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Missouri Avenue on the Caprock

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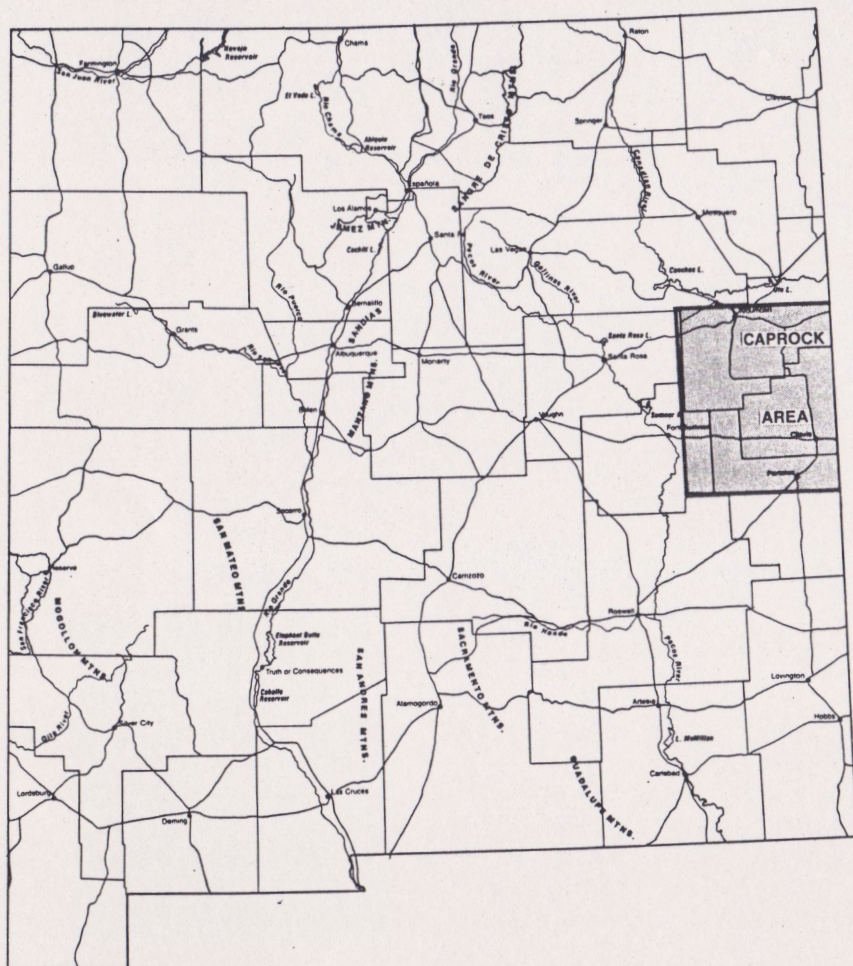
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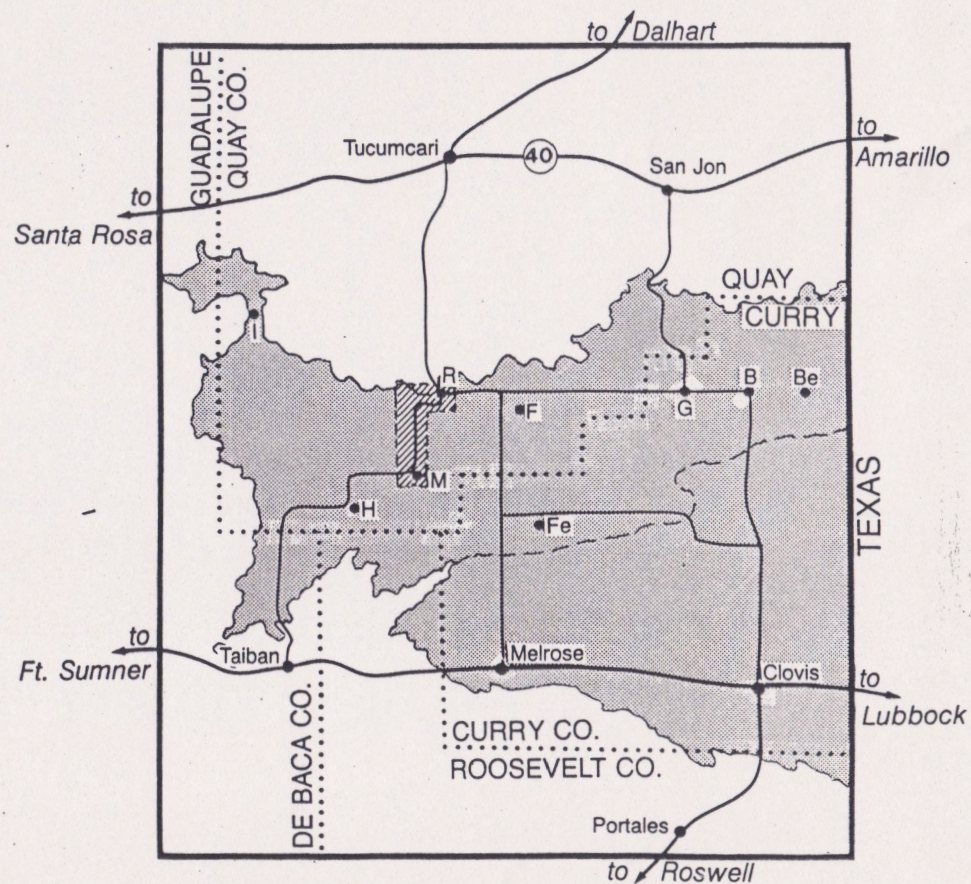
MISSOURI AVENUE ON THE CAPROCK

Lured by reports about grama grass that was so high it tickled the belly of a horse, the settlers poured onto the high plains of New Mexico during the first decade of the twentieth century. Boom towns began to sprout up along the sidings that the single-line railroads needed for intersecting trains and for locating maintenance crews. The towns especially blossomed if the siding was next to a highland area of prairie that appeared capable of supporting dryland farming. The railroad companies, which were provided with large blocks of land to promote settlement, and the merchants of the new railroad towns had a mutual interest and investment in attracting sodbusters to the open grass plains of the eastern part of the state.

Prior to the arrival of the railroads, the high plains had been the homeland for many societies: Comanche buffalo hunters, followed by Mexican sheepherders, and at the turn of the century the highlands were controlled by the cattle companies. Legal right to the land had been contested since 1846 when New Mexico became an American territory. A number of companies and individuals surfaced with documents as proof of lands granted to them by the Mexican government before the arrival of the Americans. Many of the title disputes over land grants covering much of the Llano Estacado and Buffalo Plains had subsided and the federal government proceeded to free areas for homesteading in 1905 and 1906 (although much of the litigation was not resolved until several decades later). Included in this land release was the 1200 square mile southeast-sloping caliche (chalk-base) caprock area bordering



Location of the Caprock



Limits of the Caliche Base

4500' Elevation Southern Limit
of the Highland Cap

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| B Broadview | H House |
| Be Belview | I Ima |
| F Forrest | M McAlister |
| Fe Field | R Ragland |
| G Grady | |

Texas and bisected by the southern boundary of Quay County. This area, referred to locally as "the Caprock", is a rimrock area of the Llano Estacado that has been dramatically exposed by downcutting tributaries of the Canadian River on the north and the Pecos River to the west. Moderately thick stabilized sands over the caliche had formed a reddish loam soil which supported a thick mantle of grass dotted with numerous depression lakes. The place must have appealed to the farmers from further east as they wandered onto the vast open space in search of the right quarter section of turf to live on, develop, and, after a time, claim for their own.

Groups of curious farmers began arriving by train at Melrose and Tucumcari in 1905 and 1906. Others came by horseback from Texas, drifting westward from small places like Bovina and Hereford. Many headed to a little spot in the grass called House where a land surveyor and commissioner helped determine places available for filing. These adventurous men came from small towns and rural counties in Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri; several came from as far away as Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia. Many had procrastinated during the 1890's land rush for Oklahoma and West Texas, and they viewed New Mexico as a last chance for cheap land and the opportunity to acquire their own farm. The land offices surrounding the Caprock were kept busy recording land filings, and there was a flow of commissioners and aides over the plains in search of the elusive section markers to guide settlers to unclaimed parcels of land. The original survey of land in this area was less than scientific, as described

by Victor Westphall in The Public Domain in New Mexico (UNM Press, 1965). "It was obvious that when the original survey had been made the marked monument rocks had been tossed off each side of a wagon as it traversed a winding route...By tying a red cloth to a wagon wheel and counting the number of revolutions, the team arrived at surveyed distances." Juana Foust, in a little-known but excellent novel called Prairie Chronicle (Putnam, 1932) about pioneering on the Caprock, claimed that it was miraculous that anyone could make proper land filings in the area. In a particular graphic account of one family's crossing of the Cap in search of the claim, she relates that:

The men made a game out of checking the distance between section rocks. They already had heard tales about how this country was surveyed. The current story was that the surveyor loaded a wagon with rocks, then tied a handkerchief around the twelve-foot rim of the wheel. On the 440th turn of the handkerchief he threw out a rock, if he remembered to.

....
"Four hundred and one", Bugs called back to the women, "the bastard that laid this out must a been full of Choc (Choctaw beer)".

The next section would be long, maybe five hundred turns of the wheel and a hundred yards out of line. "He was thinkin' about his girl when he drove this mile," Joe said. (p. 27)

Between 1906 and 1908 immigrant railcars, freightcars slightly modified so they could carry people, began to arrive at this farming frontier with extended families, household goods, livestock, and farming machinery. Cousins, uncles, parents, friends, and anyone of filing age joined the caravan to begin the process of consolidating the land claims by settling on adjoining parcels or by acquiring nearby patents through private land sales. Land spec-

ulators without agricultural supplies also arrived on these immigrant trains. They were after profit by cash sale of land and were not interested in "proving-up", or living on the claim long enough to receive a patent.

Frank Jester, the highly respected late veterinarian of the Caprock, offered a personal account of some of the problems encountered by the first pioneers. "I came with my grandparents (from Scofield, Missouri)...my dad couldn't get an immigrant car. They were a-comin' in here like flies in 1906 and 1907. There was no road up from Tucumcari; that Plaza Largo down in Quay Valley had quicksand...You got stuck in there, you was in trouble. Get to the Caprock and no road up the Cap...Had to put about three or four teams to a wagon and double them up with chains to drag them wagons up the slopes. Hauled most of our lumber then from Melrose, but lord...there was a strip of sand between here (Ragland) and Melrose that give us a mess of trouble." According to Frank, the hostility to the farmers went beyond the physical difficulties of getting onto the Cap. "The cowboys of the Horseshoe Ranch (northwest of Melrose) had burned off the grass on the Spring of 1906. Just as far as you could see it was black as a hat...They said those nesters couldn't survive without livestock feed." But the good rains continued through 1908 and as the new grass sprouted the Caprock quickly filled with dugouts, tents, poleshacks, or frame houses on nearly every 160-acre land plat available for homesteading.

Although the law required that the claimant reside on the land they filed on, there was very little inspection and only random enforcement of this rule. A lot of extended families lived

together on a single filing and casually maintained small dug-outs and shacks on peripheral land parcels so they could file claims on them. Opal Vance Howard recalls that..."They came on out and homesteaded on the land they had filed on, and they pitched a large tent where all of them stayed until they built their houses on each one of their quarters." Some families, such as the Franklins of Missouri Avenue, were clever enough to immediately consolidate four quarter-section claims of a single section by constructing the house at the midpoint of the section and extending the claimants bedrooms onto each quarter they were attempting to prove-up. The Caprock had to have one of the greatest rural population densities in New Mexico in 1908, the last year of good rainfall before it began to get too dry to support dryland cultivation. "Every quarter section had somebody living on it," says Roscoe Runyan "...every 160 acres. But when it commenced to get dry...There was old maids and old bachelors and every kind of person you can imagine. But a lot of 'em was footloose...and when it got dry they went back to where they came from. Somebody else got their places and filings."

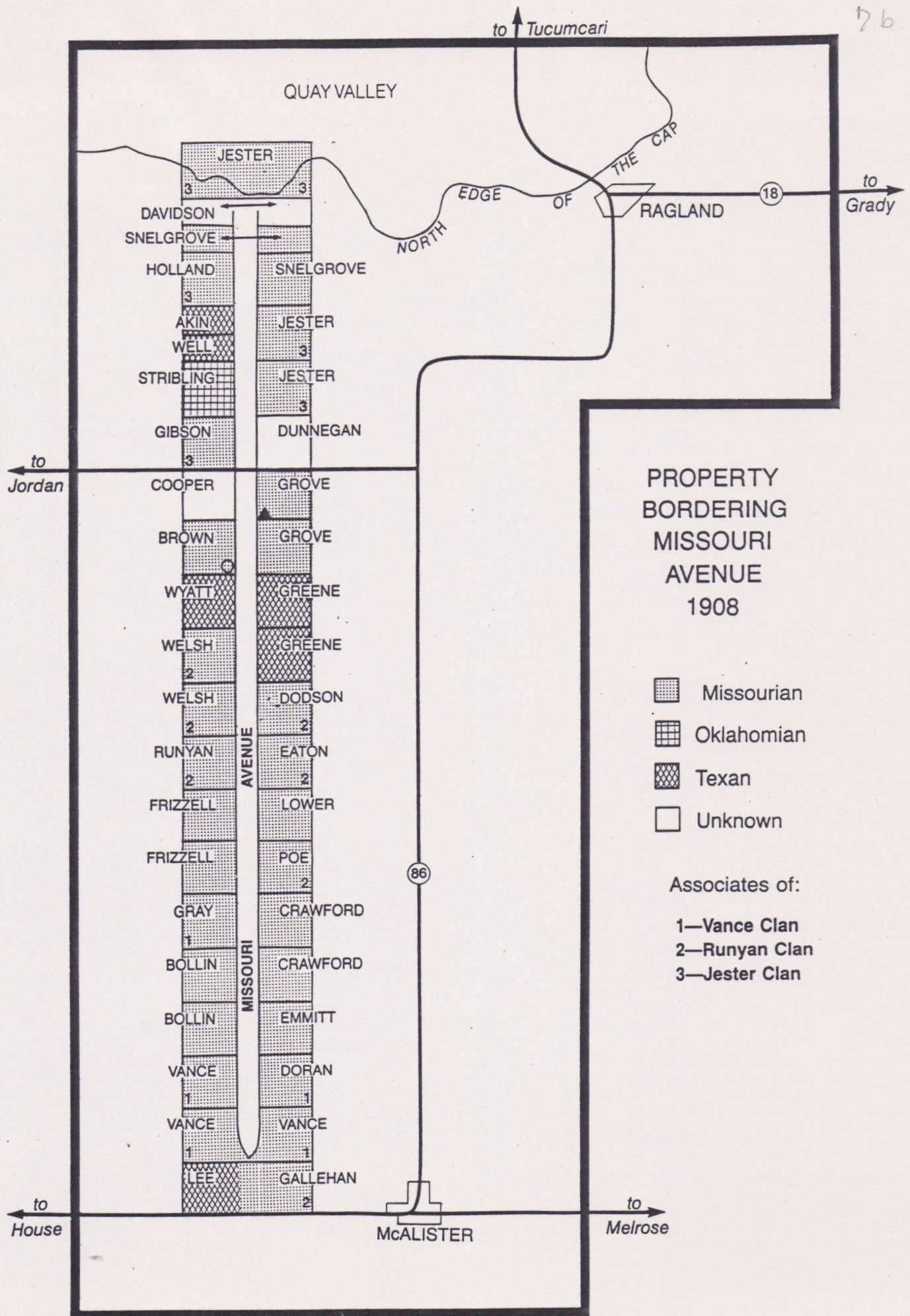
But not every family left; some remained and survived the hardships of the harsh climate. And it is they who are responsible for the evolution of over forty communities on the Caprock, many centered on only some meeting-place like a brush-arbor or a building used for school and church. Most of these with names such as Hope, Frio, Murdock, Ford, and Grand Plains remain only in the memories of the dwindling number of old-timers who fondly recall the prayer meetings, singing conventions, and the few months a year they spent at the one-room subscription schools. A number

of communities were able to support stores and post offices which were connected by mail contract routes and wholesale lines to Melrose, Taiban, Tucumcari, and San Jon. Places such as Ard, Hollene, Plain, Hassell, Ima, and Roosevelt are evident on the landscape today only as cemeteries, in varying states of maintenance, in the midst of wheat fields or rangeland. Several places such as Wheatland, Bellview, Forrest, and McAlister were large enough to support a variety of services and became locations for high schools in the 1920's and 1930's. These villages are mainly abandoned today, with numerous building shells and ruins attesting to their previous importance. Only the small towns of House, Grady, and Broadview survive as service centers on the broad expanse of the Caprock. Declining population, especially of young families, threatens their future existence.

The dispersed agricultural population did not live in towns or specific centers. Instead their home sites stretched across the prairie in a linear-grid pattern following the wagon ruts along a survey line. This pattern was sharpened when the nesters erected fencelines to contain their stock and the ruts were transformed into unmaintained rural roads. One such path ran from the north edge of the Caprock (3 miles west of Ragland) to a place one mile west of McAlister. This ten-mile stretch of road became the front street for a lot of homesteaders, as did many other similar sand tracks throughout New Mexico. The uniqueness of this one was that the folk along it all came from Missouri; everyone that is except the Wyatts and the Greens, who came from Texas. These two exceptions are quickly pointed out by the Missourians who remember

the old days, but they add that it was only their land that adjoined "The Avenue". The Texans' houses faced another section line. Courthouse records in Tucumcari indicate that there were a few other non-Missourians but they also were not part of the Avenue (such as the Akins and Wells families from Texas and the Stribling clan from Oklahoma) and had built their homesites facing the next section line to the west.

Of the forty-two land parcels that bordered this homestead highway, thirty-one were proved-up by Missourians, six were granted to Texans, one to an Oklahomian, and four went to those of undetermined home-state origin. Twenty-one of the twenty-three houses known to front onto Missouri Avenue were occupied by Missourians at the time the first private deed for each claim was recorded. It is of little wonder that so many people from the same general area of the nation should find themselves in clusters on the frontier. Many of the settlers were extended representatives of one family who often came out together as a form of kinship cooperative. This was true of the Vance family on the southern part of the Avenue where Bill and Maggie and Jimmy each had quarter-sections along the road and had acquired four additional homesteads by the mid-twenties. The enterprising Vance family became a prominent economic element of the Caprock when they introduced the Turkey Red wheat stock from the farmlands around Ravenwood, Missouri. As Opal Vance Howard recalls, "They brought wheat and their coal-fired steam thresher. They were the first on the Caprock to raise wheat...they were the ones to turn this into wheat country. The Vance^s were threshers in Missouri and they threshed on the Cap



from Ima (on the western edge) into Texas (sixty miles to the east). The Turkey Red stock was analyzed as the best milling wheat of the pioneer period."

In the middle section of Missouri Avenue were the clan and friends of the Runyan family who had come out from Bolivar, Missouri. These included the Eatons, Welshes, Poes, and Dodsons. The Eatons and Dodsons were among the first to drill wells and furnish water to their neighbors. Prior to this the farmers were dependent on unreliable storage in the many depression lakes, or they would have to carry water in barrels from springs or old rangeland wells that were up to twenty miles away. The northern edge of Missouri Avenue was settled by the Jester family and acquaintances from Scofield, Missouri. Frank Jester offered a theory about why so many other Missourians were attracted to the Cap. "It went to raining in the Spring of 1907, and those Missouri boys planted potatoes and corn like they did back in Missouri...and they sent it back there (to the county fairs)...won prizes...Oh man, those huge potatoes and long ears...They thought (as well as farmers back in Missouri) they'd come to the land of milk and honey."

The concentration of farmers along this one road did have a community focus. Although they would go to Jordan or McAlister for mail and supplies, they also supported a school-church building near the middle of the Avenue. The building was named Browning, retaining the name it had at a former location before it was slid on log-runners to Missouri Avenue. There was also a cemetery that formed in the quarter-section across from the church which became one of a handful of dominant pioneer burial grounds on the

Caprock, superceding cemeteries that had begun at Ard, McAlister, Jordan, Curry, and Hartford. As Opal Howard recalls, "the Browning Church also served as a social ground for Missourians, a place where they would have separate picnics. They carried this on for quite awhile...It was important for the first generation of settlers where one came from."

There's not much on the Avenue today. Many of the old wood frame houses stand abandoned to the wind and the vandals. A few of the old dugouts can still be found (if one knows precisely where to look) and the plows, wagons, and harnesses that were instrumental in breaking sod and hauling the necessities of life are now visable in the ruins of an old shed or in the clumps of tall weeds on the edge of a wheat field. Rarely does a car travel the path of Missouri Avenue. The County paved the north-south section road a mile to the east which provided a more direct connection between McAlister and Ragland, where the highway drops off into the Quay Valley and to Tucumcari. Only the occasional farm vehicle passes in order to reach land parcels that now belong to consolidated agribusinesses.

The people of Missouri Avenue? Many rest in the tidy rows of Browning cemetery. But others drifted off the Cap long ago when the dust and sand wasted the farmland and there was no water for stock. A lot have lived out their lives in Tucumcari, Melrose, Clovis, and Albuquerque. Others returned to their hearths of the Midwest or pushed on into other frontiers farther west. There is a diminishing number that did not leave the Caprock and they can still be found in isolated places throughout the high plains.

It is from these remaining first generation pioneers that the story of homesteading can be reconstructed and hidden places such as Missouri Avenue can be resurrected.

for additional information on homesteading
in New Mexico contact:

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