

IN SEARCH OF SCHOOLCRAFT IN THE WOODS NEAR DORA, MISSOURI

BY JASON MCCOLLOM

PHOTOS BY JIM MCFARLAND

“Do you see it? Do you see anything?” We were yelling at Jim McFarland, who had hiked away from the group, laterally along a steep bluff-line in the woods not too far from West Plains, Missouri. Though the leaves had fallen, the dense tree line of oak and hickory obscured our vision. Breathing heavily after the near-vertical climb from the creek bed, we waited to hear from our *de facto* leader, crouched over with our hands on our knees.

“No, I don’t think it’s here,” Jim called back. “Let’s head back.”

This was the second of three searches for Potato Cave, a site given historical significance by Henry R. Schoolcraft on his epic, ninety-day trek through the Ozarks. According to what we read in his published diary, we were following him one hundred ninety-nine years later almost to the day, in late November 2017. Schoolcraft supposedly spent the night of November 22-23, 1818, in a nearby cave, carving the date of his visit and a long poem in a “smooth calcareous rock.” And we thought Potato Cave was it.

Our Team

Everyone in our search party that day had an interest in Schoolcraft or Ozarks history. Jim McFarland, the head of the West Plains-based nonprofit Trillium Trust, and the brains behind the Unlock the Ozarks project that brought us together, served as our unofficial guide. Unlock the Ozarks aims to identify key sites of Schoolcraft’s journey so people can recreate parts of that nineteenth-century trek while learning about Ozarks history. McFarland sits along a lengthy line of generations in the southern Missouri Ozarks, and his knowledge of the land and people is wide and deep, so he’s a perfect leader for our group.

Then there’s Steve DeClue, who grew up locally in south-central Missouri, became an Ozarks expatriate in the Houston, Texas, oil industry

for some decades, and then recently resettled in West Plains. Steve is an old friend of Jim’s and passionate about all things Ozarks history.

I joined the search party, because I too have a passion for history—I teach it, after all, at Missouri State University-West Plains. My broad specialty is American and Canadian agricultural and rural history in the twentieth century, but one easily gets drawn into Ozarks history and culture after living here for only a few years. I moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas, for graduate school in 2007, and then came to West Plains in 2015. As a relative newcomer, I tell people there’s something about the Ozarks that pulls and tugs at a person; something that lodges hooks in one’s life that are difficult to remove. I brought along an interested student, Drew Bledsoe, and *OzarksWatch* editor Susan Croce Kelly, who rounded out our intrepid band.



The search team in front of the entrance to Potato Cave, from left: Amelia LaMair, Gainesville, Missouri; Steve DeClue, West Plains, Missouri; Eric Tumminia, Gainesville; Jim McFarland, West Plains; Jason McCollom, West Plains

Second Search

This November adventure was our second attempt to find Potato Cave, and it wouldn't be our last. A miserable, sticky, and tick-infested August attempt had yielded little except heightened determination to come back after the first couple of frosts. After that blistering late-summer excursion, Drew wryly noted that the title of the reprint of Schoolcraft's journal was apt: *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks*. When we returned in November, we knew we had gotten closer, but ultimately had to slink back home once again, empty handed.

Following this part of Schoolcraft's trail reminded us why he chose the winter season for his journey deep into the Ozarks: no bugs, less foliage, and milder weather. Schoolcraft traveled, apart from the few settled areas of the

Ozarks, following the interior waterways and Indian trails, and came in contact with sparse and isolated homesteads, hunters, and traders. He was less an adventurer than a young man on the make who hoped to use his observations and newfound familiarity with the region as a springboard to more lucrative endeavors—a federal mining position, for instance, or as a famous chronicler of western lands. Though these never came to fruition (he died penniless in 1864), Schoolcraft did produce invaluable observations of the area in his journal, which was expertly annotated by geographer Milton D. Rafferty and published by the University of Arkansas Press in 1996 as *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks*.

Schoolcraft's account of his trail leading to Potato Cave, for example, gives the reader a taste of his



Inside the first room

keen eye for descriptions of the Ozarks' karst landscapes:

Nothing could equal the sterility, or the rugged aspect of this valley, which deepened rapidly as we went, and was nothing more than a dry channel scooped out of a mass of rocks and stones, and seemed alike to forbid the expectation of finding either wood, grass, or water.

Unlock the Ozarks

In Schoolcraft's adventure, Jim McFarland found a vehicle through which he could kindle interest in Ozarks history. For instance, as Phyllis Rossiter points out in *A Living History of the Ozarks* (2006), "One can read Henry Schoolcraft's journal of his Ozarks sojourn of 1818-19 and follow the explorer's progress down the rivers, recognize the landmarks described in the narrative, and easily visualize Schoolcraft's current whereabouts as she reads. How many other areas of the country have remained so close to their 1818 geography?"

The Unlock the Ozarks project is a perfect vehicle to confirm Rossiter's observation about the historical and cultural worth of Schoolcraft's explorations. McFarland envisions a roadmap of county and state roads that would actually take someone the whole route of Schoolcraft's circuit—to follow in his literal footsteps—as close as possible. From there, the twenty-first century explorer could link up with a few dozen Schoolcraft sites, where a QR code would provide relevant information, and where they could get out of their vehicle and perhaps take the short hike to one of these sites. Some locations, of course, now lie on private land, and McFarland makes clear those would be off-limits to the curious Schoolcraft tailgater. But the multiple and myriad parts of Schoolcraft's journey that cut through public lands, national forests, or along rivers and creeks could function as road trip stops where people actively engage with Ozarks history. Trillium Trust (*See page 21*) is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Potato Cave is a potentially fitting site for the



Pond just about a quarter mile below the cave in the dry creek bed

Unlock the Ozarks project. Situated in the Mark Twain National Forest in northeast Ozark County, it is accessible to those willing to clamber down into a dry creek bed, a small tributary of the North Fork of the White River, and follow it a mile or two. Our party did that in December, 2017, on our third attempt to find the cave in which Schoolcraft spent a November night two hundred years ago. And we think we found it.

Third Search

Jim, Steve, myself, and two members of the local band Creek Stink (Eric Tumminia and Amelia LaMair)—who share our passion for the Ozarks outdoors and uncovering Ozarks history—arrived at that creek bed on a cold and clear December morning. After an hour or so of unsuccessfully searching some remaining areas we hadn't investigated during the first two trips, despondency set in. Following months

of analyzing Schoolcraft's journal and multiple on-site search attempts, it was quite possible Potato Cave would remain hidden to history. A last-ditch effort that morning had us fanned out along the hillsides and washes, as we meandered back toward our exit point (and towards potential failure once again).

Suddenly I heard Amelia yell, "There's something up here!" I squinted and spotted her a hundred yards up a bluff, waving her arms. We all shuffled up, over rocks and through brush, and came face to face with a dark opening about three feet high and perhaps six-to-eight feet across. The excitement was palpable. In 1818 Schoolcraft, too, had been "Elated with this sudden discovery... [and] scrambled up to explore it." Our assessment of the cave matches Schoolcraft's: it certainly was "habitable," "spacious," and with a "rugged" roof high enough in most places for us to walk unencumbered. Our band of explorers spent a memorable half-hour investigating Potato Cave,



We looked for, but did not find, the poem that Schoolcraft was to have etched inside the cave.

poking our heads in ceiling holes and around corners, and imagining where Schoolcraft might have slept or carved his poem.

We think there's a strong case to be made that this discovery is in fact the cave in which Schoolcraft spent the night of November 22, 1818. His description of the location and interior of the cave fits our observation, as do Schoolcraft's accompanying notes from that day's travels. Our case is not airtight, however. One inconsistency emerges with Schoolcraft's note that there was a "small spring of water trickling among the stones at our feet," and directly above this spring he noticed the cave. We didn't find a spring in the immediate vicinity, but much could have changed in 200 years. It has also been an exceptionally dry fall season in our neck of the Ozarks. In addition, Jim McFarland shared a rumor that Potato Cave had been dynamited in the 1920s in an attempt to increase the flow of the supposed nearby spring. Could Potato Cave have collapsed a century ago? Did the dynamite disrupt the spring, and is that why we didn't see water "trickling among the stones at our feet"? Or was this rumor merely that—a falsehood passed along as fact?

Until these queries have definitive answers, our group feels confident in claiming that we found Potato Cave and that Schoolcraft likely spent a night there 200 years ago. To our group of explorers, the experience of searching for one small part of Henry Schoolcraft's journey across the Ozarks makes his entire endeavor that much more impressive. Nine hundred miles over ninety days—it was an amazing feat through unforgiving wilderness. And we Ozarkers should all take some time in 2018 to learn about and celebrate this 200-year-old adventure. ■

UNLOCK THE OZARKS AND TRILLIUM TRUST

Imagine standing in a historic spot and instead of wondering what happened there, being able to call up history on your smartphone. That's the idea behind Unlock the Ozarks, the project that sent Ozarks history buffs scrambling through the undergrowth last winter in search of a cave where adventurer Henry Schoolcraft supposedly spent the night.

The idea behind Unlock the Ozarks is to put QR (Quick Response) codes on large key-shaped signs at historic locations like the Schoolcraft cave. These barcode labels can then be read by smartphones equipped with QR readers.

"When you scan the codes with a smartphone, there are links to different ways to find out more about the history of the location," says Jim McFarland, a key player in Unlock the Ozarks and a co-founder and director of Trillium Trust, the private non-profit organization that is sponsoring Unlock the Ozarks.

West Plains-based Trillium Trust is dedicated to increasing knowledge of local Ozarks culture, history, natural beauty, and entrepreneurship.

Some of the Trust's efforts to date include an incubator kitchen for regional food businesses, education programs and, most recently, Unlock the Ozarks, which ultimately is aimed at giving young people access to, and getting them excited about, Ozarks culture and history.

Identifying spots where Schoolcraft stopped in his 1818-1819 trek through the region is Unlock's biggest project to date, but several Unlock the Ozarks keys are already in place around the Howell County Courthouse in West Plains, including one at the location on East Main Street where Sheriff Roy Kelly was shot and killed by members of the notorious Ma Barker gang in 1931.

"It's not just a West Plains project; it's an Ozarks plateau project," says McFarland. "For example, Civil War sites can be included. Our goal is to have 500 keys in place over the next few years.

"Why is this important? We need to remember the stories our predecessors told us. It's who we are and where we came from. The idea is to keep the story forever and get it before it's too late."

To find out more about Unlock the Ozarks or Trillium Trust, contact McFarland via email at jmcfarland@trilliumtrust.org or by phone, 417-274-3176.