PAUL STRAIGHT

Yarrow, like many of the towns in Northeast Missouri, was once a thriving, bustling little town. With the improvement of the highway systems, many of these towns began to die.

Most of the residents left for better jobs, but in almost every town there remain a few who stay behind to become the caretakers of the land, the town, and its history.

Paul Straight is one of those caretakers and we were pleased when he consented to let us visit and interview him at his home in Yarrow.

"Com'on in," Paul said as we started toward the house. Just as we got to the back door we could hear fiddling music coming from the living room.

Before we could sit down and talk, we had to have a cup of his "brew," meaning some of his Folgers coffee. After we had tilted our cups we went into the living room to listen to the music for a while.

Paul put on a record of "old Pete Mehan," one of Paul's friends that he had met at a fiddling contest. He has all of Pete's records. According to Paul it is "mighty fine music."

With, "Now listen kids she's comin' up loud and clear," we heard some of the best music around, in Paul's opinion, and we all enjoyed it, too.

Just as the music started, he began dancing, but before he really got started he sat down and said he'd be quiet.

We asked him if he'd show us how his type of dancing, which is called clogging, is done. So, with our teacher as a partner he danced around stomping his feet to the beat of the music.

We heard some of the best music around . . .

When the song was ended, Paul got out his rattle bones to play to the beat of the music of the next song. For someone who has never seen them or heard them played, it is a whole new experience. The set he had was brought from Illinois by his grandfather.

"The first rattle bones used to be made out of cow ribs—these are mahogany here," Paul learned to play the rattle bones from his father who learned from his father before him.

Then Paul said, "You say you want to hear that Jew's Harp played?"

With that he played three different harps—a tenor, an alto, and a deep bass (which he called Elmo). When he first started playing Elmo he said it "sounds like a bullfrog."

He then passed the Jews harps out to the boys for them to try. Before their attempts, Paul gave them a few pointers.

"See the sharp of your teeth? Just set your teeth right there, see. Like that, then kinda close your lips and hold out this way. Kinda judge it with your tongue."

After the boys caught their tongues on the harps they gave it up pretty quick. Paul said a lot of Jews harps were made out of cast iron, but those weren't very good. His came in a set of three from Sweden and were made out of steel.

"They're just right, I say the tune's just right."

He took up the Jews harp because "us country boys didn't have much to do." One of his brothers plays the fiddle and the other plays the banjo. His two sisters both play the piano and violin. He was "kinda left with the rattle bones and the Jews harp."

There are five children in Paul's family: a big brother John out in Los Angeles with the Sante Fe; then an older sister, Ruth, in Statesboro, Georgia, teaching school; the next sister, Clara, in Ithaca, New York; Paul came after her; and a younger brother down in Columbia, Missouri, with the M.F.A. Oil Company.

Paul and his younger brother were both born in the house he lives in now. His oldest brother was born in Portland, Oregon. The oldest sister was born in Boise, Idaho. The next sister was born in Walla Walla, Washington.

"I was born right here in this bedroom in here. Doc Muiner came up on the old C-B-Q Railroad. Put me on earth here in high shape."

"Then he went on to Unionville. The railroad ran from Centerville, Iowa to Elmer, Missouri. This little train ran through here. The fact is he came up on the hand car the mornin' he delivered me."

His ancestors came from Scotland and Cork, Ireland. They all moved to America and the Straight family lived in Green, New York.

Paul said that they "...migrated west and went plum as far as they could go. They all married women out there and then they started back. This is as far as they got. Kinda settled down and raised a family here."

When he was asked where he went to school, his comment was, "Well, most of it was out behind the barn."

"Spent eight years up here in this little school house you just passed by. Seven years, I was pretty bright so I got out early."

His two sisters had to walk five miles to Gifford each day to go to school and five miles back each night for two years. Then they started going to high school at Kirksville.

When Paul first started to work shucking corn, stripping cane, and cutting brush, he was paid a dollar a day.
Paul’s History of Yarrow

“There was some settlers come up the river and they saw all these beautiful, little white flowers on the hillside and they decided that they were the little flower called Yarrow, so that’s where it started from, was from that little flower.”

“On west of Yarrow, the first fork was Linderville. And that little town of Linderville kinda moved over to Yarrow.”

The old mill was Doomy’s Mill to begin with. Weber’s bought it off Doomy. Lawrence Hayes and Henry Cook, they bought it off Weber and run it for a little while.

Down below the Yarrow mill there was a sawmill and also a big sorghum mill. “They run that sorghum through clay, . . . made the purtiest sorghum you ever ate. And they sawed out all the logs there for country wide.”

And on up a little bit, just a piece across the river, there was a little restaurant and that was the only thing on that side besides the ballfield. Vernon Weber’s wife, Novena, run that.

Then on the east side of the river, the first place they built was a big brick building. That was the M.F.A. Exchange. They built that when I was just a little boy, there at the foot of the hill. Tom Mendenhal was the first man to run it and I presume the last. He stayed there quite a spell.

The M.F.A. Exchange

Then the next building was down in that draw, they had a nice spring well there, fine water. It was also a skating rink and dance hall. They had a lot of good times down there.

Then the next building was up on the hill, there ain’t nothing there now, but just the foundation. The building is gone. Ellis Carter run it.

Right at the foot of the hill across from Carter’s place was a blacksmith shop. Charlie Payton, he was the blacksmith and Oscar Boley was the mechanic there on those old model T’s. That’s where I kinda started shoe’in. I done the nailin’ for Charlie—he did the drivin’. I got twenty-five cents a foot—that was a dollar a horse on them big ole Belgums. A dollar a horse back there in the 30’s.

Then the next place up from the blacksmith shop was the bank. It’s still there and they kinda made a recreation room out of it. Also they built a fireplace there on it. The back end there—that’s where the vault is—that big cement place there. Mary Weber was the cashier and president of the bank. She ran that several years until the depression struck and the bank went broke and was closed.

The next place up the road was a poultry house. Emmett Wood run it. That’s where Bill Trader lives now. On the north side there was a big chicken coop made out of wire. They bought cream in there and also chickens. They had a little trap door on the north side, and they’d toss ‘em out in this pen and then a truck would come and pick them up.

Then up on the hill just a piece, why there was a little brick coated house. That was the minister of the Methodist Church in Yarrow. That was Sam Bullards. We had a lot of prayer meetings there at the church.

Paul’s cowboy-boots mailbox advertises his horse shoeing business in an unusual way.

And also down the line where my old friend Charlie Hayes (he just passed away) lived, there’s a bunch of evergreen trees and they had lanterns and these big planks on wooden blocks. There were a couple of boys that held prayer meetings in the moonlight by lantern light, Merle and Marvin Green.

Then on up the hill there was where the old retired railroad man lived and that was Mister Mack.

And then the next building was a brand new building, a two-story. It had four rooms—two in the basement and two in the attic. Below was a blacksmith shop on the north side and on the south side they had a little mechanical shop in there, they worked on old model T’s in there, too. Then upstairs they had the Wilson Produce. They bought cream and chickens. In the next room ever was where they ground feed.

Then right across from the poultry house was old George Boley that was the granddaddy of all the Boley folks there. And then we went on up the hill and across and we came to the little church there. Old daddy Prather was the superintendent. We had a lot of fine prayer meetings there, too.

Stories by Denise Whittle and Angie Neff
Mike Weber’s House

There where the church was they call it the Yarrow Cemetery. Where the Yarrow school was, it was called Tick Hill School then. It burnt down twice and then they moved it up to where Doc Prather lived and it burnt, too, so they moved it down to where it now stands.

“So that about covers the town of Yarrow, I guess.”

After talking to Paul inside, he took us to see his big Brahma bull, which he is very proud of. We then got in his truck and he showed us where everything was located in Yarrow and how it looks now.

We all left with a better understanding of Paul and the past history of the little town of Yarrow.

Paul told us on our first visit that he could tell us some stories that would make our hair stand on end. On our second visit he related the following:

“I went over to (a neighbor’s house) one Saturday to help him build a cistern. So (we) were out there and I was digging. I think it was eight feet across and twelve foot deep.

At twelve feet... we hit quicksand. So (my neighbor) said, ‘Let’s just quit right there now and we’ll just pour our cement bottom in it and brick it up and then you come on Sunday morning and we’ll plaster it.’ So on Sunday, I cut across here afoot... went over there and plastered that cistern up and then put a top on it and about that time it was noon. So (the wife) said, ‘Come on in boys and let’s eat,’ so we went in and the table was set. It just looked like a threshin’ outfit table and we had fried chicken... big old washtub plumb full! Well, we just ate and ate and ate. We had a little cherry pie and coffee... we pushed our chairs back and (my friend) said, ‘Well, boys, you might as well go ahead and eat all the chicken you can hold, they’re dyin’ faster of the cholera than we can eat them!”

Another neighbor’s wife milked Guernseys. “One night a cow gored her. She carried her guts up to the house in her apron. They put them back in and sewed her up. She lived.

Far left, Paul posed for this photo at the time of his interview for the Charlton Collector. Left, Paul is proud of his cattle, especially this big Brahma bull.

Photographs by Andy Lochbaum.
Paul's History of the Yarrow Bridge and the C-B-Q Railroad

The C-B-Q Railroad ran from Centerville, Iowa to Mercerville, Missouri, which is next to Elmer. It followed the river that distance. They couldn't go any farther south with the railroad because the Santa Fe wouldn't let them have the underpass.

The train was an old steamer with Jockey Green as its last engineer. The depot is still standing down there by the road that runs along the old railroad right-of-way. After the ties were taken out, the land was given back to the original owner which was Jockey Green. Paul thought it was probably thirty years ago that the railroad had been taken out.

The bridge at Yarrow was destroyed when Ike Novinger went through it with a load of cattle, also about thirty years ago. They didn't build a new one for eight years and the local people had to pay for it when it was built. During those eight years people had to ford the river and in the spring Paul would take his team of mules down to pull the trucks out when they got bogged down in the mud.

A new bridge is going to be put in by the state in the near future. Paul's comment to this was, ... "put in a two lane, I guess. A two lane bridge with a one lane road."

"There was a windmill at Mike Weber's house that pumped water all over the little town of Yarrow. There was a mill run by the current of the Chariton down on the river. It ground corn, carded wool, and produced electricity for Yarrow along with many other things. Mike Weber ran it, too."

Paul and his friends used to throw corn cobs at the fishermen on the river. When the old miller wasn't there, they'd slip one of the double gates on the forbed (watterwheel) and let the water come around and then they'd back a wagon down in there and get a whole wagonload of big channelcat about four feet long. The fish would come in with the water. The mill was located on the south side of the river. Some of it is still there.

It took the people of Yarrow eight years to collect enough money to build the present Yarrow Bridge.

This old mill pumped water to Yarrow, and also produced the electricity for the town.