MADISON COUNTY'S CASTLE ON A HILL

by Joy Russell

I think that everyone will agree, that Madison County is rich in

natural beauty and that its history contains many stories on a wide

variety of subjects. But when I found out that Madison County

once had a large, beautiful rock house that most people referred to as

"The Castle", I have to say that I was surprised.

A couple of years ago in some correspondence I had received from

Phillip Steele of Springdale, he happened to mention that he had once

visited "the castle" which was located southwest of Aurora on a hill

overlooking Jackson's Creek. This fact immediately caught my

interest ..could it be possible that there was a castle here in

Madison County ? I began to ask various people about it and I was

told that most people had always referred to this house as "the

castle" and that no one really knew much about its history. After

talking with people who had been there and after research at the

Courthouse, I was able to gain enough information to write an article

in "The Musings", the quarterly magazine published by the Madison

County Genealogical and Historical Society. When this article was

published I still had a lot of unanswered questions... questions that

I figured would remain unanswered. Was I ever wrong when I thought

that !! After the article appeared in "The Musings" I began to get

calls and letters from people who knew bits and pieces about it, and I

was even contacted by Alma Henker of Anderson, Missouri, who is the

great-niece of the man who built it. Several people supplied me

with pictures of it taken over the years. M. E. Oliver had written

an article about it that was published in the March 1966 issue of "The

Ozark Mountaineer" magazine. In the December 25, 1966 issue of

"The Arkansas Democrat Magazine", there was also an article written

by Phillip Steele which told about the castle.

Most of the facts presented here were taken from letters and diaries

written between 1886 and 1920. Copies of these documents were

supplied to me by Alma Henker, age 77, who is the granddaughter of

Daniel and Nancy Melton, and the great-niece of Clinton and Jessie

Jones. Alma's grandfather was Otha Melton and he began keeping a

diary in 1887, beginning at the age of 14.

Here is the story as I know it now, based on the documented facts,

about Madison County's own "Castle On A Hill".

In 1886 Clinton Kelly Jones and his wife, Jessie L. Hopkins Jones,

were living in Douglas County, Kansas. Also living nearby were

Clinton's sister and brother-in-law, Daniel and Nancy Elizabeth

Melton. According to Alma Henker, these families had

"wanderlust" in their blood and were almost like gypsies who moved

from place to place and were never satisfied anywhere for any length

of time. In 1886, the Kansas plains suffered the worst blizzard

ever recorded with newspaper articles telling of snow drifts as high

as the cottonwood trees. This blizzard lasted over a month with

temperatures staying below zero. Scores of people died, thousands

of cattle perished, and many settlers decided that Kansas was not the

place for them. Evidently this is the way the Jones and Melton

families felt after the blizzard.

In the diary of Otho Melton is an entry dated October 17, 1887, which

states: "We are going south to southern Missouri or Arkansas. We are

going down to Dixie where we won't freeze in the winter and burn in

the summer". At this time, the families of Daniel Melton and Clinton

Jones started on a journey that would end in Madison County, Arkansas.

During the next twenty years, these two families played an important

part in the history of the Jackson's Creek area where the settled.

Clinton and Jessie Jones purchased land in Sections 16, 20, and 21 of

Township 15, Range 26, and during their stay in Madison County owned a

total of about 800 acres of land. They purchased the land to harvest

the virgin timber which was growing on it, and during this time they

operated a sawmill which was said to have been one of the largest in

the Ozarks. They also planted peach and apple orchards on their land

and sold fruit harvested from them. Jessie Jones was an educated

woman, whom we know taught school at Jackson Creek School and

according to M. E. Oliver's story, she also taught "in a shabby one

room log building located on top of the Locust Mountain". Mr. Oliver

attended this school, which was Locust Ridge District #58 which

operated from 1891 until 1925. Jessie later taught at Little Rock

College and Kansas University and she was also an artist. She must

have been quite a woman in her day and time. Clinton Jones was a

Methodist minister and the diaries talk about him holding meetings of

the Literary Society in homes of the area. One of the subjects

mentioned as the topic for debate at one of these meetings was, "Which

has caused the loss of most lives, alcoholic beverage or war". Based

on the information in the diary, these meetings sometimes ended up

getting very argumentative when various people stated their views.

Clinton is mentioned as preaching at Aurora and also traveling as a

circuit preacher throughout the area to speak in various churches.

Evidently Clinton and Jessie were doing very well for themselves in

the sawmill business and according to Alma, Clinton wanted to built a

home that would be one of the finest in the state. Jessie retired

from teaching and took over the operation of the sawmill, while

Clinton began construction on their home. In M. E. Oliver's

article, written in 1966, he states: "The Castle in the hills was

built by C. K. Jones in 1894 to 1904 and is still standing. When

built, there was nothing like it for miles and miles and to this day

there is nothing in this section of the country that even compares to

it. When I was a small boy about the age of six years, we passed by

the C. K. Jones place and I observed this huge stone building being

built. Mr. Jones did most all of the stone work. He built

scaffolds by the side of the walls of the building and built sort of a

runway on which he rolled the rocks up which were too heavy to carry.

It took him about 10 years to complete the building".

Clinton Jones had a great dream as he built his castle. It was

situated in a large clearing on the slope of a hill, with a

magnificent view overlooking the valley below. The structure was

built from native stones which were gathered nearby and hauled to the

location. The stones were then hand-hewn to a square shape and laid

by Clinton Jones to form the walls, all of which were a foot thick.

The stones were carefully laid and mortar which was made from lime and

sand was placed between them. The house had four rooms downstairs,

three large upstairs rooms, a full cellar beneath the house, and a

tall tower room stood at the front which contained the spiral

staircase leading to the upstairs. Two of the rooms were pentagon

shaped, having a five-sided outside wall, with windows in three of the

sides. Even the inside walls that divided each room were constructed

of rocks. Some of the rocks in the room facing south, were hand-

hewn and chiseled with a design . The floors were constructed of

enormous oak beams covered with native white oak planks and white oak

shingles covered the roof. The gable ends of the house was adorned

with boards sawed in a scalloped design also made from white oak. It

is said by some that a stone was placed above the door that was carved

with the inscription "LaVerne Place" on it. This translates as

meaning "the green place", but no evidence of this stone is seen

today. After the castle was completed the mountaintop was

landscaped with various kinds of shrubs and flowers and Clinton Jones'

favorite tree, the pine, was planted. A circle drive was

constructed leading to the castle and it has been said that people

would drive to the castle just to view the beautiful grounds and

beautiful flowers, as well as to view the castle.

At the same time as Clinton Jones was building his dream house, his

brother-in-law, Daniel Melton, was also constructing a house that has

been described as being an unique structure for Madison County. The

Melton house was located about one-half mile from the Jones castle,

and has been described as one of the largest log houses ever

constructed in the Ozarks. The architecture design of it greatly

resembled a Swiss chateau and it was two-story in design. It had

huge fireplaces and contained about eight or nine rooms, with a large

upstairs front porch. In the diary of Otho Melton, he mentions

frequently that he had chopped logs that day for the house. This

house was located on what is known as the "old Black Mitchell place",

and stood until about the mid-1970's when it was bulldozed down.

Clinton and Jessie Jones only lived in their dream house for a few

years. Evidently the "wanderlust" that Alma Henker spoke of began to

make itself known and sometime before 1910, they sold their land and

along with their dream home and moved back to Kansas. The castle

was lived in by various people until about 1960. Later on in the

1960's and 70's it became "the party place" for students from the U of

A, as well as local people.

After hearing about this castle, I searched for someone to take me

to see what was left of it. I was told by several people that there

was nothing left but a pile of rocks and I would be wasting my time.

Finally, last fall I was able to go there with Mr. and Mrs. Roy

Watkins as guides. Yes, a pile of rocks is all that is left of

this beautiful dream house of Clinton and Jessie Jones. It is sad

to stand and look at a pile of rubble and to realize that this once

was a very important part of someone's lives. Upon examination of

the remains of the house, it is very plain to see, even to an

inexperienced person, that the mortar that held the stones together

was the weak link in the construction and was the main reason that

"the walls came tumbling down". A few of the walls still stand

about four feet tall in places, but mostly they have fallen with parts of the white oak rafters and roof lying among them. The mortar in

the partial walls that are still standing up can be flicked out by the

mere touch of your finger and crumbles at the slightest touch. You

can still see the remains of the fireplace, which was situated on an

inside wall and had openings into more than one room. Later tenants

have used cement to reinforce the fireplace. The hillside which was

once landscaped and was the showplace of the county, is now grown up

in briars, bushes and tall grass. There is only two lone pine trees

and a few shrubs to mark the location of the beautiful landscaped

area.

I have thought a lot about the house and the people who came to this

part of Madison County and built their dream house. Considering

the time period that Clinton Jones constructed it and the tools that

were available to him, the mere fact that he was able to construct it

is quite a fete. When you stand and look at the pile of rocks, it is

hard to imagine just how many individual rocks that it took to

construct the house. It is plain to see from the information

available, that this house was looked upon as being something out of

the ordinary. Most people at this time were living in very plain

houses and would have considered this kind of house a luxury.

Clinton and Jessie Jones never had any children and it is a sad irony

to me that they spent so many years of their lives constructing a home

that they were evidently so proud of, only to leave it almost as soon

as it was finished. Jessie died in 1917, just a few years after

leaving Madison County, at the age of 57, and both Clinton and Jessie

are buried in Frankfort, Kansas.

LaVerne Place, our own version of a medieval castle, once stood in

all of its splendor, tall and proud on the side of a Madison County

hill. Now it is just a pile of fallen stones and rotting wood,

however it will be remembered by many as a intriguing part of the

history of Madison County.

If you have further information about this castle, please let me know.

Copies of the diaries mentioned in this story can be seen at the

Madison County Genealogical and Historical Society in Huntsville.

This is only one of the interesting historical landmarks that existed

in Madison County. Stop by the Society's library to read about

others.

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