

THE AUTHOR

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Mr. MacElree was admitted to the Chester County Bar in 1880 and since that time has practiced law in West Chester. He was twice District Attorney for Chester County and his ability as a persuasive speaker before the Court has long been recognized.

As an author and lecturer, Mr. MacElree is well and favorably known. He wrote, among other books, "Along the Borders of Chester County", "Down the Eastern and Up the Black Brandywine", "Along the Western Brandywine", "Side-lights of Bench and Bar of Chester County" and "The Trial of Jesus".

H O R S E - S H O E B E N D

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"AROUND THE BOUNDARIES OF CHESTER COUNTY"

B y

WILMER W. MacELREE

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Below Wood's Bridge the Octoraro meanders around the southwestern corner of West Nottingham Township and flows into Maryland; then loath to leave the state that gave it birth it turns northward once again and lingers long enough to murmur its farewell and having done so hastens on in its quest for the Susquehanna.

Who first gave the name of "Horse-Shoe" to this portion of the Octoraro or when it was given is alike unknown.

In 1807 John Frey, an iron master, applied that appellation to a fording when he asked for a road to form a link with two roads already constructed; one of them leading from Criswell's Ferry in Maryland to the Pennsylvania line, and the other from the Borough of Lancaster to the Horse-Shoe Fording on the Octoraro Creek.

His petition prays that the road may be laid out "in the best and nearest direction to Octoraro Forge, the property of the petitioner".

The draught attached to the return of the Viewers shows the course of the road as laid out by them and the location of the fording.

Frey's forge lay along the Octoraro a little below the grounds originally acquired for the Scouts Camp at a point where an old mill stands.

Perhaps it may not be altogether uninteresting briefly to give a history of the land embraced in this bend.

"On the 7th Day of the 8th Month (old style) 1751" a survey was made by George Churchman for Robert Mitchel of "two small Picoes of Land Situate in a Loop of Octoraro Creek called the Horse-Shoe ford--containing in both 70 acres & the usual allowance."

Some years later, Mitchel abandoned the land and in 1786 John Churchman surveyed the entire tract for himself and labelled it Crook Hill. One naturally asks why such a name was given to these acres in this beautiful turn of the Octoraro. In recent years, before the Scout Camp was organized, the number of illicit distilleries that were operated within its watery boundaries might well make such a designation appropriate, but my question relates to conditions in 1786. Was it at that time a place to which fugitives from justice betook them-

selves in their search for a safe retreat or did it have its origin in the crook of the stream? This question is apparently answered in Churchman's patent of July 14, 1786, in which the name is changed to Crooked Hill.

In 1822, the land was sold for taxes to Charles Miner the scholarly editor of the Village Record. The consideration named in the deed is four dollars and thirty-three cents. Two years later he disposed of the property to William Work for the sum of two hundred dollars.

In 1826, it passed into the Reynolds family where it remained until the early part of the Twentieth Century.

More than fifteen years have passed since I first looked at the draught of Frey's Road. As soon as I saw it I fixed upon a day to visit the Bend. An intermittent rain had fallen on the two preceding days, but the afternoon I selected greeted me with a sunny smile. Clouds, however, began to gather before I reached the Borough of Oxford and by the time I came to the Gray Horse Church, past which the road leads in its descent to the Octoraro, the clouds had grown darker and were closing in.

A storm was imminent. Hardly was I half way down Goat Hill when it broke. A moment later an avalanche of water was pouring down the ditches on both sides of the road.

The wind had risen, too, and was blowing hard, so hard in fact that the trees were bending close to the breaking point. To go back was impossible, to go forward was dangerous, for the darkness was concealing the turns in the road. Safety lay in the surefootedness of my horse and his ability to see through the rain and the blackness that enveloped us.

From the depths below came the booming of swollen waters, while the echoing thunder sounded as if it were blasting every rock along the banks. River, wind and thunder were holding a high carnival in the chasm whither the storm was driving me. But my horse proved true and at last the stony and abrupt descent was over and the ground about me gave me a feeling of levelness.

I stopped, for the water seemed to be rushing in every direction. As I did so a flash of lightning gave an instantaneous view of my surroundings--a light from Heaven illuminating Hell.

How long I stayed I cannot say. I waited 'til the storm was over and the clouds began to break, then a tired horse climbed the hill down which I had come and finally brought a bedrenched and bedraggled man over the muddy roads of Nottingham to the Borough of Oxford.

Was the experience worth while? Yes, for it showed me the Octoraro in its wildest mood. In fact, my experience almost justified the remark of a Maryland negro whom I had asked to point out the nearest way to Horse-Shoe Bend. "Down the Gray H-Horse Road," he stutteringly answered, "but I nebber goes dere--for doole h-hole am h-haunted."

In this year of grace, 1933, I revisit Horse-Shoe Bend and find many changes.

The entrance from the Gray Horse Road is closed. The rock and stone that formed the lower part of the hill have been utilized in improving the driveway along the stream, while the bushes and tangled vines that encumbered the ground then have been cut down and burned.

Five hundred acres embracing not only Horse-Shoe Bend, but the hills encircling it, have passed into the control of the State of Pennsylvania and the Encamping Association, Chester County Council of Boy Scouts. What was once a wilderness has become a park.

Would you enter the grounds today? If so you must travel two miles below Rising Sun, where a signboard on the northern side of the highway (U.S.1) that leads to Conowingo will direct you what course to take. After following the indicated road a mile or two, you will find the hills becoming larger and more abrupt until at last, on your left, you look down upon the waters of the Octoraro.

To view the Bend and Camp you must go at least a half mile further and pass through a gate. Going up the stream from the gate until the lower side of the Horse-Shoe is reached, you will see the Octoraro at its best. It is seronely beautiful. What remains to be seen? Many things--the old Fordings, the Seven Cabin Spring, the Buzzard's Nest Rock Shelter, the Devil's Lane, and the various Camps.

Looking southward from the main building, the land that lies before you is not unlike many a meadow; elsewhere, for the most part, it is wild and rugged. The hill north of the building declines gradually toward the west till it touches the stream. The declension toward the north is much sharper with many gullies. For almost half a mile westward from the eastern fording, the bank is precipitous and rocky. When the rough and stony road that leads from this fording leaves the stream, the land near the water becomes level with a plenteous growth of bushes and wild-briar, but on the Lancaster County side a sharp hill starting almost from the water's edge continues unbroken by ravines until another fording appears west of a small run. This is Horse-Shoe Fording that is shown on the draught of Frey's Road. It also appears on Churchman's survey of John Stone's tract in 1757.

Is the site of Old Shawana Town within Horse-Shoe Bend? Those who think so say that the high land of the enclosure would have been an ideal spot for a Shawnee town and claim that an Indian trail crossed at Horse-Shoe Fording. They also point to the great quantity of Indian relics--arrow heads, lasts, axes, and other tools that have been found upon this ground. An Indian trail did cross the Octoraro at a fording above the Horse-Shoe on Kirkpatrick's Bend. The grandfather of Graville Reynolds frequently spoke of this trail and fording and of the deer that came there to feed upon the wild vines and also of the herons that fished around an island in the center of the stream.

But did an Indian trail cross the Octoraro at Horse-Shoe Fording? If so, was it the fording referred to in a road proceeding of 1719? The road returned by the viewers started "on ye west side of Jonas Arskins Land at a poplar Marked to Six Notches thence East & be North by u Course of Marked Trees Until it Comes

to ye fording Place att Octtararo att ye old Shawana Town. Thence over Octoraro allong ye Indian Path to a Birch Tree by ye Side of ye hill along ye path Side Marked by Six Notches". From this point the course is mainly easterly until it passes by the south side of the Brick Meeting-house.

It is clear that a good part of this road ran through that portion of "Nottingham Lotts" that lay south of Mason and Dixon's Line.

Where was Jonas Arskins' land? Arskins was a resident of New Castle who owned land on White Clay Creek and also land "north of Octorara three or four miles from its mouth". This description while elastic is not sufficiently so as to warrant locating his Octoraro property as high up the stream as Horse-Shoe Bend. In 1713, he asked the Pennsylvania authorities to have the Octoraro tract surveyed. His request was granted but I can find no patent, survey or warrant and the poplar tree with its six notches has long ago fallen. I am satisfied that the Arskins road on the western side of the Octoraro ran south of the Pennsylvania line but I can not locate its course definitely. After much investigation and plotting I leave the question of the site of Old Shawana Town unsolved and wait like Lessing's Sultan for a wiser man.

In the first half of the Eighteenth Century there were several industries northwest of Horse-Shoe Bend. The remembrance of these industries is preserved in a couplet which the old men of this neighborhood often heard their fathers repeat:

"Masonry, fullery, pottery, hattery;
Over the hills to Hog Hollow Battery."

But enough of the past. Today you will find five camps in Horse-Shoe Bend bearing the names of Kit Carson, Boonesboro, Fire Circle, Sherwood Forest and Bayard Taylor. These camps form a crescent and are reached by various trails. One of them is called Alamo; another, Sante Fe; while the third has the sinister but alluring designation of Pirates' Trail. What Scout when following this path for the first time, could fail to experience the thrill of his life.

No better place in Chester County could have been selected for a Scout camping ground than this unique combination of land and water. Other places offer large level tracts and rocky hills but their streams lack the charms of the winding Octoraro.

Besides these features the site of Old Shawana Town can not be far away. With such a stimulant to fancy it would not surprise me if a youthful scout of imaginative vision were to see in the dusk of evening some flitting wraiths of Shawnee warriors among the rocks and the trees of this long, wild wooded ravine.

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West Chester, Pa.
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