

Rock Architecture in Old Pulaski

by Terry Primas

By no means common, rock structures were once plentiful in this part of the Ozarks. A few fine examples still serve the intended residential, religious, and commercial purposes. But many more have disappeared from the landscape.

Underlying the forested hills are sedimentary layers of rock that are hundreds of feet thick. The magnificent bluffs along the Gasconade and Big Piney Rivers are made of dolomite, a type of limestone. Generally, the dolomite (termed the Gasconade dolomite formation by geologists) is covered by layers of sandstone, which can be 150 feet thick. In our area, this sandstone is called the Roubidoux formation.

According to Dan Slais (2000 *Old Settlers Gazette*, page 55), "The Roubidoux formation can be described as a medium grained quartz sand. It is often clear, brown, or red, depending on iron coloration. It is noted for outcrops with the display of ripple marks left [below left] by oceans some 450 million years ago during its formation. The Roubidoux sandstone appears in flat layers and can be quarried for attractive building stone as seen in many houses and stores around Waynesville."



Sandstone (ripplestone) with ridges left by ocean currents eons ago with damage to the one on the right.

Building with stone in the rural Ozarks was generally limited in the 19th century to livestock enclosures and roughly dressed dolomite for fireplaces. With the ready availability of portland cement at the turn of the 20th century, building with rocks and stone, both structurally and ornamentally, was possible.

Portland cement cured quickly and could be twice as hard as previous lime-based mortars. Foundations and walls made with a portland cement mix became common. Rocks could be placed in or on a structural wall of wood or concrete.

The native rock house was a logical successor to the iconic log cabin of Ozark vernacular architecture. Like the log cabin, it could be built by a man with modest skills and most of the materials were at hand on the natural landscape.

Types

Cobblestone, or **rubble**, is one of the earliest fieldstone constructions. This type uses fieldstone of irregular and moderate size, generally rocks that could be picked up with one hand. The rocks might be dolomite, sandstone, or chert. The rocks were used as found. They required little cutting or matching the angles of adjacent rocks. The mortar lines



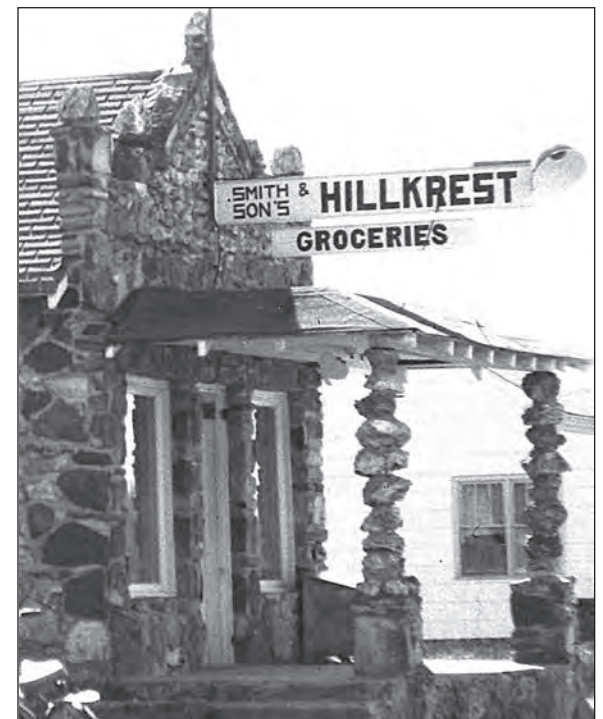
Above J. D. Stanton built Spring Valley Camp on Route 66 east of Hazelgreen in the 1920s using rubble rock construction for his tourist cabins. Right While the wooden doors were rotting in 2007, the rock walls were fine.



were recessed, giving such a building a rough, knobby texture.

Guy and son Vern Smith built the Hillkrest grocery store and filling station, pictured above, near Buckhorn on Route 66 in 1932. At right, you will see that the porch roof pillars are made of stacked and cemented rocks. The rock gable is also ornamented and extended with rock pillars. Vern converted the grocery into his residence and was living there in the 1990s. The buildings were torn down about ten years ago.

Fieldstone, for purposes of this discussion, are medium to large rocks found on the surface of the ground, literally picked up on the field. Technically, the smaller cobblestones discussed in



Hillkrest photographs above are courtesy of Ron Toops.

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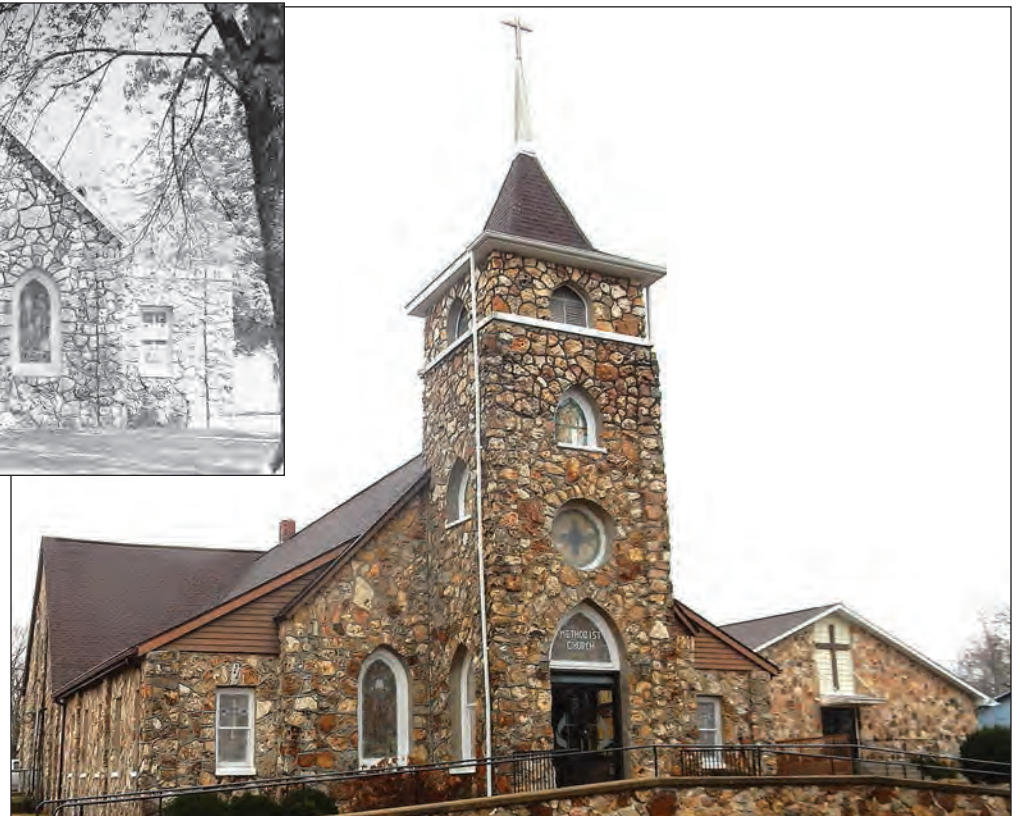


the previous section are of this type but fieldstones are larger, requiring most of us to pick them up with two hands.

A fine fieldstone building is located in Licking, Missouri, in northern Texas County. The United Methodist Church in Licking came about with the consolidation of the Methodist Church, South, and the Methodist Church, North, also known as the Methodist Episcopal, in 1930. (Methodists had been meeting in the Licking area since 1840.)

According to the church historian, Allen J. Boardman, "In the spring of 1936 a building committee was appointed with the power to act in the remodeling of the two churches, "North and South." They decided to move the former Methodist Church South building and place it in back of the Methodist Church North, forming a "T." The sides of the Methodist Church North were removed, and extended outward by nine feet on each side." It is most likely that the newly configured church was "rocked" with cobblestone at that time, with the rock collected by church members.

Much of the current appearance was achieved when, as Boardman writes, "On August 7, 1950 the Licking Methodist Church's official board met to plan the building of a new cobblestone vestibule. The building committee appointed decided the vestibule should be 10' by 12', and be 35' or 40' high. The work



The Licking United Methodist Church is a fine example of fieldstone facing. The church was rocked in 1936 (upper left) with the rough textured fieldstone (lower left) made up of a variety of rock types (sandstone, chert, dolomite, etc.). The new vestibule and bell tower was constructed in 1950 and the local matching rock looks as if the whole building was rocked at the same time. The fellowship hall to the right was erected in 1983.

began that month. Estimated cost of the building outside of donated work and material was approximately \$1500. This amount was ultimately donated to the church."

The church was not finished with its rock construction. A fellowship hall was dedicated in 1983. Its exterior is native stone. However, the rock is mostly sandstone and has a smoother surface.

Another fine example of a rather large commercial fieldstone build-

ing is in West Waynesville. It is also one of the earliest. Earl Bohannon built the garage pictured on the next page in 1920 with a spacious walkout (or drive-in) basement. Alf Clark operated a station and cafe in the building for several years in the mid-1920s. In March of 1948, George Long leased the building and his wife and Mrs. Elmer Long opened Long's Cafe, a 24-hour eatery, in May. Melvin Powers operated a garage in the west portion of

the building.

The ground floor exterior of the large cafe/garage is finished with fieldstone in a wide variety of sizes but mostly sandstone composition. The mortar lines are roughly finished, rather wide, and recessed.

While the commercial and religious rock buildings are large and impressive, the native rock houses are much more numerous and, upon close inspection, more variable in details.



Waynesville had its rock church, too. The First Baptist Church on Benton Street was established in 1880. After a log and frame church, the native stone church building was erected in 1936. Additions have left only a small part of the rock auditorium visible.

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Earl Bohannon built the large fieldstone garage/cafe in 1920 (above left) and it is in operation today sans cafe as Ed Wilson's Auto Works (above right). The stone is of various types with a wide range of sizes (left). Sandstone is found in bedding planes (right) with layers from three to six inches or more in thickness. Most builders preferred to work with slabs three inches thick and would split the thicker slabs with chisels and bars into the preferred thickness.



Historians, in particular those few writing about vernacular architecture in the Ozarks, often link the compact cottages in the Ozarks with the Arts and Crafts or Craftsman movement in architecture. One of the movement's leaders, Gustav Stickley, characterized Craftsman architectural ideals as "simplicity, durability, fitness for life that was to be lived in the house, and harmony with its natural surroundings. That descriptor of Craftsman ideals might well be attributed to the hewn log cabin construction practiced by Ozarkers

for several previous generations. Stickley produced several volumes of building plans beginning in 1909. Of the scores of illustrated plans, a few may have become inspirations for rock houses in our area.

Most of the houses viewed in Phelps and Pulaski Counties were relatively modest cottages or bungalow types. In modern usage, a cottage is usually a modest, often cozy dwelling, typically in a rural or semi-rural location. A bungalow often has a broad front porch, having either no upper floor or upper rooms set in the roof, typically with dormer windows.

The construction of a rock house varies. The rock can be set on a poured concrete wall, described by one writer as "plums on the pudding." This mostly applies to rubble or cobblestone buildings (Sheals, 2006). Fieldstone and split slab construction was often applied as a veneer to frame or stick-built houses. The frame was

covered with boards and the stone laid up with a cement bed several inches thick.

Quick and Morrow described a method used in southeastern Missouri for slab rock construction. Wooden forms of smooth boards nailed to 2" x 4"s were made for the walls and set on the floor joists. "The rocks were set out a few inches from the form and bedded

in cement mortar. The space between the rock and the form was filled in with cement, small rock, and other material. The goal was to keep the wall as porous as possible, a kind of honeycomb. A very dry mix of concrete was used with a lot of gravel. The porous wall provided some insulation; however, the main purpose was to cut down on the transmission of moisture through

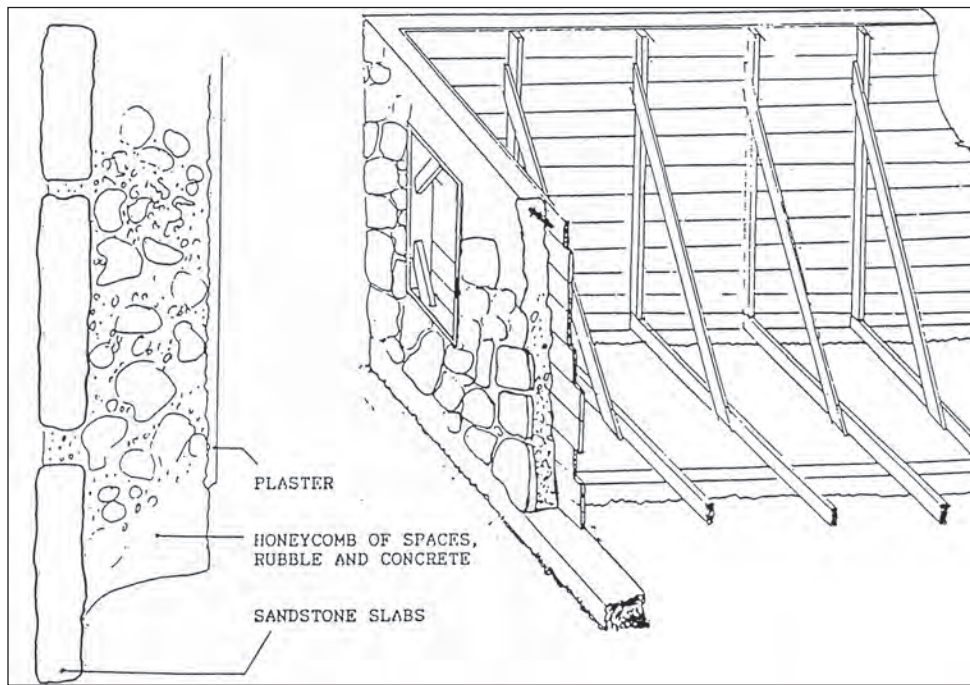


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This tidy cottage, situated on the original Route 66 in Hooker, was built in the 1930s and was the home of basketmakers Clarence and Ruth Wells. Clarence and Ruth made and sold white oak baskets on the roadside. The frame structure has oak studs covered with wide 1-inch thick oak boards. The rock was set in a bed of cement.



At left is the interior wall of a cabin at Piney Beach, which is the tourist cabin camp shown on the cover. It was built in the early 1950s on the Big Piney River next to the footings of the concrete arch bridge on the new Route 66 four-lane through Hooker Cut. The walls are 2"x4"s on 2-foot centers covered by sheathing covered by split slab sandstone. Native rock motor courts became closely identified with Route 66 in the Ozarks.

Sources

- Sheals, Debbie. "Ozark Rock Masonry in Springfield, ca. 1910-1955," *The Society of Architectural Historians, Missouri Valley Chapter Newsletter*, Summer, 2006.
- Stepenoff, Bonnie. "Ozark Rock Masonry Architecture Survey, Phase Two" prepared for South Central Ozark Council of Governments, 1993.
- Quick, David and Morrow, Lynn. "The Slab Rock Dwellings of Thayer, Missouri," *Pioneer America Society Transactions (PAST)*, 1990.
- Telephone interview with Jim Bales on June 11, 2020.

the wall (see above diagram). After curing, the wooden form was removed and the interior of the cement was given a plaster finish." (Quick and Morrow, 1990)

Giraffe rock is a split slab type with some artistic finishing touches that produced this distinctive Ozark style. The craftsman started with particularly colorful rocks, the hues in the sandstone intensified by the presence of increased mineral content, particularly iron. The mortar lines were raised and painted, usually either white or dark gray to black, with an occasional red-lined structure.

The popularity of rock construction grew during the Depression and into the early 1940s. The University of Missouri Extension service promoted the construction technique with publications and

workshops. The process was not particularly difficult and the material was available during the World War II years when most other building materials were scarce. The upkeep was minimal, too. However, the construction was labor intensive. Rock construction became more expensive after World War II as lumber prices decreased and labor costs rose.

At first glance, a rock house is a rock house. However, it is a challenge to find two that are exactly alike, except for cabins built at the same time by the same builder as at

Piney Beach. The differences are often in the details. On this page and the next are pictures of rock houses in Rolla and Waynesville. The web edition of the *Gazette* shows them in color.

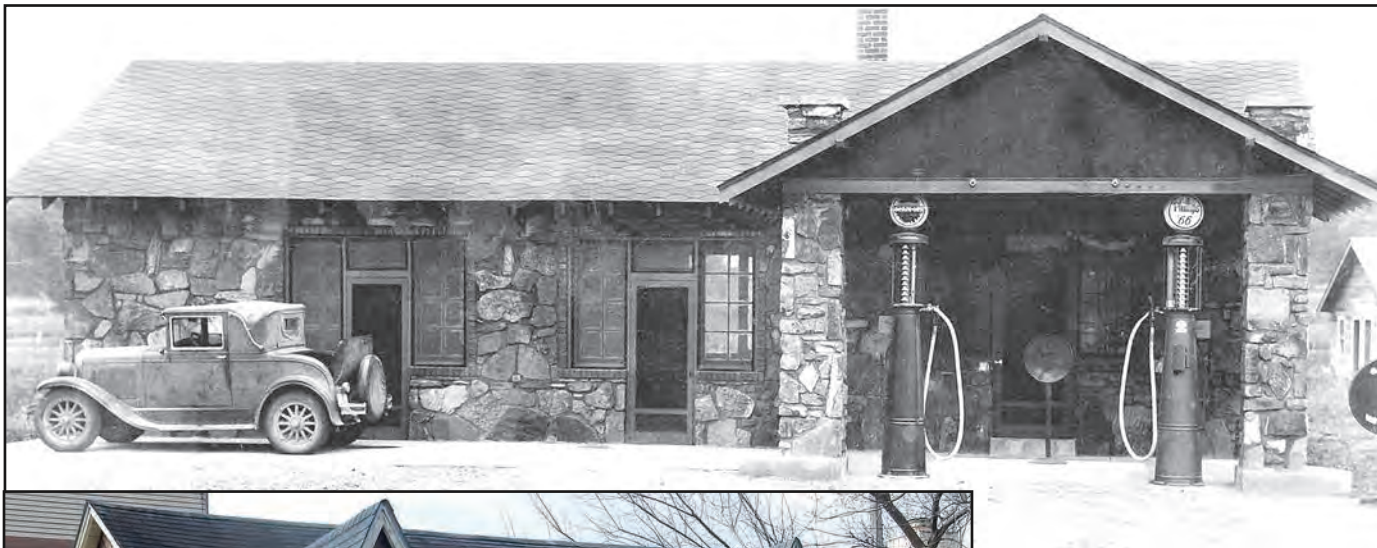
In focusing on houses, we have omitted the rock work done during the New Deal era by the Works Projects Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) exhibited in our state parks and numerous school and government buildings. However, the next section highlights a truly large and unique rock construction enter-



Section of a giraffe rock wall with narrowly beaded mortar joints painted white. It includes some nice ripplestone. Photo by Primas.



This house typifies the definition of a bungalow: broad front porch, having either no upper floor or upper rooms set in the roof, typically with dormer windows. It is located Licking, Missouri.



This commercial building was constructed in the early 1930s by Vern Prewett, mentioned at length in the next section, and called Roubidoux Garden. It had a cafe in the left side. It was owned by Mart Ballew and Warren Wyrick. It is located on Historic 66 in West Waynesville and is still in use housing an insurance company and hair salon. Courtesy of Maxine Ballew Farnham.



Above This slab rock duplex stands next to what was the Bell Hotel, now Waynesville Memorial Chapel, on Route 66 in the 1930s through the 1960s. In the 1940s, this cabin served as living quarters and office for a group of eight frame cabins. It has quite a few very large split slabs in this view. The tops of the side windows and front doors are ornamented with ray patterns. It is still a rental residence.

Right This bungalow is adorned with several large slabs of ripplestone. It sits on the footprint of Graham's Resort and Camp office which served as the first post office in Devils Elbow in 1927. It is not clear whether the original office was enlarged and rocked or a new structure built in the 1930s. It became known as Big Piney Lodge and during the 1960s Jiggs Miller and family occupied the house. The Millers operated their store/post office in downtown Devils Elbow and Jiggs maintained about ten frame cabins on the property, keeping them rented for owner Raymond Dwyer, who lived in California. It is still in use.



Bonnie Stepenoff, in the introduction to her 1993 survey of Ozark rock masonry

architecture in seven Ozark counties, made the following statement which is also apt for the examples we offer: *"These buildings are representative examples of a type of construction, utilizing native rock and embodying high ideals of the American craftsman movement. These buildings also have strong associations with the lifeways of the Ozarks. Specifically, they express the traditions of hard work, self-reliance, and attachment to the land that are hallmarks of Ozarks culture."*

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Almost at the end of Benton Street at the top of Fort Hill in Waynesville is the giraffe gem at left. Ruth Long, owner of the *Pulaski County Democrat*, chronicled a walking tour past the houses on the hill in a “Dear Reader,” column in 1944. She said as she passed this house that “the home of Wm V. Hensley—that I always call the fairy tale house—of fieldstone, with mammoth small-paned windows (picture window) taking up practically the entire east side of the home from which outer living pictures are seen.” A half century later, it served as a bed-and-breakfast.

This fine home on Historic 66 in West Waynesville was built for William and Chadna Brisch in 1940. The large bay window sets it apart from the other three rock houses along this stretch. Two lots to the west, Brisch built the largest brick building in Waynesville at the time to house his O. K Garage, which has been rehabbed and is for sale. The Brisches occupied the house together until William died in 1968, at age 73. Mrs. Brisch remained in the house for a little more than three years when she passed away. The house today has a red metal roof which adds to its striking appearance.



Frank A. Jones, who developed the Gascozark farm and resort also established a roadside business. The original concept was part cooperative and part store/station, named Gascozark Farmers Exchange. He bought a small frame building on the north side of Route 66 in 1931 and made some additions to it. In 1935 he hired a stonemason named Lillard to rock the several structures. The roof lines did not match so Lillard fashioned a singular sweeping arch capped with cobblestones. Fieldstone columns flank the mostly split slab building. It is an amalgam of rock types. The rock building still stands near the Pulaski/Laclede county line.

Photos on this page by Primas.

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The rock house at left sits atop Waynesville hill, looming over the junction of Highway 17 North and Historic 66, a block east of the square. It was rocked by Howard Bales, according to his grandson and local contractor Jim Bales. Jim noted that one sign of his grandfather's rock work is the thick and rounded mortar lines molded with a short piece of steel pipe cut in half lengthwise. He Jim typically painted the mortar lines black. Howard was not a builder but specialized in rock laying. He was the premier rock layer in the Waynesville area during the 1930s and early 1940s. Bales began his rock laying craft at least as early as 1923. He worked on the massive rock retaining wall on the hill near Devils Elbow that supported the roadbed of Highway 14, which became Route 66 in 1926. Jim said Howard Bales plied his rock laying craft for a short time in Springfield, Missouri, too.

Howard also rocked the house at middle left that was built for the Clyde Wheeler family in 1941. Son Bill Wheeler, in his book *A Kid Growing Up on Route 66*, remembered that, "Our family property was about one mile west of downtown and almost out of the city limits at that time. It was a rural setting without city water or sewer services...The house was

constructed of native fieldstone, like so many of the commercial and residential buildings along the highway. The stone came from an outcropping of sandstone just east of Lebanon, Missouri, and was trucked to Waynesville." That "rural setting" today is located across from the Waynesville Middle School parking lot.

Howard used large slabs on the lower portion of the walls. The slabs were held in place by 16-penny nails driven into the wall on the sides with wire ties fastened to them. Mortar was forced behind the slab and in the joints. The nails and ties were removed after the mortar set.

What might also be a hallmark in addition to the distinctive mortar lines is the rock motif over doors and windows. This design is a fan pattern (or maybe rays) made of narrow rectangular rocks. This feature is seen above the windows on the hilltop house. It is also present above the front door of the Wheeler house but is hidden by the porch roof, which was not present in 1941. The same motif is visible over the windows of the Hensley "fairy tale house" on page 42. It also appears above the windows and doors of the duplex cabin and Big Piney Lodge, both on page 41.

The large rock residence at lower left was built for Dr. R. O. DeWitt on Fort Hill in the 1940s. The rock window motif is present over the basement windows.

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Rolla Rock Roundup

Rolla has more than a dozen rock houses in the northeastern part of town. While they all share the same exterior material, they differ in design and detail.

Top left This large and attractive giraffe rock house on Oak Street in Rolla was built in 1935. Its distinguishing characteristic is its broad porch with wide arches. The exterior has received close attention with rock cleaning and rebeading of the mortar joints. This house is still an eye-catcher after 85 years.



Middle This house has two waist-high walls bordering what was a narrow driveway coming from the street. This front wall has rocks that vary greatly in size, from hand size to the gigantic split-slab to the right of the house number. The slab appears to be at least five feet tall.

Below left This bungalow sports three masonry fireplaces, as well as a rounded Spanish-style archway to the covered porch.

Below right This house on a corner lot features a stone retaining wall on the street sides.

See these rock houses and the subtle shades of the sandstone on the web edition of the *2020 Old Settlers Gazette* at www.oldstagecoachstop.org



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Right This modest bungalow on Holloway Street features brick corners and brick framing of the windows, including the round one next to the left of the door.



Below Just when we thought no two rock houses were alike, along came these twins with the Swiss or chalet sweep to the entry door roof at Holloway and 11th Streets. However, they are not identical twins, but fraternal twins with individual minor differences. We took this picture in January and the house on the right has since been razed, making the survivor unique.

Middle right The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship building on 11th Street is a well maintained giraffe rock building with a garage in the basement, the entrance barely visible under the small roof at lower right of the picture.

Bottom left This unique rock home stands alone on a block that is a parking lot at Ninth and Rolla Streets. It has several unusual design details, including the entrance, rock banister on porch, and the diamond and vertical block rock patterns on the front wall. The front chimney is decorative. The house also has a small attached rock garage.

Bottom right This is an enlarged view of the floral (or are they sunbursts?) pattern above the front windows of the house at left. One is repeated near the top of the front chimney.



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