LICKSKILLET

Six miles east of Graysville, Mo., on the Chariton River in Putnam County, there is a "place" called Licksillet. This place was a part of the coal mining boom in northeast Missouri during the early 1900s.

The name Licksillet lives only in the memories of the people. Officially, it was known on the map as Mapleton, but the residents were said to be so poor that they lived mostly on fried onions and cow weed and had to lick the bottom of the skillet to survive. So for more than 70 years the unofficial name of Licksillet took precedence over Mapleton. No matter what the map said, it was, and still is, Licksillet.

To our knowledge, there is only one Licksillet in northeast Missouri, but the name was not an uncommon one in the state. Many of the poorer and more isolated areas had this label attached to them. At one time, Missouri sported more than seven Licksillets.

In an interview with Jack and Madie Rowland, former residents of the area, we found out what a place called Licksillet was like.

The railroad came to Licksillet in 1901 and the main business became carring coal, mining coal on the slope mines and making props for the railroad. There were three stores in Licksillet during the early 1900s. They were run by Bill Ramsey, Coleman Fowler and the Rowland Mining Company, the latter being located on the north hillside.

It is difficult to talk about Licksillet without mentioning the local landmark, Sally Mountain. Sally Mountain stands at the edge of Licksillet. "This landmark was named for an old lady, Sally Mosley, who lived on the east side of the road in an old log cabin shack called the Sally House," Jack said.

"It was an awful steep hill," Jack said, "and back in the early days a Model T couldn't pull it."

"When Model T's first came out there wasn't one in 25 that could pull that hill. The gas was gravity-fed and had no pumps to pull the gas to the motor. As a result, the car would stall on the trip up the hill. The driver then had two choices. He could back up the hill or have a passenger remove a cushion and blow air into the tank to force the gas to the carburator."

"I don't know what the census would have been," Jack said, "but there were houses all along the north hillside, but most of the people lived in Licksillet."

Coal was hauled by horse-drawn wagons. Jack remembers, "The wagons would pull along side the boxcars and the haulers would shovel the coal in, and the 'chunkers' were hired to shovel the coal to the back of the cars."

Jack's uncle, Noah Robbins, drove an old grey mare and hauled coal from the slope mines down to the railroad. He would pull five or six cars down the hill at a time. "One day, he started down the hill and didn't get his cars spragged (They would put sticks on the wheels to stop them from turning). The old grey mare went to running and she went right off into the car with five or six loads of coal falling on top of her and killed her.

"Once a day the train made a trip to Sedan, Iowa, and back (Sedan is 10 miles north of Livonia, Mo.). The train was primarily a freight train, although there was a caboose for the passengers. It turned around on the Y and brought supplies back."

That was the official business during the week. But on the weekends the popular unofficial business began. Jack said, "There used to be a boxcar that set off the road by the railroad tracks and on Saturdays and Sundays this was known as the 'gambler's hideout.' I was a good-sized boy when just droves of people would come to gamble. They would come from Livonia, Worthington and everywhere else to gamble."

Jack and Madie Rowland, former owners of the Rowland Mining Company, described what it was like to live in Licksillet back in the days when horse-drawn carriages were more common than Model T's. (Photo by James Ray)

Bootlegging was also common. "The Blind Tiger," a house located near the Chariton River Bridge, bootlegged the whiskey brought in from Unionville.

Although the place was one of bootlegging and gambling, the participants were not without feelings. One Unionville man remembers that one day a woman started down Sally Mountain leading her cow. The cow fell and broke its neck. Well, all the gamblers were sorry for the woman and said so, but one said that he was "sorry five dollars—How about the rest of you?" By sunrise, they had a cow bought for the family.
The first car around Lickskillet must have been a frightening thing to behold. Jack's wife, Madie, remembers it very well. "Simon Oliver owned the only car around and the folks called it the White Steamer. Pappy told us to get off the road if that old White Steamer came by because it ain't got no eyes—it can't see you. When it came down the road, me and mom took for the ditch and went toward the brush until the car passed. There wasn't but one car around and we were all scared to death of it!"

There were two schools in the area—Mapleton or Button School (the elementary school) and a school the kids called Hoog College (pronounced "hogg"), located two miles from Sally Mountain.

Jack said, "I went to Hoog College. The old building had leaned until they cut some white oak poles and propped it up on the north side to keep it from falling any further. We had old wooden seats made out of two-by-sixes from the saw mill. The black board was just a board with a black streak painted across one end of it. The school didn't have any coal to heat the school house unless a miner's kid went there and his folks would donate a ton ever once in a while. When they didn't have coal, the teacher would dismiss two of the bigger boys and they would find stumps and twigs to keep the fire going."

July 4th was usually a day for celebration. When Jack was a kid, he remembered such a celebration near Lickskillet on FF Highway. "They had an old grey mare that pulled a merry-go-round. Bill Ramsey ran that. For the older folks, a feller ran a taxi service from FF to the Blind Tiger in Lickskillet where they were bootleggin' whiskey. He had a two-seated surrey and he would charge 25 cents a trip and if four or five went, he would charge a nickle or dime."

But those were special occasions. Most of the time they created their own entertainment. Dances were held in their homes. "For entertainment, the children would make a ball or ride brush down," Jack said. Riding brush down was accomplished by two or three holding limber sprouts down while another one sat on it. Then they would turn it loose.

Nature has reclaimed Lickskillet now. Jack said, "About all there is now to Lickskillet is a good fishing place. The train died out in 1940 and then the stores went out, then the mines and the people who were left went to trucking."

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By James Ray

Sally Mountain may not be a mountain by western standards, but it certainly is one of the steepest climbs in northeast Missouri. (Photo by James Ray)

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This bridge is one of the few man-made landmarks still existing around the Lickskillet area.

Reprinted in April 1937, this postcard shows the Trammel family, some of the residents of Lickskillet.