

# THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

JERRY MCKELVY, EDITOR

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Away back in the southern part of Pike County, in the edge of the valley of the Little Missouri River, is an interesting old town. Buried far back from the din and racket of the busy world, the old town of Murfreesboro has for nearly a century pursued its undisturbed way—its very existence would almost have been forgotten had it not been the county seat of Pike County. On that account when court convened, some news would trickle out and remind men of its existence. And Murfreesboro seemed to like this pastoral life—it cared little if it were forgotten. Its people were contented and happy and its only ambition seems to have been the seat of justice of Pike County, and this honor it had held since the day of the county’s organization which was so long ago that none of the residents could recall just when this important event in the town’s history did happen. It was the heart of the little Utopia in the foothills of the ever-interesting Ozarks.

But one day something happened in Murfreesboro—something which not only awakened the people of the old town from their peaceful slumbers, but sent a thrill through the financial circles even as far away as New York. This something which happened caused many a financier to dig up a musty atlas from his library shelf and turn to the map of Arkansas to look for the unheard-of-town of Murfreesboro. It is singular how it happened, too. One would never think that because an old farmer away down here in the beautiful Ozark foothills chose to ramble over his wooded acres, the financiers on Wall Street would become interested in his peregrinations, but that is exactly what happened.

John Wesley Huddleston was a good honest farmer who owned 160 acres of land bordering on Prairie Creek about two miles south of Murfreesboro. His land was not very fertile—not even as fertile as some of the lands surrounding it. It was mostly wooded and not very fine woodland at that. Probably there was not enough timber on his holdings if sold to buy his winter supplies. It is likely that John Huddleston got blue about it. I cannot positively state that he did, but as the story unfolds, I believe that you will agree with me that he must have been blue—peevish at the world perhaps. On August 1, 1906 he sat down beneath a scrubby pine tree that grew on a naked hillside which never would grow even many scrub pines. Now I say that John Wesley Huddleston was blue because all men when they are blue are morose and think life is a dreary desert with never an oasis in sight, would do just what he did on that August day—get out somewhere alone and brood over their luck. While he sat there in the shade of that scrub pine, he picked up a pebble probably to toss at some bird which annoyed him because it twittered a song full of joy and sunshine. That pebble is the core of this story. It started Wall Street to whispering and put Murfreesboro on the map. It proved to be a perfect specimen of a blue white diamond which weighed nearly two carats.

Financiers in Little Rock, St. Louis, and even New York immediately became interested in the sleepy, old town back here in Pike County, Arkansas. They made the journey to

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Murfreesboro and bought Huddleston's property, paying him \$36,500 for it, which was all he asked. It is strange what unusual sequels can come to some stories. Because John Huddleston had went rambling about his farm, the town of Murfreesboro has now an industry the like of which no other community in Arkansas can boast, or the United States, or North America, for that matter. It has an honest-to-goodness diamond mine with genuine diamonds equal in hardness and luster to any from the far-famed Kimberly mines of South Africa. The world's diamond mines which are of enough importance to warrant operations are found in India, South Africa, Borneo, Brazil, and in Pike County, Arkansas. A few specimens of inconsequential value have been found in the southern Alleghenies, California, Indiana, and Wisconsin, but the craters were not productive enough to warrant operations, which give the Arkansas mines the distinction of being the only commercially valuable mines of their kind in North America.

The Arkansas diamonds have been put to the test by experts and are pronounced by them to be equal in every respect to the valuable South African diamonds. One government report to which I fortunately had access, says of them, "Samples from South Africa when placed by the side of the Arkansas diamonds is very striking—often barely distinguishable." It is claimed by geologists and other experts that the general appearance of the area in Arkansas is very similar to that in South Africa. The report also states that diamonds probably may be recovered in this area to a depth deeper than mining can be carried on. When it is recalled that South African mines are now successfully operated at a depth of 4000 feet, the possibilities that exist in Arkansas are more forcefully illustrated. Since the Arkansas mines started operations in 1908, diamonds in the amount of 10,000 carats have been recovered there. The average size of the diamonds recovered range all the way from one-eighth of a carat to 20 carats, although one was found which weighed more than 40 carats. Even a stone of this weight does not rank as one of the world's big gems, although it is a valuable stone. Newspaper reports have recently mentioned the famous Sultan diamond from Wulai Haifid, former sultan of Morocco. This stone weighted a little more than 183 carats and is said to be the fourth largest diamond in the world. By this comparison, my readers can obtain an idea of what the Arkansas mines are producing. It is estimated that a diamond in the rough is worth something like \$200 per carat, but may vary according to quality. After they are cut, their value increases to about \$400 to \$800 per carat.

I paid Murfreesboro a visit to see for myself where men dig real diamonds out of the ground—big sparkling gems that look like lightning bugs on a starless night. I also wanted to know if the current reports are true that the boys about the village streets use diamonds for taws in their games of marbles. This report, unhappily, I found was exaggerated, but not so much as one might imagine after all. Upon my arrival, one of the first men I happened to meet was W. J. Munsey who owns a slice of ten acres extending into the center where the diamond mines are being operated. He did not sell his property to the corporation which operates the mines in the crater and is probably the only single individual in the world who owns land where he positively knows there are diamonds in paying quantities. While in conversation with him, I noticed a ring he wore which contained a beautiful specimen of uncut diamond. I commented upon the novelty, whereupon he opened his mouth and disclosed an uncut diamond even larger than the one in the ring, reposing as a filling in the cavity of a hollow tooth! He then placed his hand in his hip pocket and brought forth more than a dozen stones, some of which he told me weighed more than a carat. After I saw this I was about ready to believe the story about the marble games was not so impossible after all.

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The mine now being operated is known as the Arkansas Diamond Mining Corporation of Virginia. It has an authorized capital of \$10,000,000. They have been operating more or less regular since 1908. From the very beginning the venture was a success. Of course, I lost no time, but hastened my visit to the mines as soon as I arrived at Murfreesboro. The superintendent of the mine was absent, but Lee Wagoner, his assistant, a very kindly old fellow, most courteously extended me an invitation to the mines and very carefully and with much patience explained to me the complete process. About two miles south of Murfreesboro is a little creek, known since the country was settled as Prairie Creek, but since the discovery of diamonds along its banks, now bears the high-flown name of Peridotite Creek. Now the bank of this creek was a naked hillside of a dozen acres in extent and surrounded by dense woods, and here I saw the interesting process of playing hide and seek with diamonds.

The large plant is not being operated at the present time, but the smaller plant was running. It is not my purpose in the scope of this sketch to go into the scientific details of the why of diamonds. I believe even the scientists themselves do not thoroughly agree on the subject, and I certainly will not attempt to add an opinion, for I have none to add. I know nothing about it. I consulted two or three books of the learned and on reading them, I felt about as wise as the subject. After I had finished I was as much informed as I would have been engaged in perusing a manuscript on Egyptian hieroglyphics or some classical masterpiece of ancient Sanskrit. I shall feel I have accomplished the purpose of my visit to the mines if I succeed in conveying to you simply how the diamonds are obtained.

The diamonds appear in what is known to scientists as peridotite. Now, peridotite, if you please, looks to me very much like a mucky brown clay. When it is uncovered and exposed to the air it slacks not unlike lime and becomes like very coarse brown sand. It had rained before my visit, and I made the discovery which may or may not be of interest to scientists that peridotite is a very pernicious neighbor in that it clings to one's shoes with a tenacity that is marvelous. I wonder that I did not carry off half a dozen valuable gems clinging innocently to the peridotite which had persistently attached itself to my shoes.

There are many methods of recovering the diamonds from the peridotite, but the method in vogue at this time was to first uncover the earth and let it slack—a pulverized mass of coarse dirt is what the uninitiated would call it. Long wooden troughs are constructed on an incline leading from the point of operation—the mine—to the machinery which separates the diamonds from the residue. Big hoses are turned on this peridotite which flows along with the water troughs which carries it to the machines where the mass is separated, the residue sifted and passed over a greased board to which the diamonds adhere, the residue passing along into the waste pile.

It is muddy in the vicinity of the mines at all times due to the constant stream of water which washes the peridotite to the place of separation. The workmen engaged about the premises all wear rubber boots. I watched these men at work and the thought occurred to me that they must have sore temptation to retain some unusual gem for their own future speculation. It must be remembered that sometimes diamonds are found exposed on top of the ground as was the original find of Huddleston. I asked Mr. Waggoner about this. All the employees, he told me, are taken entirely on honor. They are required to make no bond nor are they ever searched, but they come and go like any other workmen whose output is not so

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valuable or as easily concealed as diamonds. Of course great care is exercised in the employment of the men. All of them are men who have lived all their lives in the vicinity and are known to the superintendent. Let it be said to the everlasting honor of the neighborhood that not once since the mine has been in operation has any man been dismissed on suspicion of pilfering diamonds, nor even the slightest suggestion of dishonesty ever having been noted by the corporation. The workmen are all eager to “make a big find” and every stone is promptly turned in with as much elation on the part of the employee who found it and is evinced by the great corporation whose property it is.

Of course, visitors are not allowed promiscuously in the diamond field but even in this it seemed to me that the corporation evinces a faith in the honesty of men that is contrary to the ethics of the average city policeman. The field is surrounded by a barbed wire fence such as an ordinary farmer might build to keep his cows in the meadow pasture. A simple wooden gate which, however, was locked is at the entrance with the sign attached “No admittance except on Business”. I fear that the pilferer who might want to prowl over the premises might give this warning a liberal interpretation and decide that he was on business—quite important business should he be lucky enough to find an exposed gem weighing several carats.

The quiet old town of Murfreesboro may be hidden far back from “the maddening crowd’s ignoble strife”; the little railroad track which once wound through the inviting hills to haul their freight and passengers may have ceased to function; there may be other places with taller buildings and more of them; but one thing is here that not even the biggest town in all the land can boast—a real diamond mine is almost daily producing gems which are not scorned by kings and queens and which the most exacting of the earth do not disdain to wear.

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*Note:* The Murfreesboro diamond mine became the Crater of Diamonds State Park in 1972 and is still a popular tourist destination. Visitors are allowed to keep any diamonds they find. If you are looking for a vacation close to home this year, consider the diamond mine. Who knows? You might get lucky. From 1972 through 2001, a total of 23,809 diamonds were found for a total carat weight of 4,663.89 carats. There have been 677 found that weighed over one carat. A total of 2,144,396 people purchased admission tickets to the park during the period 1972-2001.

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### **WORLD’S SMALLEST HORSE BURIED AT PRESCOTT (from the 12-20-1910 issue of The Nevada News)**

The Fireman’s Carnival now showing in this city lost one of their smallest number and greatest drawing card last night in the death of their little fifty pound horse which died during the night. The pony was born on a ranch near Laredo, Mexico four years ago last June. At the time of its birth he was only 13 inches high and weighed only 19 pounds. Being too low to suckle, he was fed from a bottle. His mother was an Indian pony and father a bronco. The mother and father weighed from 600-700 pounds each. At that time his present owner, Mr. G. Baldassarre, was agent at Laredo for the Lemp Brewing Company. Mr. Baldassarre purchased the colt and entered the show business with him. The purchase price of the colt was \$225. What he was worth on the show last night only his owner knows. He is known

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far and wide and much loved by all show people. The Prescott authorities will be interviewed for a burial plot today and a monument will be erected at the grave. The cause of the death of the horse is supposed to have been from eating wheat which caused indigestion.

Later—By permission of the city authorities, little Dixie was found a burial place at the price of \$10 in the potter's field at the city cemetery. Burial will take place at 5:30 o'clock this afternoon. A headstone will be erected to mark the grave so that visiting shows may pay their last sad rites to the little fellow who has made so many thousands of dollars.

A crowd of men and boys gathered at the carnival where last sad rites were paid to "Little Dixie" and then the group went to the cemetery where all that was left of "Little Dixie" was lowered into the grave which was prepared for him in the Potter's field. The carcass was taken to the grave in a box covered with stars and stripes. Though Dixie was a native of Mexico, he belonged to the United States by adoption.

*(Note: We did not find the headstone for "Dixie" when we did our cemetery surveys and we are not sure exactly which part of De Ann cemetery was known as "the potter's field". )*

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### "OLD MIKE"

Died in Prescott, Arkansas in 1911

Buried in Prescott, Arkansas in 1975  
(No, that's not a misprint)

This picture shows "Old Mike" posed by the Cornish Funeral Home hearse. I'm not sure of the date of this picture.

For the complete story of "Old Mike", refer to the March, 2003 issue of *The Sandyland Chronicle*.

Thanks to Mrs. Mildred Munn for providing this picture.



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## THE ALL-ROUND WIFE

Of all the virtues, tis a fact  
There's none that helps as much as tact,  
And in the case of many a wife  
It's often saved her husband's life.

I knew a buxom wife, who pined  
Because her husband, who though kind,  
Admired ladies tall and slim  
And said they always looked so trim.

His wife, who really was quite square  
Tried everything in her despair  
To make herself look small and trigger  
But all he said was "Aren't you bigger?"

Her courage then completely failed  
She sobbed and frantically wailed

"Why did you marry someone fat?  
You knew I'd always be like that."

In vain her tears to quell he sought  
Until he struck a happy thought  
"My dear, I wouldn't have you smaller"  
He said, "Or lank or taller."

"I wouldn't have you lose a pound  
The Lord made all the best things round  
The sun, the moon, this world of ours  
Our favorite fruits, the sweetest flowers."

"Those active maidens I've admired  
Would in the long run make me tired.  
Oh no, my dear, give me for life  
The cozy little all-round wife."

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## LEMON CAKE PIE A recipe from 1942

1 cup sugar  
1 Tbsp. butter  
2 Tbsps. Flour  
2 eggs (separated)  
1 cup milk  
1 lemon

Blend sugar and butter. Add beaten egg yolks, milk, flour, and the juice and rind of the lemon. Fold in stiffly beaten egg whites and pour into an unbaked pie crust. Bake in a slow (325 degrees) oven for 35-40 minutes. The top will be like a sponge cake and underneath there's a soft, firm custard.

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## BIG FIRE AT CHIDESTER—JANUARY, 1933

A fire of unknown origin destroyed one block of the town. The Knight and Grayson store, one of the largest in town, a café, a barber shop, and the post office were completely destroyed.

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Trivia: How much water can a thirsty camel drink at one time? (15 to 20 gallons)  
What is the origin of lb. for abbreviation for pound? (from Latin word libra, a pound)

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## OUR BOYS IN UNIFORM

By Willa (Carter) Yarberry

This poem appeared in the April 9, 1942 issue of The Nevada News at the time when many of Nevada County's young men were being called to serve their country in World War II. With the present situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere and many of our young men (and women) away from home, I felt that the message of this poem is still applicable today.

To a far away land  
Our boys have gone  
To help protect mother,  
Sweethearts and home.

So let's all try  
To do our part  
By asking God  
To cheer some heart.

Of course, they'd rather not  
But duty says go  
To live through hardships  
Through rain and snow.

Or brighten a corner  
Where some boy dwells  
On land or sea  
Or in prison cells.

Away from loved ones  
Away from home  
Out in the jungles  
Or across the foam

Boys, be good  
And true and brave  
And always make  
Old Glory wave.

Oh God, give them courage  
And grace and health  
For to we mothers,  
They are more than wealth.

Let's all unite  
In an humble prayer  
For God's protection  
And His care.

They are priceless jewels  
Though some may not know  
I wonder, mothers  
Have you told them so?

Upon our boys  
For whom we yearn  
And how we long  
For their return

If it were not  
For the boys of our land  
We'd be living  
On sinking sand.

All their places  
We are saving  
While they keep  
Old Glory waving.