

THE NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKE

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I choose to write the historical story of the New Madrid earthquake because of its value to the Jackson Purchase Historical Society and because I believe I ought to write the history of what I know about the greatest natural phenomenon that has ever come to pass on the North American continent.

My relation with the history of the New Madrid earthquake is a unique one. As far as I know, I am the only living person who ever saw anybody, man or woman, who lived through every harrowing shock and tremor of the seventy-seven days of the New Madrid earthquake and lived to tell the story.

Dosson Cromwell, my mother's great grandfather, was granted a square mile of land on the west side of the Mississippi River by the Spanish government. The grant of land was one mile upstream from the New Madrid Trading Post, named after the capital of Spain. I do not know when the grant of land was made, but Dosson Cromwell moved onto his land and lived there until his wife had two children, a boy named Oliver and a girl, I believe named Sarah. Oliver Cromwell, named after the famous Scotsman, in time became my mother's grandfather and a wonderful family historian.

The Indians in the Missouri Territory were mean and thieving. The hunters, trappers, and adventurers who often stopped at the New Madrid Trading Post were a rough and tumble segment of pioneer life only a degree or two above the Indians, whom they hated.

Dosson Cromwell never felt secure on his land, consequently, he abandoned his land in the night when the moon was full and the water in the Mississippi River was low. He put his wife and two children onto a raft he had made from driftwood, along with his horse, his dog, gun, axe, dutch oven, frying pan, and stew kettle. He poled the raft across the Mississippi River and landed on the Kentucky shore five miles below the New Madrid Trading Post. He made his way into what is now Graves County and built a strong, sturdy log house about four miles northeast of where the city of Mayfield, the county seat of Graves County, is situated. That is where Dosson Cromwell and his family were living in 1811.

The entire Dosson Cromwell family was awakened by the vigorous shaking of their beds and the cracking and splintering of timber accompanied by a deep, unrecognizable rumbling sound which seemed to come from deep inside the earth instead of from the clouds where thunder originates.

The Cromwells were frightened almost out of their wits. They ran out into the dark calling to each other to keep together. They stumbled about as they tried to stay erect on the shifting, rolling ground beneath their feet. They almost froze, too. Again they shouted to each other amid the rumbling and roaring, "It's just like our preachers have told us it would be on doomsday."

In religious belief the Cromwells were called Hardshell Baptist. They were fundamentalists. They believed in a literal hell and a literal heaven. Their ministers usually were poorly educated; they preached about hellfire, damnation, predestination, and the imminent end of time and the utter destruction of the world.

Dosson Cromwell's house was almost wrecked. The logs were shaken out of position at the corners but the roof remained on top of the logs. That gave the family shelter from rain and snow. The chimney toppled from its foundation. Dosson Cromwell built a heaping log fire on the ground a few steps from his front door to keep his family from freezing and to have live coals for cooking. Within a week friends and neighbors whose houses had not been damaged came and helped Dosson Cromwell put his house in order and rebuild his chimney.

That is how the New Madrid earthquake affected the house and family of Dosson Cromwell, but the Cromwell family did not leave their home as some other families did.

In 1809, two years before the New Madrid earthquake, my great grandfather, Phillip Guier, erected two two-story log houses 16 feet apart on his large tract of land which he had purchased from Abraham Boyd who operated a ferry service across the Cumberland River at a point in Christian County called Boyd's Landing. In 1820 when Trigg County was carved out of Christian County the name Boyd's Landing was changed to Canton.

The two log houses were securely tied together by notch and saddle construction on the level with the floor of the upper story. The open space between the two buildings was called a dogtrot. The walls of the large upper room were securely tied together by two strong log partitions with notch and saddle construction into each wall as were all corners of the fort-like building.

Phillip Guier built his fort-like houses as security against a possible attack by the Chickasaw Indians who were often seen beachcoming on the west bank of the Cumberland River only a half mile away. He had seen the aftermath of the Indian raid and massacre in the Catawba River valley in North Carolina and he built to feel secure.

When the New Madrid earthquake erupted in the night of December 11, 1811, Phillip Guier's family of thirteen people were sleeping on the upper floor of his fort-like house. They were awakened by the vigorous rocking and shaking of the house and the creaking of timbers in it. Each member thought that the Indians finally had attacked as was feared. When the chinking and daubing began to fall out of the cracks between the logs, however, they knew an earthquake had erupted not far away. They hurriedly took whatever clothes and blankets they could find in the dark and ran, badly frightened, out into the darkness and into the frigid air. Like the Cromwells, they almost froze.

When the shock had subsided the family went back into the house, which had withstood the shock, and discovered that all the chinking and daubing in the upper story had been shaken out of the cracks between the logs and the cold wind whistled through as freely as it does through the bare branches of trees in the forest.

When daybreak came the women worked feverishly in the cold to clean up the mess in the house while Phillip Guier and his four sons toiled in the bitter cold from daylight until dark tapping the chinking back into place. Against that they daubed the soft clay mud, which froze hard in an hour. In one week another severe shock came and shattered the frozen clay into fine pieces and it fell out a second time, but on the outside this time. The daubing had to be done all over again.

The suffering of the Guier family through the winters of 1811 and 1812 was great, but because of the rigid construction, the house withstood every shock and tremor of the New Madrid earthquake.

That old fort-like house stood for more than ninety years, victor over every foe but time.

When my father moved with his family from his birthplace in Trigg County to Calloway County on the third day of January, 1899, the caravan consisted of four wagons, ten horses, two cows, and fifteen people. My father's wagon was the last one to leave. An hour later when our wagon came in full view of the old fort-like Phillip Guier house, my father stopped and took a long reminiscent view of his great grandfather's old home. Nobody had lived in it after 1851. One corner of the upper story had rotted away and it sagged a little. The boards on the floor had rotted and fallen down inside the building, leaving the rafters bare

and regularly spaced like the ribs of a giant reclining skeleton.

The remainder of this story is the physical history of the New Madrid earthquake. The reasons for the earthquake, the deductions, and the conclusions are the author's.

The New Madrid earthquake erupted in the night of December 11, 1811. The name comes from the name of the New Madrid Trading Post, which it destroyed, as well as all the boats moored near it.

My knowledge of the New Madrid earthquake comes from the lips of those who lived through every shock and tremor of it. I know no source of information more reliable than that.

The people literally were caught napping when the earthquake erupted. They need not have been. The actions of the wild animals in the Mississippi River valley told a story the people were unable to understand. Their story was a warning.

People who crossed the Mississippi River valley in the fall of 1811 on their way to a new home in the west were amazed at the number of wild animals hurrying across the roads in front of them. All were traveling in a southerly direction. Their extrasensory perception, which we call E.S.P., had warned them of some impending disaster. Wild animals sleep on the bare ground and walk on it with bare feet. They can feel every tremor of the earth, and they know when to seek safety. Indians have a high degree of extrasensory perception, far beyond that of white people. If I had seen the actions of the wild animals that others saw, I believe that I could have been aware of some impending disaster.

My great grandmother was born in 1798. She was nearly 13 years old when the New Madrid earthquake erupted. She died in 1894. I was 12 years old when she died. She told me the story of the New Madrid earthquake over and over again. Always she admonished me to remember what she said. I do remember.

I believe the New Madrid earthquake was the result of a gigantic underground gas explosion of such magnitude that it is beyond the ability of man to calculate. The pentup gas probably exploded from pressure like the gas in a diesel motor. The gas pocket had to be a massive one, and deep. It extended up and down the Mississippi River valley for more than 60 miles. The explosion was not a progressive one. It was instantaneous like the explosion of a charge of dynamite. Nobody knows at what point in that long gas pocket the ignition took place.

The shock from the first explosion was so great it literally destroyed the New Madrid Trading Post, a few miles below Cairo, Illinois. In the same instant of time sixty miles downstream near Tiptonville, Tennessee, the force of the explosion was so great it upheaved several cubic miles of earth, but nobody knows how high. By the upward movement of the earth a violent suction force was created, and aided by the natural air pressure, a vast amount of bottom land loosened by the explosion was drawn in under the upheaved earth. When the upheaved earth settled it rested on a firm foundation and remained high above the highwater mark. That left a giant immovable barrier right across the channel of the Mississippi River. As the land mass was drawn away from the hills to the east, it created the massive fault called Reelfoot Lake. The land mass was 18 miles long and the south end of it moved one-half mile westward and the north end moved two miles westward. Those measurements establish the widths of the lake.

All the rivers in the Mississippi River watershed west, north, and east of Cairo, Illinois, empty their waters into the Mississippi River channel just below Cairo, Illinois. That mighty mass of moving water, the largest in North America, running at a speed of four miles per hour ran head on against the immovable

barrier across her channel immediately after the terrific explosion. The water swerved and ran into the Reelfoot fault for 52 hours before the vast underground cavernous pockets made by the explosion and Reelfoot fault were filled. At that moment the mightiest body of moving water on the North American continent was squarely up against an immovable barrier and had nowhere to go. The water quickly moved to the Missouri side and cut a new channel 23 miles long around that huge mass of upheaved earth and rejoined the old channel below the barrier.

It has been nearly 168 years since the New Madrid earthquake frightened the people all over the Jackson Purchase area. There are many physical scars of that terrifying event. The most fascinating and interesting evidence of the earthquake is Reelfoot Lake. Probably in another span of 168 years Reelfoot Lake will be only a swamp.

There is a beautiful Indian legend about the origin of Reelfoot Lake that ought to become a part of the history of it. I have not written all I know about the story, but the story is already a long one. Let us make and preserve history.