

The Enduring French Creole Community of Old Mines, Missouri

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French lead miners, fur traders, and farmers were living in Missouri for eighty years before the Louisiana Purchase. Their presence is splendidly preserved in French Creole houses at Ste. Genevieve, now a national “museum village” with the largest collection of French Creole buildings in the United States, and in village layouts and remnants of common-field landscapes at Ste. Genevieve, Florissant, St. Charles, and Portage des Sioux. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, only in the obscure community of Old Mines do the daily lifeways of the residents perpetuate vestiges of a “French way.”

Old Mines is a dispersed rural Ozarks community of mostly French Canadian origin in Missouri’s northeastern Washington County six miles north of the county seat of Potosi, sixty miles south of downtown St. Louis, and thirty miles west of the Mississippi River (Figure 1).¹ Some 1,000 people live on its forty square miles of wooded hills. The entire northeastern quadrant of Washington County constitutes a larger settlement region of French Creoles and includes another 2,000 people in the daughter communities of Fertile, Cannon Mines, Baryties, Tiff, Bellefontaine, Shibboleth, Cadet, Kingston, and Richwoods. Whereas better-known Ste. Genevieve, St. Charles, and St. Louis vigorously promote their past Frenchness to attract attention, Old Mines has continued its distinctive cultural traditions without conscious effort. It has quietly and passively evolved over the centuries, always tardily.

Old Mines is an “old landscape” in the sense that the families that settled there in the late-eighteenth century are the same families that still live there after twelve generations, some descendants occupying the same houses for as long as seven generations. Unpaved ridge roads used for two centuries bend around long-abandoned mining pits in woodlands that two centuries of repeated cutting have seriously degraded. Though it appears old, poor and worn out to outsiders, the landscape is comfortable to its residents—it is home.

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Figure 1. Old Mines is located in Washington County in the eastern Ozarks of Missouri.

Old Mines is essentially a covenant community in which members subscribe to common goals, common values, and common ways of living not imposed upon them by civil authorities or set by standards from the outside, but developed over decades of living together, sharing experiences, and retaining collective memories, always underpinned by a common Catholic faith.² Residents have a quiet sense of pride in their long heritage that proclaims “this is our land, we are different.”

The story of this enduring community begins in the early decades of the eighteenth century when the French explored the hills of eastern Missouri for lead.³ In 1723, François Renault received a grant of nine leagues for mines on a branch of the Little Meramec River (now the Fourche à Renault or Fourche Arno), and lead mining commenced in earnest, probably using black slaves from the French Caribbean.⁴ Renault abandoned his operation in the 1740s, but the site was periodically reinhabited and reworked by French Creoles of the middle Mississippi Valley who came to use “Vieilles Mines” for the location. Descendants of these miners have occupied Old Mines continuously since at least 1792.

Because lead ore, often in pure chunks up to twenty pounds, occurred at the surface over hundreds of square miles, any miner could open his own pit and smelt the ore crudely on a log fire. Widespread occurrence of surface ore kept mining dispersed among dozens of families and allowed families to work independently, but smelting was increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few after American Moses Austin set up his lead plantation at nearby Mine à Breton in 1799.

Spanish authorities in control of Louisiana did not interfere with the longstanding Creole tradition of mining and cutting timber on *domaine royale* and did not grant land titles to these independent miners. Though rich in game for hunting and trapping, the Ozarks hills were too poor for full-time farming or to lay out a traditional French village as at Ste. Genevieve, with the result that the families ended up squatting on the *domaine royale* and aggregating into tiny, free-form villages in the creek valleys. Thus, the elements of settlement that still characterize Old Mines today were implanted early—scattered hamlets, desultory farming, a depleted natural-resource base, and living on public land or the land of mining companies.

Rumors of possible retrocession of Louisiana to France and then of cession to the U.S. prompted the wealthy lead entrepreneurs of Ste. Genevieve to seek official title to valuable mineral lands in the eastern Ozarks. At Old Mines, they colluded with the local independent miners, who did not think landownership by a piece of paper was necessary to obtain official title to lead-bearing lands along Old Mines Creek. The request for land at Old Mines (May 25, 1803) was an improbable combination of some of the wealthiest families of Upper Louisiana and local, hardscrabble Creole miners living off the land—no Americans were involved. A mere two weeks before Old Mines residents learned of Louisiana's sale to the U.S.,⁵ the lieutenant governor at St. Louis awarded a concession of 13,400 arpents (17.8 square miles) to the collective group within ten days.

The group concession had the customary French shape of a long rectangle fronting on Old Mines Creek. Within a few years surveyors subdivided it into thirty-one parallel, equally sized long lots for the thirty-one resident and absentee signers of the concession request. The long lots were simply a way to divide a large property into equal tracts and are not the same as long lots of the agricultural common fields at Ste. Genevieve, St. Louis, and St. Charles. Still visible in the landscape, the long lots continue to be used for legal property descriptions. Unfortunately, the thirty-one long lots, when assigned to the families by chance, did not match the residences of families who continued to live clustered in previously established hamlets. But no one cared at the time, neither residents nor wealthy absentee operators.⁶

Miners used centuries-old mining methods of pick, shovel, and windlass to dig the surface ore. *Piocheurs* (diggers), both Creoles and black slaves (for the wealthy), worked side by side, digging into practically every hillside. Miners knew of deleterious effects on humans of fumes from lead

smelting in unenclosed log furnaces, and this is likely why slaves did most of the smelting. In recognition of health problems, miners fenced off furnace pits from free-ranging hogs and cattle and put their crops at some distance as a matter of longstanding practice, unenjoined by law.⁷

Miners built their cabins (*cabanes*, not *maisons*) of native wood, the logs just as often laid horizontally in the American style (*pièce sur pièce*) as vertically in the French style (*poteaux sur sol, poteaux en terre*). Low-pitched roofs and *galeries* (“gallery” is still the word for porch at Old Mines) were innovations that were brought upriver from Lower Louisiana for the hot, humid Missouri summers⁸ (Figure 2). They had extensive *jardins* (vegetable gardens) but only tiny *champs* (fields) for row crops for household needs. They protected their crop plots with simple “French fences,” or logs and brush piled up in rows, not with American rail fences or the formal French-style vertical posts as in Ste. Genevieve.

Whereas entrepreneurial French at Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis adjusted rapidly to the incoming American regime by learning the language and laws and entering into advantageous marriages, Creoles at Old Mines had less contact with the newcomers and held on to traditional ways. The American governmental policy of reserving lead-bearing lands from sale and delaying private lead lands from title confirmation (the Old Mines group concession was in legal limbo until confirmation in 1833) created confused landownership conditions throughout the mineral district. While American nabobs asserted strong-arm control of mines and defied au-



Figure 2. The Etienne Lamarque House at Old Mines, Missouri, built about 1818 (State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

thorities to oust them, the Old Mines *piocheurs* remained tenaciously on the lands they occupied and continued mining the hillsides.

Enterprising French families from St. Louis and Ste. Genevieve and American companies from St. Louis, Baltimore, and Philadelphia bought land in the concession and neighboring hills. Many Old Miners willingly sold their uninhabited long lots to these mining companies and remained squatters on someone else's land or lived on lots kept in the hands of a few families.⁹ Thus, the unconcern with property ownership was reiterated. Also forming during these early American years was an economic power structure that subjected the independent miners to domination by absentee lead companies. It was a type of colonial economic exploitation with grave implications for a society increasingly being divided along cultural lines—non-resident English-speaking civil and economic authorities and resident French-speaking laborers.

When richer lead mines along the upper Mississippi River came into production in the 1820s, lead mining in eastern Missouri declined. In the Old Mines area, however, miners kept on digging their pits and cutting timber for fuel; there was nothing else to turn to because commercial agriculture was not possible on their poor soils. In 1833, nearly 400 people lived on the concession itself, including a few new Irish-Catholic families, and several hundred more lived just beyond the concession. The community was keeping its progeny at home, even as economic conditions worsened. After the Civil War, diamond-bit drilling introduced deep-rock mining to the eastern Ozarks and converted it into the world's largest lead-producing region. But shafts were not drilled at Old Mines, which, economically, then fell further behind. Defensiveness, a sense of inferiority, and social and psychological isolation that poverty begets became firmly entrenched and engendered cultural separateness.

Toward the end of the century *tuff blanc* (tuff) or barite, which the *piocheurs* of Old Mines had earlier discarded from their lead pits as waste, became a resource for the fast-growing petroleum industry.¹⁰ Whole families turned to the back-breaking job of picking up heavy rocks of tuff from the ground or digging it in pits, using the same primitive methods as in lead-mining days—pick, shovel, windlass, rattlebox, wheelbarrow, mule-pulled wagon, and human muscles (Figure 3).¹¹ Though dug independently by family labor on company-owned land, externally owned companies controlled marketing and milling, and families received little in pay for physically moving tons of rock from pit to company mill. The division between “American” (English-speaking) economic authority and Creole (French-speaking) manual labor deepened.

Tuff companies brought in mechanical shovels in the 1940s, throwing Creole laborers out of work and plunging Old Mines into the direst of economic conditions. Family labor in mining pits stopped after two centuries. In 1949, the unemployment rate among adult males in Old Mines approached 100 percent.¹² “French” became equated with poverty, lack of



Figure 3. Tiff (barite) miner, with hat, hand digging in a pit in Washington County, Missouri, around 1930 (Ken Magazine, Courtesy State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

education, and backwardness.¹³ People survived on mutual aid within the community organized around families, St. Joachim Catholic Church, and the Rural Parish Workers of Christ the King, a Catholic relief agency from St. Louis. Visitors, however, reported a population reasonably content with their pace of life. Folks gathered in each others' cabins to fiddle, sing, and tell tales.¹⁴

National economic growth after World War II broke the economic torpor and self-imposed inward mentality and isolation of Old Mines. Jobs opened in neighboring Jefferson County. Highway 21, paved to St. Louis in 1949, made commuting possible. Some Old Mines residents moved to the city, but more commuted, still a common practice. Car-loads of men and women left their families in the morning and returned

in the evening for the fifty-mile one-way trip. Others commuted weekly, returning home for the weekends. Attachment to place is unusually strong at Old Mines; life in the strange city is not preferable to life with one's extended family in Old Mines. Commuting jobs remain the major source of income for the community, for Old Mines itself still has few opportunities for employment.

Today there is no "town center" for the 3,000 residents of northeastern Washington County. The sole geographic focus is venerable St. Joachim Church, which is where the highway signs labeling Old Mines stand (Figure 4).¹⁵ Probably all residents are aware of the community's French ancestry, although they no longer refer to themselves as Creoles or Canadians. The French-speaking black population is gone. Washington County stands out statistically in Missouri for its high population growth rate due to large-sized families and low emigration rates from the county, for low income and little wealth per household even for an Ozark county, and for high unemployment rates that consistently rank among the highest in Missouri.¹⁶ The community has yet to enter the mainstream of American economic prosperity.

These conditions may not be apparent to those who pass through the community on Missouri Highway 21. Off onto the side roads and trails emerges the traditional settlement landscape. Houses, cabins, and trailers are collected in clusters of five to twenty families, situated randomly in the wooded hills at the end of an unimproved cul-de-sac that could be on mining-company land. A collection of mailboxes where the cul-de-sac meets the county road betrays the secluded compound's existence. Each compound has a name (e.g., Rabbitville) known only locally. An intricate network of foot trails and ridge roads kept passable by usage interconnect these discrete neighborhoods through brushy, second-growth woods.

Unincorporated and lacking any civil organization below the county level, Old Mines has depended on St. Joachim Catholic Church to organize community life and serve as the institutional force to sustain cultural identity for two centuries. Community announcements made through the church reach everyone. While civil authority may be distant, religious authority most certainly is not and, in Old Mines, commands respect.

Community cohesion derives from loyalty to large, interrelated families: most in Old Mines are at least third cousins. Until the twentieth century, few outsiders took up residence in the community, and thus the community's social isolation resulted in consanguinity and risked inbreeding.¹⁷ However, external job opportunities in the twentieth century led to more marriages outside the community and much less social isolation. Nevertheless, some fifteen family names still dominate the community—one possible reason for the common use of nicknames instead of family names.¹⁸

Because much of Old Mines' history is unwritten, the community remembers its past by oral tradition. The vernacular has taken precedence over the formal, whether in building, educating, cooking, or farming. It is not surprising that the *conteur*, or storyteller, has long retained an esteemed



Figure 4. St. Joachim Catholic Church at Old Mines, Missouri (State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

role in the community.¹⁹ Fiddling, dancing, *boullions* (chicken soup dinners, but now the common word for a social gathering in a home), and distinctive foods (e.g., *croqueciolles*, crisp fritters, *galettes chouazes*, fried doughnuts, and *du gru et des fèves*, hominy and beans) continue as learned from parents and grandparents. Homes prominently display blessed palm fronds, altars, and icons. Madonnas and grottos decorate yards that are outlined with attractive rocks and minerals that reconnect residents to their arduous mining past. Gardens are filled with an enormous variety of vegetables, greens, and herbs.²⁰

The French language, its purity not upheld by an educated elite and unreinforced by French-speaking immigrants since 1800, has been passed on to succeeding generations by speech. Although 90 percent of the households at Old Mines still spoke French in the 1930s, public schools at the same time strictly forbade it.²¹ Pervasive ridicule by school and other public leaders who equated the language with backwardness—even parents were ashamed to speak French and would not let their children learn it—had reduced the language to the exclusive domain of the oldest members of the community by the 1970s.²² Now they are gone and the language remains primarily in singing and for special terms. Attempts to restore it have resulted in sporadic interest in it as a cultural heritage but will not recapture the language as a common speech form. Without a different language to set it apart, Old Mines may eventually lose its identity as a French Creole island in an American sea.²³

Poverty and self-imposed isolation enabled elements of Old Mines' Frenchness to persist. A community essentially closed to others—who would choose to move into an economically struggling and socially closed community?—Old Mines has continued enough of its traditional lifeways to be obviously recognizable as French but has incorporated practices of others as necessary to survive. Old Mines had no wealthy, socially conscious community leaders to set cultural standards. On the other hand, neither were there leaders, as in Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis, to show by example how to participate productively in the economic and social life of Americans and escape becoming a minority. Thus the French ways that have survived are the vernacular, those passed down by common folk through the closeness of families.

Since the 1970s, community festivals have been dispelling residents' feelings of inferiority. St. Joachim Church holds multiday picnics, complete with bread baked in *fours à pain* (outdoor ovens) and attended by several thousand, including expatriates from St. Louis and elsewhere. The Old Mines Area Historical Society, formed in 1977, annually celebrates a joyful *Fête de l'Automne* with traditional foods and crafts at a reconstructed village of authentic Creole cabins (Figures 5-8). A separate group formed in 1983, *La Brigade à Renault*, conducts *La Fête à Renault*, an annual rendezvous for French and Indians (Figures 9-10). These festive efforts are aimed more at restoring a sense of pride in the community for locals and former



Figures 5-8. Activities at a Fête de l'Automne in Old Mines, Missouri (Old Mines Area Historical Society). Figure 5 depicts Rosie Boyer and Ilene Villmer at the Noad Boyer house, Figure 6 shows Dennis Boyer splitting shingles, Figure 7 features Rosemary Sansoucie and partner cooking apple butter, and Figure 8 captures Anna Pashia (Paget) hooking a rag rug.

residents and less at attracting tourists with money. Old Mines festivals are not listed with the Missouri Division of Tourism for broad geographic promotion, as are French festivals at Ste. Genevieve, St. Louis, and St. Charles.

It is the insular genuineness of the community that most strikes the contemporary landscape interpreter. A community maintained for its residents alone, there are no highway billboards, no brochures luring outsiders to “come see us (and spend your money here),” no motels or trendy bed-and-breakfasts, not even one restaurant to accommodate visitors. Old Mines is a landscape built over time by continuous adjustment to changing economic conditions but always keeping an attachment to the place and continuing just enough of its French past to be distinctive as a French community to its residents and to outsiders. Much like an Old World French *pays*, Old Mines is an enduring landscape, one of continuity built over generations by the same families.



Figure 9. Brigade à Renault Rendezvous, Old Mines, Missouri (Old Mines Area Historical Society).



Figure 10. Encampment at a Brigade à Renault Rendezvous, Old Mines, Missouri (Old Mines Area Historical Society).

Notes

1. Though “Ozarks” is used for the region at Old Mines today, it was not used in Missouri in colonial time. Ozarks derives from *aux Arcs* (French abbreviation for land of the Arcansas Indians) and was first applied along the Arkansas River in the early eighteenth century. It was not extended into this part of Missouri until well into the nineteenth century. Lynn Morrow, “Ozark/Ozarks: Establishing a Regional Term,” *White River Valley Historical Quarterly* 35:2 (Fall 1996): 4-11.

2. The original covenant communities in America were those in colonial New England wherein members agreed to live by an established set of rules as a “Christian utopian closed corporate community,” Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970). Old Mines did not have formal rules and was covenant in the sense of cultural homogeneity wherein disputes were mediated locally through local norms of conduct, Stuart Banner, *Legal Systems in Conflict: Property and Sovereignty in Missouri, 1750-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).
3. C. Ray Brassieur curated and designed an exhibition, “La Vieille Mine: The Enduring Community,” 1989, that toured in Old Mines, St. Louis, and several small towns in Missouri, and others have also used “enduring” to characterize Old Mines. The settlement history of Old Mines until the 1820s is interpreted in Walter A. Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks: A Historical Geography of Missouri's Ste. Genevieve District, 1760-1830* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002): 303-20. The best historical summary by a resident of Old Mines is Natalie Villmer, “History of Old Mines Area, Washington County, Missouri—A Resume” (Old Mines, Mo.: Old Mines Area Historical Society, 1973). Also see Ward Allison Dorrance, *The Survival of French in the Old District of Sainte Genevieve*, University of Missouri Studies Quarterly 10(2) (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1935) and Rosemary Hyde Thomas, *It's Good to Tell You: French Folktales from Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981): 212-42.
4. In French, *mine* may mean both the presence of a mineral deposit as well as a worked deposit. The words *pays rempli de mines* on eighteenth-century maps mean only that the land was full of lead ore.
5. Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks*, 306-10.
6. Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks*, 310-14.
7. Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks*, 50-51.
8. Charles E. Peterson, *Colonial St. Louis: Building a Creole Capital* (Tucson, Arizona: The Patrice Press, 1993). Originally published in the *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 3(1947): 11-30, 94-111, 133-49.
9. Schroeder, *Opening the Ozarks*, 314-15.
10. Barite, the ore for barium sulfate, served as a flux in oil-well drilling and is now used as a pigment in paints and printing inks and for X-ray diagnosis. Washington County, Missouri, was the nation's leading barite producer throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.
11. Joseph Médard Carrière, *Tales from the French Folk-Lore of Missouri*, Northwestern University Studies in the Humanities No. 1 (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1937): 14.
12. Thomas, *It's Good to Tell You*, 219.
13. Mary Bolland Taussig, “School Attendance in Washington County, Missouri: A Study of Certain Social and Economic Factors in the Lives of Children in the Tiff Area of Washington County, Missouri, in Relation to the School Attendance.” M.A. thesis, Washington University, St. Louis, 1938.
14. Taussig, “School Attendance in Washington County, Missouri,” 78.
15. Joachim is today pronounced Joe-AH-kim. Its former French pronunciation came into English as Swashin or Swashing. Elsewhere in the Ozarks, the German Joachim has been rendered as Yokum or Yocum in English.
16. Missouri Office of Economic Development, Jefferson City, Missouri.
17. Carl O. Sauer, *The Geography of the Ozark Highland of Missouri* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920): 93.
18. Kent Beaulne, Judith Escoffier, and Patricia Weeks, “Les Nom des Vielle Famille de la Region de la Vielle Mines (sic) (Old Family Names of the Old Mines Area in Missouri).” Old Mines, Missouri: Old Mines Area Historical Society, 1982.
19. Carrière, *Tales from the French Folk-Lore of Missouri*; Thomas, *It's Good to Tell You*; C. Ray Brassieur, “Expression of French Identity in the Mid-Mississippi Valley,” Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1999: 75-107.
20. Brassieur, “Expression of French Identity in the Mid-Mississippi Valley,” 59-61, 63-68; Thomas, *It's Good to Tell You*, 226-27.
21. Brassieur, “Expression of French Identity in the Mid-Mississippi Valley,” 30-32.
22. Villmer, “History of Old Mines Area”; Thomas, *It's Good to Tell You*, 217-18; Gerald L. Gold, “Lead Mining and the Survival and Demise of French in Rural Missouri,” in Dean R. Louder and Eric Waddell, eds., *French America, Mobility, Identity, and Minority Experience Across the Continent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983): 154-55.
23. Brassieur, “Expression of French Identity in the Mid-Mississippi Valley,” 26-35.