A Meaningful Place

The Miller County Historical Society Museum shares artifacts and memoirs of the miners and musicians, storytellers and soldiers, teachers and farmers, slaves and steamboat pilots, nurses and railroad engineers whose lives created the history of Miller County.

In 1821 the majority of residents of this region, thirty miles south of Jefferson City, were new to the area. The Osage Indians had moved westward from these hunting grounds. A collection of discovered artifacts from thousands of years of occupation by Native Americans is on exhibit at the Museum. The reference center includes publications about these artifacts from archaeologists studying this area. A few Museum artifacts pre-date the Native Americans, including a mastodon tooth found in a local creek.

Settlers responding to published reports of mineral riches, vast timber resources, and rich farm ground joined area fur trappers. These new residents arrived overland on foot, on mules and horses, and with ox teams. Others traveled up the Osage River by flat boat. A wealth of caves in the area provided housing for some new residents until homes were built.

The Lupardus log cabin and the Williams slave cabin were relocated from their original sites to the Museum grounds. Each spring local students climb the steps in the Lupardus cabin and noisily exclaim at the small space where six or more children slept. Next door they stand in quiet shock at the reminder that some Miller County families were held in slavery.

Shelter and provisions accomplished, the settlers began to collect furs and grow products for sale. Unfortunately, the cost of getting items to market overland made their efforts futile. Miller County was created in 1837, the same year the first steamboat came up the Osage River. The Museum is located in the town of Tuscumbia, home to a busy steamboat landing. Artifacts include a pilot wheel, capstan, rope, and replicas of local steamboats, as well as paintings and photographs. The reference center holds stories of the lives of the people who owned and worked on the steamers. A short trip downhill to the river offers a view of the homes of some of the men who piloted the boats.

Lead, barite, and other minerals were mined, smelted or milled, then shipped downriver on the steamboats. Examples of the raw minerals and a large smelting pot from a lead mine introduce the stories of these settlers to Museum visitors.
A large agriculture exhibit includes a molasses mill, blacksmith forge, corn shucker, and a variety of tools for those who worked the land with horses and mules.

Miller County’s veterans are remembered outside in a monument by the Jason Ash Memorial Foundation, and inside by a large exhibit spanning the Mexican American War, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. One item on the Museum Exhibit Hunt that children almost always ask for help locating is a “dogtag.”

In the 1890’s the first railroad tracks were laid in Miller County. The construction fueled a major economic boom as men turned to tie hacking. The railroad ties were floated down the river in tie rafts. The Missouri Pacific Railroad built the Bagnell Branch to the town of Bagnell on the Osage River. It became known as the “Tie Capital of the World.” Tools and photos of tie hacking residents hang next to artifacts from the Missouri Pacific and Rock Island railroads.

New generations experience the past by stepping into replicas of a general store, a barber shop, the doctor’s office, a dog trot cabin, the post office, a one room school house, and the chapel. In elderly candor, one visitor exclaimed, “They think seeing a cream separator is neat. I hope I never see one again!” A telegraph key, crank telephone, and community switchboard display communication before the digital age. Wool carders, a spinning wheel and loom demonstrate how mothers once manufactured fabric.

Mills became popular to grind wheat and corn, card wool, and saw lumber. The Museum building was originally the home of the Anchor Milling Company and several artifacts including the machine used in the roller mill are on exhibit.

The popularity of the automobile drove a demand for better roads and more bridges. Miller County was home to several “swinging” bridges but few remain in use today. Just west of Brumley near the Lake of the Ozarks State Park are two historic suspension bridges at the Mill Creek-Grand Glaize confluence. The larger of the two bridges is the 400-foot Auglaize Bridge that spans Grand Glaize Creek, while the smaller Mill Creek steel suspension 100-foot bridge spans Mill Creek. These two bridges are currently the focus of efforts to repair and maintain them for the future. Artifacts from Miller County bridges, bridge construction, and photos of the bridges of the past are on display at the Museum.

The construction of Bagnell Dam and the creation of the Lake of the Ozarks impacted Miller County. It became a significant contributor to Missouri’s economy. Visitors to the Museum can view a wall of photos documenting the construction of Bagnell Dam and view an interview with men who worked on the project. Early businesses that erupted in the area are recalled in photographs, as well as the creation of the Lake of the Ozarks.
State Park. Area residents were leaders in the introduction of water skiing to Missouri. Several advanced to national prominence, as evidenced by the skis on display won by Cookie Clayton.

Miller County enjoys a long history of artists and popular musicians. The creator of The Ozark Opry, Lee Mace, introduced local musicians to a larger audience and became a spokesman for Lake area tourism. His bass fiddle and other artifacts are on display at the Museum. The James Earl Thompson Audio-Video Center provides listeners many hours of audio files from past area musicians.

Near the Audio-Video Center is a large reference area. Included are hundreds of histories compiled by local families, published materials sharing the background of Miller County and nearby areas, files of information on local organizations and places, and folders of historical documents. Computers are available for visitors doing research and used by staff to publish information for online researchers. Historical Society volunteers have published a large volume of searchable pages on the website at http://www.millercountymuseum.org/.

In addition, thousands of posts of Miller County stories can be searched on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/Miller-County-Historical-Society-Museum-1512921572256568.
Figure 1 - Artifacts and photos of bridges at the MCHS Museum.

Figure 2 - Lupardus Log Cabin & Williams Slave Cabin.
Figure 3 - Case of Native American artifacts at the MCHS Museum.

Figure 4 - Water skis & photos of early businesses at the Lake of the Ozarks at the MCHS Museum.
Figure 5 - A loom, a spinning wheel, a barber shop, and a store at the MCHS Museum.

Figure 6 - Musical instruments, photos, & artifacts from Lee Mace’s Ozark Opry at the MCHS Museum.
Figure 7 - The reference center at the MCHS Museum.

Figure 8 - A replica of a one-room schoolhouse at the MCHS Museum.
Figure 9 - The pilot wheel, capstan, & images of steamboats at the MCHS Museum.

Figure 10 - A display honoring veterans with artifacts from war at the MCHS Museum.