

The Old Rock House in Parkville

By Kenneth Klamm, Platte County Historical Society *Bulletin* Editor

Jim Horton fondly remembers living on Highway 9 near the Parkville city limits in what many know simply as “the Rock House.” Countless motorists pass by the house every day, as they have for generations. Jim, who moved out in 1973, lived in the Rock House with his family while growing up. The house, believed to be at least 125 years old, is something of a mystery, even to long-time area residents. Everyone in the area seems to recognize the little house with its thick stone walls, but few know anything about it.

The now-vacant structure sits not far from the highway on level ground in front of wooded bluffs. “My family did not work for Park, but my dad found the Rock House for rent by Park College around 1958,” recalls Jim, adding it rented for \$50 per month.

He remembers additional details. “Propane gas heated the house,” Jim says, adding that “originally, water was hauled in.” He says there was no trash service. “I believe we had a septic tank and of course electricity” he adds. “We shared a phone ‘party line’ with the fish market across 9 Highway. I lived there until 1973; the rest of my family move out mid-eighties.”

Jim describes the inside of the house. “Walking in the front door, you first saw the propane stove that heated the house. No duct work or vents. All the rooms were very small. A few steps past the stove to the left was a stair case,” he recalls.

“A few steps up to a landing, left turn up the stairs to two bedrooms,” Jim continues. “A few steps past the stairs was a small kitchen. Off the kitchen to the right was the single small bathroom, shower, no tub, single sink and stool.”

Jim loved the house and he recalls the inside details with amazing precision. “To the left off the kitchen was a screened-in porch added on by the college a few years after we moved in. When entering the house, to the left was the lone downstairs bedroom.” He says his parents and a sister shared this bedroom.

Jim notes that a lot of people shared the house when he lived in it. “Upstairs, two other sisters had one bedroom; me and two brothers had the other.”

Jim recalls there was no basement or attic. “The floors were concrete, my parents later tiled. No sheet rock, the interior limestone walls we plastered and painted,” he remembers.

Jim doesn’t recall heating and cooling as a problem. “The creek to the east of the house drew cool wind from the waterfall behind the house, so having no air conditioning was not an issue,” he says. “The upstairs bedrooms of course drew all the heat from the propane stove in winter and the downstairs in summer.”

He adds, “I recall sleeping on blankets downstairs with fans on and doors and windows open to get the waterfall cool air.”

Another former area resident, Linda Gresham Hanick, has ancestors who lived in the house many years ago. “My grandmother Lucy Orah Ashby Gresham lived there as a child,” Linda says. “Her father was James S. Ashby, and Thaddeus Ashby was her grandfather. Lucy was born in 1885 so I am guessing they lived in the stone house in the early 1890’s. I don’t know if they owned the house or rented it.”

Neither Jim nor Linda are aware of the origins or early history of the Rock House. A 2002 article in the Platte County Historical Society *Bulletin* provided some background. This article, titled “The Rock House in Parkville,” compiled by Carolyn Elwess, Park University archivist, says, “Despite its evident age, no definitive records have been found to tell historians who built the structure or when it was erected.”

The article continues, “The land on which the Rock House stands originally belonged to George S. Park for whom both the University and the city are named. It is located one mile east of the university campus on part of a 160 acre tract which Park purchased in two sections. He purchased the east half at a government sale on October 25, 1845, and bought the land in question, the west half, on December 12, 1847. According to local historian Sylvia Gault, he was the first owner of record. On July 6, 1887, Park deeded this section, known as ‘The Falling Springs Property,’ to what was then Park College.”

In her article, Ms. Elwess says the 1914 Park College *Narva* yearbook references the old stone house. She writes, “The last few pages [of the yearbook] are devoted to a tour of the campus and part of the town. The narrator, Frances C. Wolfe, '15, gave this description for the photo of the building, ‘And here is the old Stone House. Years ago we used to come down here for taffy pulls. The college raised cane - no joking, they did - and then every year sorghum was made and we had a taffy pull.’”

Ms. Elwess adds, “The best educated guess is that the Rock House was built soon after the college acquired the land from George Park in 1887.”

At least one source estimates the Rock House may have been built even earlier. In 1994, the structure was included on an architectural and historic survey of properties located within Parkville. The project was funded partly with a grant through the Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The survey inventory describes the Rock House property (with its address listed as 7700 Highway 9): “Architect/Builder Unknown. This I-House type residence appears to have been constructed c. 1860 and was part of the McCormick Bottom Farm and later purchased by Park College.”⁽¹⁾

In her article, Ms. Elwess notes that the Rock House has survived at least two disasters, including a 1948 fire, when it was occupied by a college helper and his family, and the 1993 flood. Ms. Elwess notes the flood “filled the Rock House with at least 10 feet of silt and water. The old place was again rebuilt, a testament to the strength of its thick stone walls.”

The uncertain origin of the Rock House adds to its charm for many area residents, who also recognize it as an important local landmark. And many people hope the Rock House continues to stand as a reminder of Parkville’s interesting and often mysterious past.

⁽¹⁾ An Architectural/Historic Survey of Parkville, Missouri. Architectural and Art Historic Research. Kansas City, Missouri. June 1994