

Stone Architecture
Switzerland County Historical Society
December 11, 2009

As mentioned in last week's column, the Switzerland County Historical Society received a wonderful collection of writings by local historian Effa Danner (1874-1949), purchased at a local auction and donated by Pam Acton. The museum staff is enjoying this insightful group of documents that take an up-close and personal look into various aspects of our county's history.

One handwritten paper was rather brief, composed of notes that touched on one of the beautiful features in our rural landscape, stone walls and fences. The following has been gently edited.

The age of stone architecture would be incomplete without the mention of the pioneers' stone fence. Miles and miles of stone walls along the waterways where lime stones are plentiful were laid off as a permanent improvement on the farm. They are about eighteen inches wide, three to four feet high, built on a firm level foundation by competent stonemasons who knew their business and whose walls still stand firm after a century of service. Stonemasons Benjamin Webb and his brother Charles Webb were the builders of a lot of the Indian Creek stone fences.

There they stand moss-grown, lichen-covered, weather-worn and gray, a fortress home for the ground squirrel, the meadow mouse and the snake who loves to dwell there. The oxlip and the nodding violet grow in its shadow. Time passes on, gathers the pioneer and his sons to its bosom, but the stone wall fence like the creeks they follow stays on forever.

Effa Danner's words pay homage to a treasured feature of the historical society's Thiebaud farmstead, the stone walls and fences throughout the property. A 60 meter long stone retaining wall graces the entry drive to the house, with two sections in need of repair after at least 150 years of service. Atop an extremely steep hillside a half-hours hike from the house, a 60 meter long stone fence drops-off to the east and west, possibly serving to mark an old property line. Another ridge-top wall is approximately 115 meters long, with only about fifteen meters still standing.

An archeological survey of the Thiebaud property was conducted by Dr. Robert McCullough and Dr. Michael Strezewski of IUPUI as part of the feasibility study for the developing Agriculture Museum Center. The following excerpt revealed an interesting aspect related to stonework:

A total of 34 so-called "check dams" were identified on the property. All were built along the western ravine and its sub-drainages to the west of the press barn. Each was constructed by piling horizontally-lain, roughly-shaped limestone slabs along the bottom of the ravine. The dimensions of the dams vary widely according to the immediate topography. On average they measure about 1.0 meters in height and are anywhere from 5 to 12 meters wide. All appear to have been a single stone in thickness. No mortar was noted on any of the dams. In contrast to the stone walls, the workmanship on the dams is

not of great quality, indicating that they could have easily been constructed by the landowners, rather than by professional masons.

The full report is available at www.ipfw.edu/archsurv/ROI_305_lowres.pdf.

Martha Bladen