.

popular place for Richlanders to enjoy ball games, July Fourth celebrations, and river bathing—a summer resort made sense, especially upstream from the ford where the steep hills and rocky bluffs weren't conducive for development as small farms. It was close to the Ozark Trail, making it easy for the people living along the road to visit by automobile for a day or weekend, but also not far from Missouri State Route 14, the historic overland path from St. Louis to Springfield that became U. S. Highway 66 in 1926.

Railroads had long since pioneered and fostered the tourist and recreational markets. The Frisco promoted both the Meramec and Gasconade rivers, but St. Louis sportsmen preferred fishing the latter stream in what they sometimes called "The Catskills of the Ozarks." By 1900 there was a cluster of private and semi-public clubhouses on the river, easily accessible by rail from St. Louis, beginning at Arlington and Jerome where the Frisco tracks crossed the Gasconade below the Piney forks. Urban sportsmen established the Dixon Hunting and Fishing Club on the river in 1904; a decade later recreational spots and tourist lodges dotted the map from Dixon, Crocker, and Swedeborg, and as far upstream as Hazlegreen, where Route 14 crossed the

Gasconade and where Riverside Lodge, Parsons Lodge, and Lee Walker's resort hosted over a thousand visitors each summer.

The story exists that Steckel only went into the resort business when a potential buyer of Mays Ford property said he would build a resort there. But it was clear by then that tourism was an exploitable resource in the Ozarks. It was also evident that automobiles, not passenger trains, would bring future visitors and opportunities to make a few bucks. In Richland, Parsons Garage had become a modern "filling station" and hoped to become the first Standard Oil dealer in the area. At Turkey Ridge, there was enough demand for petroleum products that Steckel planned to build a filling station there, too.

The first appearance of the name "Ozark Springs" came in the *Mirror* on April 5, 1922. Under the headline, "Workman Make Growsome Find," the story introduced the place name as well as Steckel's newest enterprise. The sensational headline referred to the discovery of human skeletons by workmen digging in a dry cave overlooking the river, on property at "Ozark Springs" being developed by Steckel in connection with a summer resort. A council of elders consisting of Richland doctors, the Turkey Ridge teacher and

others quickly determined that the bones were prehistoric and represented several individuals of varying age, but disagreed over whether they belonged to members of the Osage tribe or more ancient Ozark bluff dwellers. The newspaper story put the name "Ozark Springs" on the map; designation of the locale as Mays Ford began to fall into disuse.

What was good for Turkey Ridge was also good for the Ozark Springs Resort. Whether it was offering a quart of fresh strawberries to the first thousand visitors to Turkey Ridge in May 1922, hosting touring newspaper editors at Ozark Springs in July 1923, getting one of the first telephones at Turkey Ridge, or lecturing the Crocker Commercial Club on strawberry culture, Steckel was adept at getting his endeavors noticed in the local newspaper. The *Mirror* also indulged Steckel's creation of folklore to grace the landscape at Ozark Springs. It is said the Steckel children named each of the resort's dozen or so rustic log cabins with pseudo-Native American but entirely imaginary names, such as Kahoka, Okolona, and Zona. Bluffs and other topographical features around the resort also got names such as Rebel Mountain and Lost Lake. The new places figured in a story in the *Mirror* in July 1926, when

Steckel organized parties to search for a group of St. Louisans lost on a hike to "Lost Lake atop Rebel Mountain." The hikers finally turned up after dark, but one of the searchers got lost and had to be retrieved. The newspaper story helped establish the folklore to accompany Steckel's resort and probably shows his ideas on what might now be called branding and marketing.

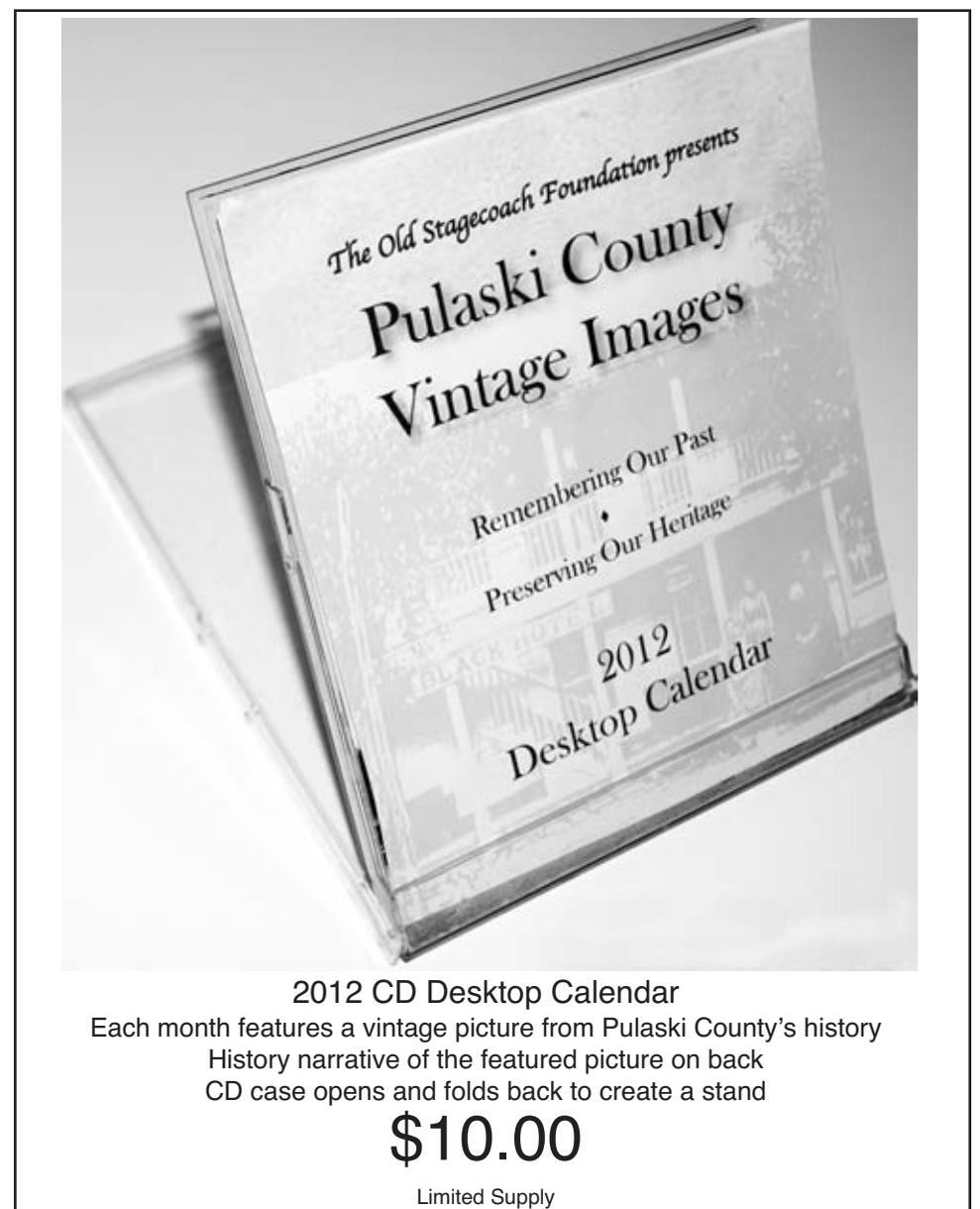
Despite all his business and civic success, Steckel had at least one enemy. In December 1922, someone dynamited the Steckel residence in Richland. The blast broke some windows and caused the house to sag in the middle, but no serious damage was done and no one was injured. The *Mirror* reported that authorities had an idea who the perpetrators were, but there were no further developments. Until May 1923, anyway, when several sticks of dynamite rocked Steckel's Turkey Ridge sawmill. Workers had been getting the mill ready for operation, but the damage was minor and there were no injuries. The newspaper reported nothing else, but the dynamite seems to have been inexpertly placed in both instances, or was only meant to make some kind of statement. Whether the blasts involved private, business, or political matters cannot be determined.



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The temporary bridge and approach at Mays Ford on the Gasconade River during the construction in July 1925. The driver might well be E. A. Steckel. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

MAYS FORD BRIDGE

It took more than a few sticks of dynamite to deter Steckel. His next undertaking was a bridge at Mays Ford, in abeyance since the controversial project had been abandoned in 1914.

Steckel's interests in a bridge are obvious and there was solid support from residents of Richland and Turkey Ridge, but now folks around Waynesville also saw an advantage, at least for the concrete low-water bridge at Mays Ford approved by the county court in October 1924.

The bridge was to be 295 feet long and 14 feet wide, with three arched passages for the water and a roadway seven feet above the lowest point in the river. The county put up half the estimated cost of \$1,242.60, Turkey Ridge residents put up the rest in labor and subscriptions.

With Steckel and E. E. McMillan bondsmen on the project, workers began erecting forms for the concrete arches and preparing the eastern approach. Interrupted by inclement weather and Steckel's wintering in Florida, the project picked up again in May and June 1925, when Albert Gardner and Joe Jeter each hauled over twenty loads of gravel to the site in a single day. The Ozark Springs correspondent invited people to "Come out and see the progress the new bridge is making, you will be able to walk across the river dry shod if the river does not come up by the time this is in print." Workers had the concrete top in place by the first week of June. Steckel was the first to drive across the new bridge, after which he distributed ice cream to all hands. He also hosted the bridge's dedication on July Fourth with a grand picnic at Ozark Springs featuring



It took 14 years from the initial proposal for a bridge at Mays Ford for this low water bridge to be constructed. E. A. Steckel was the major force, not the county. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

music by the Richland Band. The *Mirror* congratulated the builders for their work on the "worthy project" and declared the money and labor well spent.

Steckel sold all his personal property at Turkey Ridge before leaving to winter in Florida in 1925-1926, but brought back croquet. He had learned the new leisure activity in Florida, where the Eustis newspaper published an article on the Missouri resort owner's devotion to the game, which he played "skillfully and persistently," and his organization of croquet tournaments. On his return to Ozark Springs, he built croquet grounds described as the best in Missouri, "surrounded by cobblestone walls surrounded by onyx flower urns, have a concrete cushion to make the balls rebound and the balls are a special composition, the same as billiard balls." Steckel being Steckel, he organized a croquet tournament at Ozark Springs in August 1926 to determine the best local team. The winners would represent Pulaski County in a match against the Kentucky Champions scheduled in September.

These sorts of activities appealed to Steckel's competitive spirit. They were

also the kinds of leisurely pursuits and additional attractions desired by the resort crowd, who at the very least expected bathing, boating, fishing, hiking, and, frequently, horseback riding. Other events such as a shooting match on Thanksgiving Day in 1927 extended the season and kept people visiting Ozark Springs until nearly Christmas. And if croquet didn't work, maybe horse shoes would. When the *Springfield Daily News* got up an Ozarks-wide horse shoe pitching tournament for April 1927, Steckel immediately proposed elimination matches at Ozark Springs to determine the best local pitcher. He pointed out that Ozark Springs had "six fine horseshoe courts with strong electric lights for

ternoon, but failed to bring the body to the surface. Herman Steckel came from Kansas to help in the search. Searchers found the drowned man's notebook on Tuesday, but his body was not recovered until Wednesday. The river had been up, and it was supposed that Steckel had stopped to remove a log or other debris and had somehow fallen into the river. The *Lebanon Rustic* speculated that he may have suffered a heart attack and subsequently drowned. On Steckel's death certificate, Coroner Teeple attributed cause of death to "accidental drowning in the Gasconade."

It is ironic that the Gasconade and Mays Ford bridge figured in Steckel's death. He knew the stream could be dangerous. During the years Steckel was developing Ozark Springs, there had been drownings in the Gasconade at Hazlegreen and Cave Lodge, and in the Osage Fork and the Roubidoux. Fellow resort owner William O. Adams drowned at Jerome in 1924. Steckel himself participated in two rescues at



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Glorious**

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BEAUTIFUL OZARK SPRINGS

and also Celebrate and
Dedicate the

NEW MAYS FORD BRIDGE

which will be opened to the
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The BEST BAND in the Ozarks will furnish
music for us.

Contests and Water Sports for old and
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Full program will be out in a few days.

S. S. McMillan
Dr. E. A. Oliver
E. A. Steckel

Committee

Consession people get it early. This will be the largest
Fourth of July Celebration in the Ozarks.

Richland Mirror, June 18, 1925.

Ozark Springs. The first occurred in May 1923 when a family in a wagon pulled by a team of mules attempted to cross the swollen river at Mays Ford. The current swept the mules off their feet and drowned them, upset the wagon, and set the wagon box floating downstream with an elderly woman still aboard until it sank two hundred yards from the ford. Steckel and others pulled the poor woman ashore, but she died fifteen minutes later from shock or exposure. In a happier instance in July 1925, three boys swam to a "barge" in the river, then got trapped when other swimmers overturned the platform. Steckel was among those who helped rescue the boys and pull them from the water. His knowledge that the river could be treacherous did not save his own life.

Local legend of uncertain origin has it that Steckel's death was actually a murder staged to look like drowning, provoked by his repossessing Turkey Ridge property when poor farmers could no longer make payments. Although no one has studied land records or circuit court cases to test the theory, the *Mirror* reported only one such case. It occurred in 1926, and Steckel won judgment against an absentee buyer. It hardly seems enough to have caused a murder. The fanciful tale regarding Steckel's death might be dismissed entirely out of hand if it weren't for those unsolved dynamitings at Turkey Ridge.

Steckel is buried in Richland. He left an estate valued at \$13,118.71 to Minnie and their four children. The estate in-

cluded 3,900 acres (valued at two dollars per acre) in the Steckel Land and Development Company. The Ozark Springs Resort appraised at \$3,000 for the property and another \$240 for the furnishings. An odd entry in the inventory was \$2,078 in printing equipment. Steckel had prospered in Pulaski County. He was relatively well off by local standards but hardly wealthy. His various personal and civic endeavors were typical of hundreds of Progressive-era entrepreneurs and businessmen who developed the Ozarks in the first decades of the twentieth century. Had Steckel lived, there is no reason to believe that he would not have had continued success despite the approaching hard times.

At Turkey Ridge, people continued to move in and out but the community never got a post office and never quite reached the eminence of a town. Small family farms as a way to independence for the common man still had its appeal, indeed, the Works Progress Administration's Missouri Guidebook of the 1930s referred to Steckel's development as "Poor Man's Chance." But farming proved as laborious at Turkey Ridge as elsewhere and the rewards as unpredictable. Cucumbers, berries and apples made a little money, but it was never lucrative. The local canning industry in Pulaski County turned into an on-again, off-again proposition through the 1920s; the Great Depression finally put an end to it.

As Gordon Warren put it, those who came to Turkey Ridge looking for a

Garden of Eden went away disappointed while those with pensions or other income streams found it a perfectly acceptable place to live. The community remains "four miles long and two miles wide," and is still evident by the cluster of houses along Highway W. Steckel would probably recognize it today, although he would wonder what became of the schoolhouse, grocery store, and filling station.

Minnie Steckel operated the Ozark Springs Resort after her husband died, managing to keep it open despite lean times during the Great Depression. Vacationing St. Louisans dominated the guest register until the advent of World War Two, after which soldiers' wives and workers from the army base at Fort Leonard Wood filled the cabins. Minnie sold the resort in World War Two, after which it fell into disuse. Had E. A. Steckel been around to promote the resort with his characteristic energy, it is quite possible that Ozark Springs would have become as prominent on postwar tourist maps as the Pippin Place on the Gasconade later became. Instead the resort was a near ruin when Dave Hughes purchased the property in the 1980s. Hughes had the novel idea to build a restaurant in Steckel's cave, a gimmick that Steckel himself would have surely appreciated. Operated under the name the Caveman Bar-B-Q, the restaurant put Ozark Springs back on the map. It has become a fixture of roadside blogs and a destination for those traveling Route 66. Gary Dyer of Lebanon bought the resort in 2009

and operates the property as The Cave Restaurant and Resort.

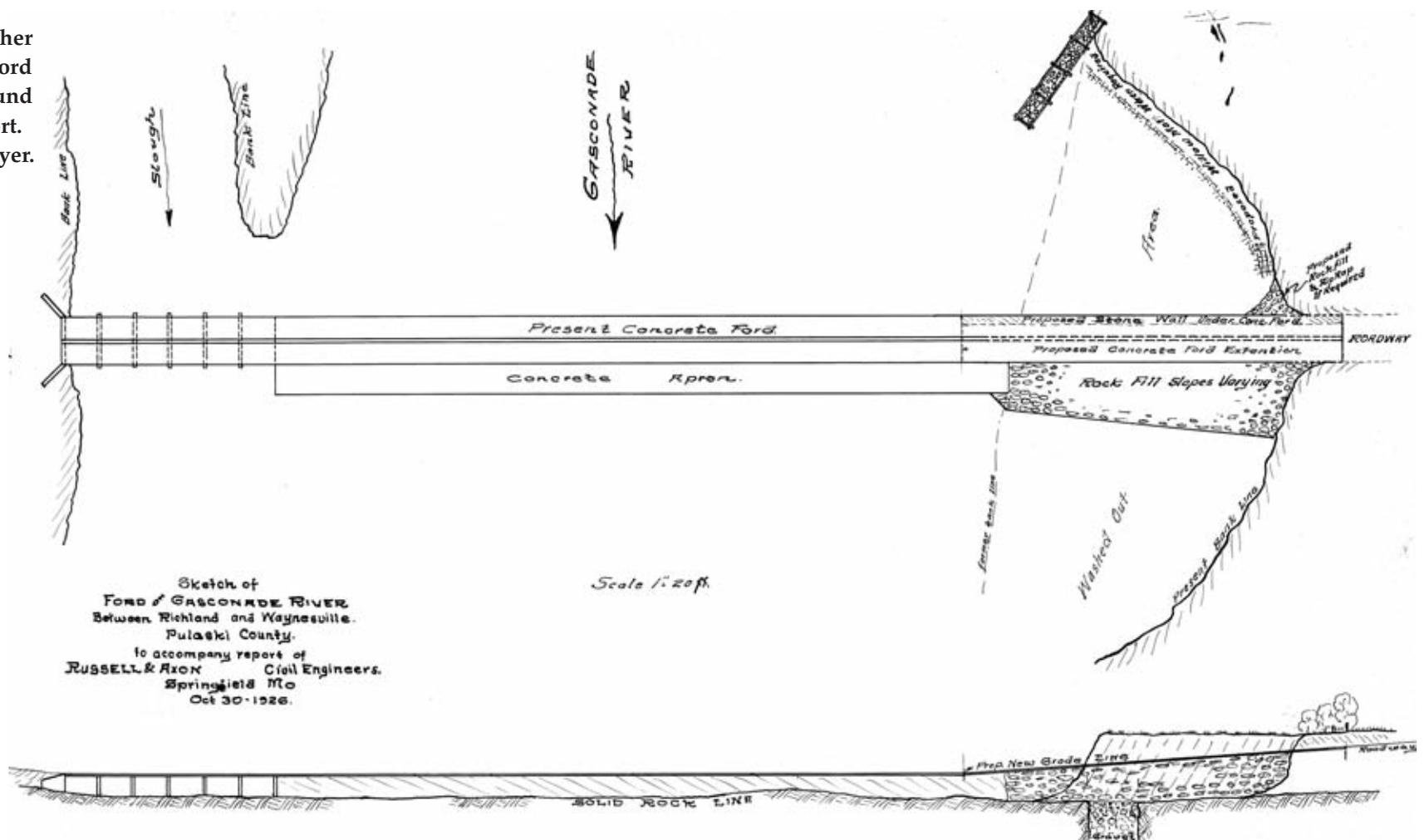
In another ironic twist of fate, Edmund Jr., who might have carried on the Steckel enterprises and name in Pulaski County, drowned off the coast of Florida while serving in the Navy in 1944. Minnie Steckel lived on the Turkey Ridge farm until her death in 1955.

SOURCES

Most of the Steckel story can be found in the *Richland Mirror*, preserved on microfilm by the State Historical Society of Missouri. There are no issues surviving prior to 1913. Turkey Ridge and Ozark Springs both had country correspondents reporting more or less regularly to the *Mirror*, the former beginning in 1913 and the latter in 1925. The newspaper published the news of Steckel's death on July 5, 1928 and promised a full obituary in a forthcoming issue, but it never appeared. Additional material on Steckel comes from his death certificate and probate file at the Pulaski County Courthouse in Waynesville, and Gordon Warren's article, "E. A. Steckel, entrepreneur, community leader," *Richland Mirror*, June 25, 1999. For local politics and the future site of Ozark Springs, see J. B. King, "County Split Over May's Ford Bridge," *Old Settlers Gazette* (1984): 3. Gary Dyer, proprietor of the Cave Restaurant and Ozark Springs Resort, provided local lore and photographs. Other images are from the collection of the author.

John Bradbury is Assistant Director of the State Historical Society of Missouri's Research Center-Rolla, located on the MST campus. He is an author and historian and frequent contributor to the *Gazette*. His most recent book, with James Denny, is *The Civil War's First Blood, Missouri, 1854-1861*.

Plans (1926) for further work on the Mays ford concrete bridge. Found in a desk at the resort. Courtesy of Gary Dyer.



Ozark Springs Views

all resort images courtesy of John Bradbury



The Ozark terrain and associated activities were part of the promotion of Ozark Springs. These young people are on the Lost Lake horse trail in 1925. Features, natural and man made, were given fanciful names to intrigue the tourist, such as the dolomite outcropping on the road along the river (middle right).



Much of the resort was built on a ridge with the river bluff offering particular building challenges. This is the "high" bluff road, while a parallel road below runs along the river (see lower right). The structure above is a "double decker" log cabin, the top cabin reached by the high road, the bottom cabin by the low.

"Ozark Springs was started just five years ago and already has first class accomodations for 120 guests...fine bathing, boating and fishing, cleanest and best built resort in the state." E. A. Steckel's post card promotion.



Certainly one associated Ozark activity was fishing. The Gasconade River and its plentiful "finny tribe" promised a bounty to anglers. While bass and jack salmon were sought-after pan fish, it was possible to catch a 30 pound catfish, too (bottom center).

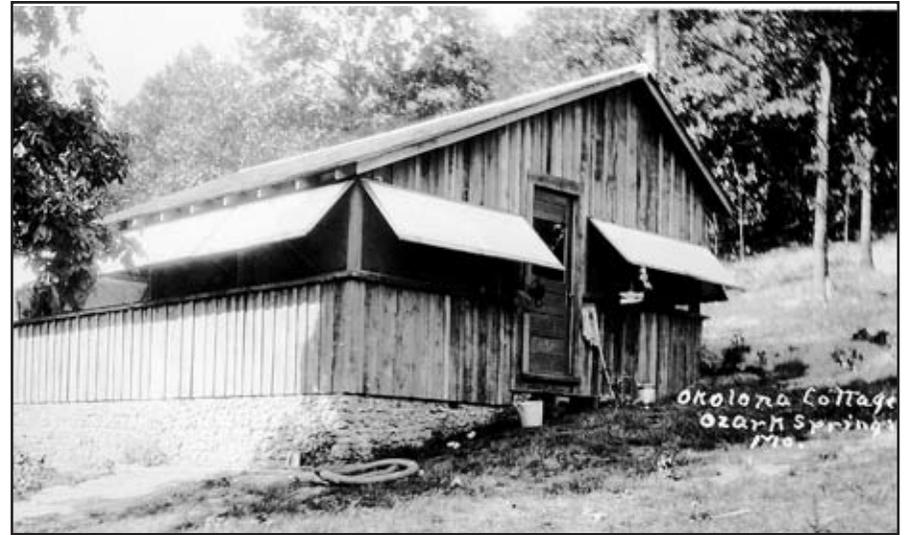


Floating an Ozark stream for the fun of it (rather than the fish of it) in a canoe was still a novel recreational pursuit. Here E. A. Steckel, on the hood of his Ford, poses with two young resorters.





Cabins for the resort guests dotted the hilly terrain. Accommodations for 120 guests were built within the first five years of the resort's existence.



Okolona Cottage. The cabins were certainly not identical, varying in size and construction. This large cottage with awnings more resembles a bunk house.



Emoka Cottage. Cottage construction was either traditional Ozark log cabin or stick frame construction with board and batten exterior.



Kahoka Cottage. Reportedly, Steckel's daughters invented the somewhat Native American sounding names for the cabins, which rented for \$12 weekly for two people.

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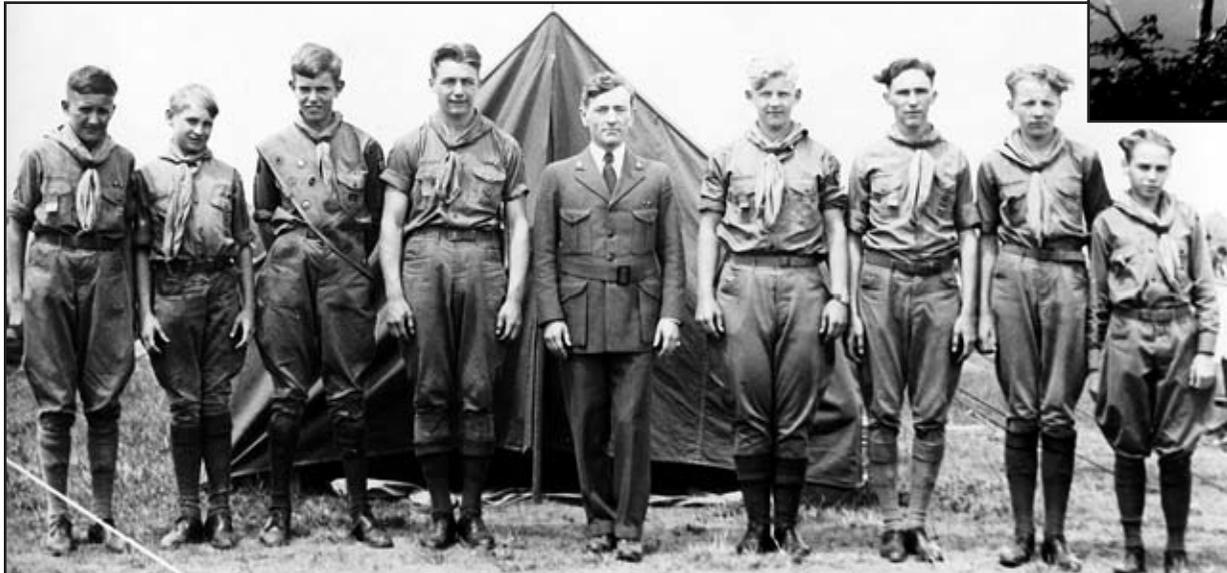


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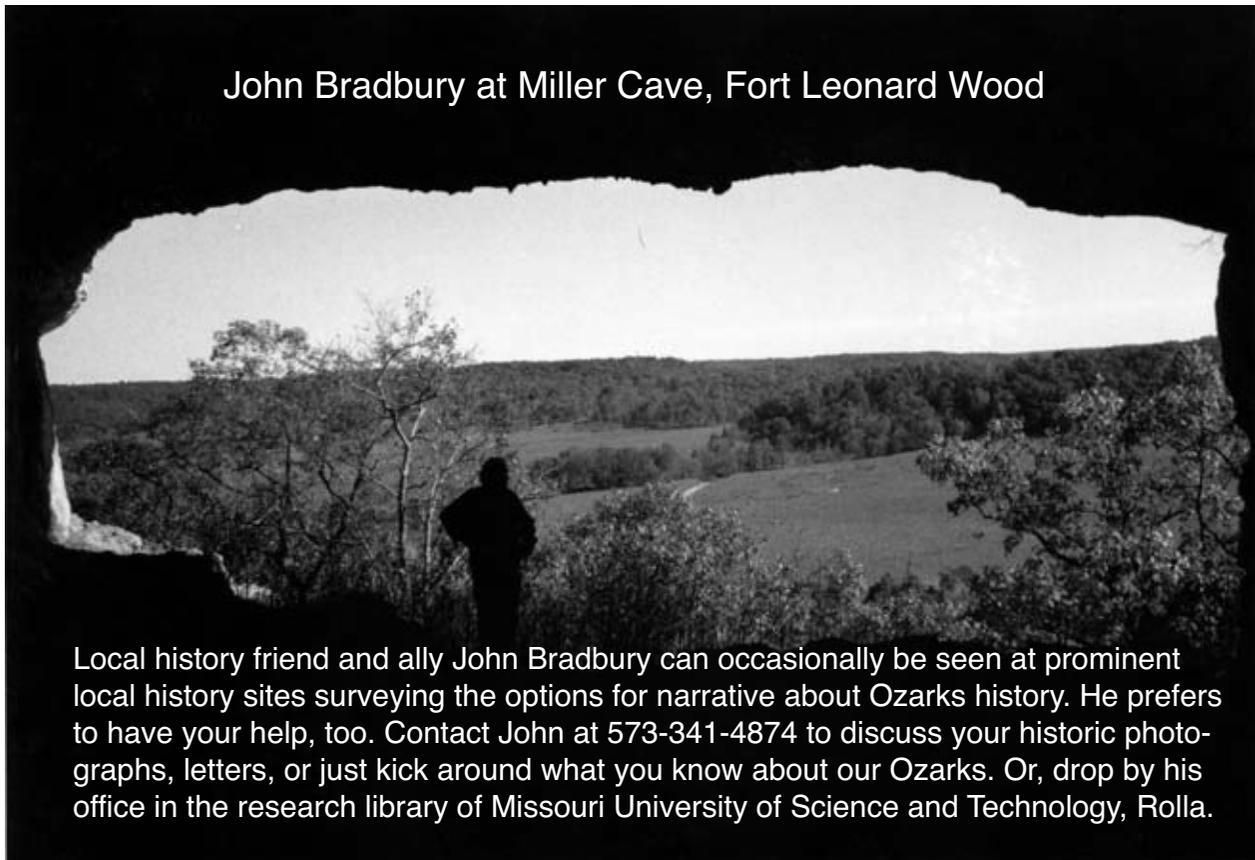


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The range of accommodations and facilities built by Steckel in the short span of five years in the 1920s, turning a hillside into a resort, was remarkable. It is a testament to his energy and commitment to a project. There was a restaurant on the grounds, but it might not have been able to accommodate these dressed up diners (top left). E. A. provided croquet grounds (top right) and a tennis court (middle left), both with stone perimeters. The swimming hole (middle right) was in the eddy upstream from Mays Ford. The scout group, pictured at left, is unidentified but is one of what was surely many scout and church groups who utilized the facilities of the resort.

John Bradbury at Miller Cave, Fort Leonard Wood



Local history friend and ally John Bradbury can occasionally be seen at prominent local history sites surveying the options for narrative about Ozarks history. He prefers to have your help, too. Contact John at 573-341-4874 to discuss your historic photographs, letters, or just kick around what you know about our Ozarks. Or, drop by his office in the research library of Missouri University of Science and Technology, Rolla.

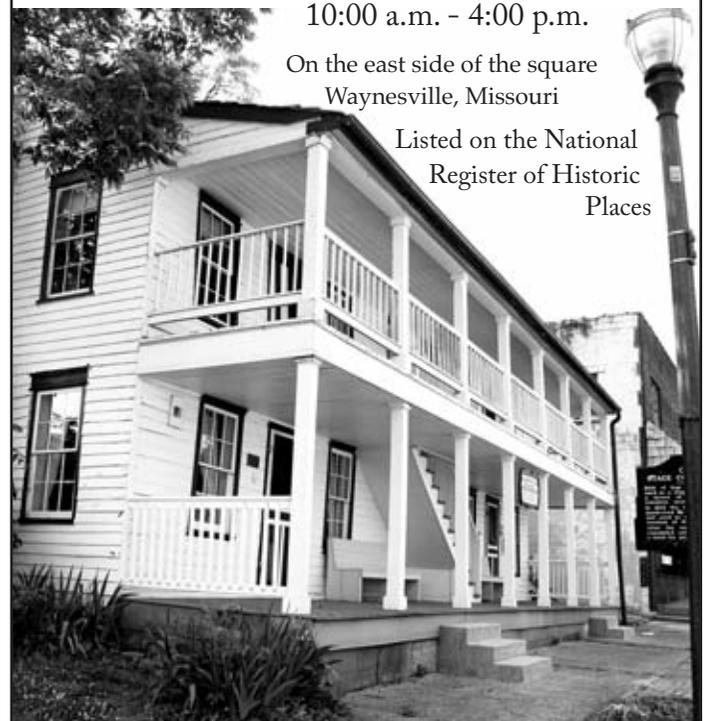
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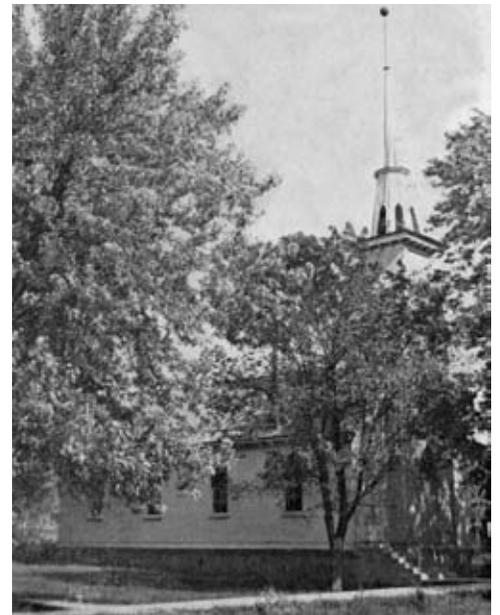
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Richland was the trading center for the Turkey Ridge/Ozark Springs area. Steckel moved the family there for the better education it offered.

Top left: Richland Hospital, 1907, operated by Dr. Everett Oliver. It burned in 1916. Dr. Oliver built a new hospital, slightly smaller and Victorian styled.

Top right: McClurg and Chestnut Streets, 1920s. Good view of the dirt streets.

Lower left: Business Section in the 1930s.

Lower right: Methodist Church. Gordon Warren remarked in his "Yesteryear" column in the *Richland Mirror* that when he was a boy, E. A. Steckel was a leader in the Methodist Church.

Pictures courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

Terri Mitchell

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