The Coming of the Colletts

By Al Lewis and Mark McIntyre

Not long ago America was caught up in a new wave of fashion. This fashion was the result of Alex Haley’s novel and the movie, “Roots.” “Roots” inspired Americans to research their past, to review their heritage, to discover the very roots of their own families.

Many started on the vast research project, but few actually accomplished it. Perhaps the challenges were too great for most’s meager resources, as the piecing together of related bits and scraps of family history is an enormous task. This story is about two who embarked on such an adventure.

Mary and Gordon Collett were fortunate to have had enough interrelated information to piece together their family line. This information was obtained from family diaries, relics and stories passed down through the generations. But they had to be careful; it wasn’t as easy as it sounds.

The Collett farm had an amazing amount of history in and around its once enormous area: such relics as antebellum homes, ice age boulders, the former site of a fort, a rare natural spring, strange soils of sandy-loam, a unique cemetery and mysterious Indian burial mounds. These all combined to make a truly classic setting for the history of this family.

The story first began in 1821, when Missouri became the 24th state in the Union. Three years later the local Indian tribes, Iowas, Sacs and Foxes, signed a land renewal treaty. According to this agreement, the Indians would forfeit their lands around what is now Macon County to the state. A flaw soon developed over definition of the northern boundary, however, producing dire consequences.

In 1829 settlers began to move north from Howard County. Most settled around what is now Macon, but a few continued north, deciding to settle the land around the upper Chariton River. Here they formed what is known among the Indians as “the Cabins of the White Folk” or “the cabins.”

Soon afterward, the settlers began to encounter Indian hunting parties. The flaw in the treaty came to light at this time as the Indians believed that they still had the exclusive right to hunt in the area. The settlers didn’t see it that way however, mistaking them for Indians on the warpath. Thus the Big Neck War between the settlers and the Iowa Indians under Chief Big Neck began.

The prospect of an all-out Indian war frightened the settlers so much that they appealed to the federal troops for military aid. So, in July 1829, a small force of 26 men left Howard County and marched north. When they arrived at the Cabins they found that the Indians had retreated northward toward what is now Putnam and Schuyler County. At a small stream the two opposing forces met and fought a skirmish, which...
neither side clearly won. The result frightened the whites so much that they gathered a large force of militia and federal troops, then moved northward once again, determined to crush the Indians and secure a homestead. But as events would have it, the settlers were left holding an empty bag because the Iowa Indians had fled the area soon after the first battle.

History has a way of repeating itself as another unfair treaty started the Black Hawk War. During this war the federal troops built Fort Clark, a three-cornered log fort, just south of the present Ira R. Collett house. One purpose of the fort was to protect the settlement from the Black Hawk Indians.

From this dark spot in our country’s history came John Cain, a Collett family relative by marriage. Cain, a born “hunter,” moved west from his birthplace in North Carolina to Kentucky. After living in Kentucky, Cain moved to Howard County, then moved to the Cabins in 1828. Soon after he arrived both he and the original settlers of the Cabins were forced to flee the area because of the Big Neck War. When the war was over Cain traveled back and settled there.

In 1830 Cain moved his family north to the Cabins. Along with the family members, Cain brought one of Adair County’s first slaves, Richard Hill. Racial discrimination didn’t apply to this slave as he was treated with dignity and respect by the settlers at the Cabins. They alternated boarding him and working him; while teaching him how to read and write. Hill, in turn, taught his family how to read and write. Hill and his family are buried in the Collett cemetery; their markers are made of sandstone.

Along with Cain came several other families. Like Cain, this group moved off during the Big Neck War but stayed during the Black Hawk War. Among them were the Conner Brothers, William “Billy” Collett and his son Asa. The Conner brothers later built the first business in Adair County, a tannery. After his marriage to Bartheba “Bash” Cain, Asa worked at the tannery.

1849 witnessed the Great California Gold Rush. Risking everything, prospectors flocked into the gold fields in search of fame and fortune. Asa, hearing of Sutter’s Mill, headed west to stake his claim.

After arriving on the scene, Asa found the fields filled to capacity. Doubts began to appear in his mind after observing the many failures and only few scattered successes of the miners. Matters were also complicated by the fact that all of the favorable prospecting sites were occupied and prices for supplies were high.

Prices may either rise or fall, and it occurred to Asa that the introduction of a middleman could put a flux in the market price of supplies. So, instead of buying mining gear, Asa purchased a wagon and a team of mules. Thus Collett began a transport service, transporting mining supplies to the mines and selling them for a profit. Asa’s business was so successful that it occupied his attention for 12 years.

This lengthy absence from home convinced Bash that her beloved husband was dead, so she began to plan for the future. While occupying her time with general woman’s work of that era such as raising sheep, spinning cloth and making coverlets, it became evident that she should remarry.

Some people believe that chance plays a major role in their lives. It may have been by chance or by information that caused Asa to return home on the exact day Bash was to be remarried. This, of course, cancelled the wedding and saved the Collett family. After returning home, Asa and his neighbors began construction of what later became known as the Ira Collett house.

Ira married Emma J. Grimm in 1882. Emma was a sister to the Grim brothers, who later helped found the Grim-Smith hospital. The life of this couple was different from the average family of this time period. While most either farmed or worked in a factory, Ira and his wife did a variety of things. Ira operated a horse farm, raised cattle and hogs, and a few grain crops. Along with farming, Ira also built fences, cleared timber and was active in community affairs.

Some people still recall camping on the Collett farm. Around 1863 Asa and Bash opened Camp Collett, probably the first recreational campground in northeast Missouri.

While the camp was in operation, invitations were sent out to encourage families to come out and spend a quiet time in the country, free from the problems of city life. The area must have been enjoyable for a campsite, because several Kirksville families camped there. Camp Collett operated until the early 1900s.

Before becoming Ira’s wife, Emma taught in public schools. Later at home Emma helped perpetuate Camp Collett by taking care of the camp’s provisions and menus, often furnishing home grown foods and meats to its campers.

The couple also had a family of three children, Hubert, Ruth and Anna. Their son, Hubert, was born in 1890. Hubert’s life was different from that of his mother and father. He attended college at the Normal School in Kirksville studying mathematics, chemistry and music. His education and interest in geology helped him get a job in Midian, Kansas, working in the oil fields.

This is a typical winter scene near the Collett farm. (Photo courtesy of Gordon and Mary Collett)
This is a sketch made from a photograph of Asa and Bash Collett, ancestors of Gordon Collett. (Photo courtesy of Gordon and Mary Collett)

Prior to leaving for Kansas, Hubert married Alice Hill. During their stay in Kansas the first of their four children was born. After returning to the northeast Missouri area, Hubert went into farming with his father, then went into the frozen food business in 1941. During the depression, the Collets had fences built and cleared land for pasture, allowing Ira and Hubert to provide needed jobs during that period of history.

Gordon Collett was born in 1928. Like his father, Gordon was bound to have a good education. He first attended Bunker Hill and graduated from Kirksville Senior High School in 1945. Gordon then went to the Kirksville State Teachers College (now Northeast Missouri State University) and obtained a bachelor's degree and then a masters degree in music. While in school Gordon worked with his father in their locker business.

Gordon married Mary Kerr in 1959. Like Gordon, Mary had a good education with a bachelor of science degree in social studies and a masters in secondary education and counseling.

Gordon began singing professionally at an early age and today teaches piano, voice and organ to talented students. This couple also realized many of their family heirlooms should be preserved. In fact, the Collets had so many pieces of antique furniture that they were able to help furnish three houses for "The Friends of Arrow Rock" at Arrow Rock, Mo. This furniture became a permanent part of that National Historic Site.

For their generosity, Gordon and Mary were recognized for their contributions to this site by the governor. Mary also had enough recipes handed down from the past to compile a cookbook which contains recipes as old as five generations.

Today Gordon and Mary Collett still live on their farm south of Novinger, and they still retain all of the original buildings and sites except the John Cain house. With all of the old buildings and relics now a part of a National Historic District the Collets are constantly reminded of their rich heritage.

ASA AND BARBARA "BASH" COLLETT
(Photo courtesy of Gordon and Mary Collett)

This photo shows children riding in goat carts at Camp Collett, one of the first recreational campgrounds in northeast Missouri. (Photo courtesy of Gordon and Mary Collett)