Seven Wonders of Shannon County

Judge Pegleg Shannon would have a blast in this neck of the woods, assuming he wasn't sick of rivers and caves and general exploring. As a pup, this youngest member of Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery had a propensity for getting lost. On one sojourn to round up the company's stray pack horses, he returned to the wrong part of the river, and stayed lost for two weeks. Years later on another mission, he lost a leg. When it comes to getting lost in the woods, the county that bears his name would make him feel right at home.

Local resident Alan Peters insists there are seven wonders in Shannon County. I found those seven, and then some...

To begin my journey of discovery, I used a conveyance most familiar to George Shannon. In the southeast corner of Texas County, two vigorous streams come together like prongs to form the headwaters of the Jacks Fork River. There I launched my canoe.

Chimney Rock towers as a sentinel near the entrance to Shannon County. Along the way, the river entered America's oldest National Scenic Riverway. I slalomed past the foreboding lorelei called Smash Rock, and paddled to a cave so remote, the only practical way to reach the spot is by river.

Jam Up Cave is a barn-sized hole at the base of a sheer rock cliff. The cave opens into a sinkhole directly behind the cliff's face. The sinkhole itself drops from the mountaintop like a landscaped funnel, big as a Piggly Wiggly parking lot at the top, small as a teachers lounge at the bottom, where a cold pool requires a body-length underwater swim from the sinkhole to the cave entrance. Because the sinkhole is so deep, and the cave faces north, only indirect light penetrates to the bottom. As a result, plant species thrive there that have not existed anywhere else in the Ozarks for 10,000 years.

I pressed on, floating down the Jacks Fork past the site of my first Shannon County memory. It's a man-made marvel. Sitting within the National Scenic Riverways boundary, Bunker Hill is a perfect core from which to launch a discovery of Shannon County. Once a retreat for members of the Missouri State Teachers Association, it’s now open to the public. Uniformly clad in dark creosote-soaked wood with whitewash trim, two dozen cabins surround a one-room school house and a chapel, everything a teacher needs to escape and recharge the batteries.

Eighteen miles downstream, some folks claim that Alley Spring Mill is the most photographed spot in rural Missouri. The two story gristmill sits astride the spring branch, where Alley Spring adds its liquid benefit to the river. Painted barn red, this mill peeks into the past, when it was a gathering place in this wilderness.

Most of the creeks that feed these rivers emanate from springs in the steep hills. Many must make a special effort to bust through barriers to reach the bigger streams. One such robust creek flows over Rocky Falls, and when I reached it the specter blew me away. This ship-sized outcropping of dolomite ranks among America's oldest exposed rock formations, the gatekeeper to a giant shut ins that channels water down its broad back.
rocks get slippery when wet. But on the day I visited, nobody else was there to fall down. This may be the best-kept secret among Shannon County's seven wonders.

Just downstream on Rocky Creek, but way off the beaten path is Klepzig Mill...best accessible by ditching your car and hiking the Ozark Trail.

Climbing north out of Eminence, Highway 19 becomes a switchback trail over the ridges that delay the inevitable matrimony of the Jack's Fork and Current River valleys. Ah, the Current. Half a million people float it every year. And if you visit the Current on a summer Saturday, you may think those half million visitors came at the same time. Pick a weekday float to avoid the crowd.

Most of these half million floaters miss Blue Spring, even though it's only a quarter mile from the Current, an easy hike beside the spring's gushing stream. Called Spring of the Summer Sky by native inhabitants, the water charges from deep in the ground, at the base of a high bluff that forms the back wall of a box canyon. Halfway up the bluff, a dead cedar trunk, taller and straighter than most, stands on the canyon wall like a spar on a clipper ship. In reality the tree is a diver, frozen in the beginning of her leap into the 300-foot-deep spring.

I paused to watch an otter fish in the spring waters, a cold aqua blue. Local fishermen hate otters, the way rival quarterbacks hate each other. It's understandable, since otters have a definite advantage catching fish, unencumbered by limits or seasons or game wardens. Bipedal fishermen are resentful that after they'd painstakingly rendered otters extinct in Missouri and sold all their pelts to hat makers, state conservation folks reintroduced the otters to the rivers a few years back. Now the otters thrive, and the fish must spawn like crazy to supply enough otter fodder.

Still, there is relative harmony in this wondrous ecosystem. Except for one thing. Walking back to the Current River, I picked up enough beer cans and cigarette butts to fill a mesh trash bag. I know most people respect nature. But a few idiots express their freedom by jettisoning their trash in these pristine areas. They really work at it. They must procure the crap a dozen miles away, and transport it to this spot to deposit.

Highway 19 crosses the Current at Round Spring, another wonder to the eyes, but also a wonder down under. That's because geologists believe the spring crosses under the Current before it empties into the river. Not far from there, I launched a canoe for a ride on Sinking Creek, one of the biggest--and cleanest--tributaries to the Current River.

Along Sinking Creek is one of Missouri's newest state parks. Echo Bluff State Park offers a delightful family vacation.

Upriver from there, past Akers Ferry, which connects the wilderness north of the Current River to the wilderness on the south, Welch Spring is home to an abandoned country hospital. Nearly a century ago, a physician built a stone sanitarium at the entrance to Welch Cave, to treat respiratory illnesses with fresh spring water and cool cave air. Long deserted, the hospital is a ruin, and the cave is home to bats, who pay the rent by
eating their weight in bugs every day. Welch Spring is a real gusher, and if conditions are right, cold water hits warm air, forming a pea soup fog for a quarter mile downriver.

Paraphrasing Jerry Vineyard, Missouri's preeminent geologist-explorer, Devil's Well is a big stomach. It's mother nature's idea of an indoor pool, except that it's cold and dark and scary as hell, hence the name. It is perhaps the world's most dramatic peek, a hundred feet straight down, into an underground river, through a hole no wider than a backyard trampoline. Before the Devil relinquished this well to the National Park Service, the previous owner lowered visitors into the stomach, er, sinkhole in a bosun's chair. It was a ride much like the worm experiences when dangled from a fish hook, although the conclusion is less digestive.

Seven wonders? More like seventy. I hopped in my car and headed straight–sort of–up Highway 19. Four hours later I reached the Massie Mill Cemetery north of Palmyra, where Judge Pegleg Shannon, after a remarkable career as a Kentucky judge and a Missouri legislator–oh, and an explorer–lies in an unmarked grave. I shouted across the graveyard, telling him about the amazing wonders I saw in Shannon County. On my way home I got lost.

**Please watch this Emmy Award-winning vid produced by Beth Pike:**

https://youtu.be/eeY6AS3Vgxl