Switzerland County landings

We moved to Switzerland County in 1999. Most of our family live north and east of here, so we looked for roads that would quickly get us to route 50 or interstate 74. We drove up every road that intersects with 156 hoping to find this magical route. We started with Wade Hill Rd. After driving for about 15 minutes we rounded a bend only to find we were back at the river. We next tried Goose Creek road with the same result. Route 56 looked like a major highway so we assumed it would take us north. We found ourselves winding down the hill behind Vevay headed toward the river. We soon realized that all roads in Switzerland County lead to the river.

A study of local history explained this phenomenon. Switzerland County's economy depended on the river as produce and products were shipped out and needed supplies were brought in. The roads were designed to facilitate the transportation of these goods. To minimize the distance from the outlying farms to a shipping point, 14 landings and 4 wharf boats were established. There were few points in Switzerland County more than 15 miles from a landing or wharf boat.

Wharf boats were located in Patriot, Florence, Markland and Vevay. They were actually floating warehouses built on the hulls of retired steamboats. Freight could easily be loaded or unloaded from the boats and from shore. The wharf boats typically handled freight and passengers for steamboats that ran a set schedule. The wharf boats kept detailed shipping records listing the name of the Steamboat and the items shipped. An 1861 freight tariff schedule gives an idea of the cost to ship goods from Switzerland County to Memphis. Most freight was shipped on a cost per 100 pounds basis. For example, hardware and glassware cost 30 cents per 100 pounds to ship. Bulkier items such as doors, stoves, safes, and machinery in boxes cost 40 cents per 100 pounds. Furniture had its own rate. A fine bureau cost $2.00 to ship while common bureaus only cost $1.50. A wardrobe cost 40 cents to ship if it were unassembled and $2.00 if it were assembled.

The landings were less elaborate than the wharf boats. They could be as simple as a cleared area near deep water or have buildings and a dock. Many of the steamboats that stopped at these landings were known as tramp boats. Tramping means that a boat has no scheduled landings and no scheduled freight or passengers. These steamboats would cruse the rivers looking for business, sounding their whistle long before they reached a landing. Because the sound of each steamboats whistle was unique, workers at the landing knew exactly which boat was approaching. If they had freight or passengers for that boat they would flag it down. Many of the great steamboat races were held between boats trying to be first to a landing. It was possible to go from Switzerland County to New Orleans on one of these tramping steamboats for $1.50 to $5.00. You would travel

in a class known as a deck passenger. You rode with the cargo and had to furnish your own food and bedding. If you were lucky the cargo was not a load of cattle or sheep.

Many farmers made extra money by cutting wood for the boats and selling it at the landings. A steamboat could run for about 10 hours on the wood supply onboard. The farmers would build a large fire to signal the passing steamboats that they had wood for sale. The boat would pull into the landing and the crew would inspect the wood. If the firewood was good a price was agreed upon and the wood would be loaded onboard. The deck passengers often loaded the wood as payment for their transportation.

Thus as we found, all roads in Switzerland County do indeed lead to the river and end at the location of one of these landings or wharf boats. North Landing was located on the Ohio and Switzerland County line. Highams landing was located at the end of Gridley road where Hilltop Materials is now located. Harris landing was on the eastern end of Goose Creek road and Goose Creek landing was at the other end near Patriot. A second Harris landing was located on the point of land near Bond Road. Hickman landing was near the end of Sand Run road with Rayls landing a short distance down river at about Hufford road. Wiley landing was near B Tapp road on Wiley Branch. Hastie landing was just above the current site of the Markland dam. It does not appear there were any landings between Markland and Vevay. The first landing below Vevay was Danglade's landing located on the back of their farm. The next landing was at the mouth of Indian Creek. Lampsons landing appears to have been located at the site of the Switzerland County Living History Museum. Danners landing was at the end of Patton Hollow road and the final landing was the Lamb landing. Most landings were named for the owner of the land. There were, however, some very interesting names given to the landings on other parts of the river. Examples of some Mississippi River landings are Pond Lilly, Sister, Widow Poe's, Lake Ditch and Seventy-Six.

To learn more about the landings and wharf boats visit the new Life on the Ohio river history museum opening in April. You will see a mural showing the location of the landings, detail wharf boat and shipping records and models of the many boats that made Switzerland County a port of call.