

Missouri-Iowa Border Markers Return St. Joseph News-Press

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These days, the border between Missouri and Iowa seems about as placid as can be imagined. But it wasn't always that way.

In its early days, disagreements over its precise location nearly caused a war between Missouri and Iowa, bringing down federal intervention.

More than a century and a half ago, the state installed a physical reminder of that contentiousness: a series of cast-iron posts, one every 10 miles, marking the 200-plus mile border. As the hint of conflict faded, so did the posts. Buried under the earth and overgrown with vegetation, they became curiosities that farmers found in their fields.

Now, a recently completed project by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources has brought them back as reminders of a time when the state literally wanted an iron-clad guarantee of its northern line.

In early 2005, the state hired Midland Surveying, a company with locations in St. Joseph and Maryville, to track down as many of the old iron posts as they could. The State Land Survey Program had already found six. Midland was able to recover 13 more, with two additional monuments apparently lost.

Each marker has now been precisely pinpointed with geographic information systems, or GIS, technology. Last month, the state officially placed copies of the data in the Missouri Secretary of State's rare document vault.

State Land Surveyor Mike Flowers said the project, which cost \$25,432, will make sure that line is there for posterity.

"I thought it was important that we spend some taxpayer's money to perpetuate that line for the future," Mr. Flowers said.

To find the line, Midland followed notes from the line's original creation in 1816, which predates Missouri's entrance into the Union. In that year, surveyor John C. Sullivan traced a border that ran from the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers (present-day Kansas City) north 100 miles, then east to the rapids of the Des Moines River. Almost 190 years later, those notes could still be used to track down the original line.

"The state boundaries were pretty big issues back in those days," noted Troy Hayes, Midland's president.

Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with the Sullivan survey, and a number of different borders were proposed. That confusion led to the short lived "Honey War."

In 1839, Iowa was not yet a state and Missouri had been one less than 20 years. When a dispute arose over some valuable honey trees in the contested area, both states jumped in with militias, ready to start shooting.

However, cooler heads prevailed before anyone was hurt, and the matter was turned over to the federal government to decide. In 1850, the original Sullivan line was retraced and marked with iron posts.

All in all, those posts have survived the years remarkably well. Of the 21 posts placed in 1850, only one, located in northeastern Missouri, was destroyed. According to local lore, it was melted down for scrap iron during either World War I or II.

Another marker, in northeastern Harrison County, has gone missing. Mr. Hayes said a contractor in Lamoni, Iowa, supposedly claimed the marker as a souvenir.

One marker in Atchison County was found six feet below the surface of a county road, its top protected by a concrete cap.

But perhaps the marker with the strangest story is the one on the eastern side of U.S. Highway 169 in Worth County. It's a few miles out of place, but that's not too bad, considering that it spent a number of years in the back yard of the now-disbanded Sigma Tau Gamma fraternity house in Maryville, Mo.

Grant City, Mo., resident Jubal Hunt hunted down the marker about eight or nine years ago, he said, after the local paper offered a reward for its return. The marker was placed at the historically incorrect but more visible location on Highway 169 on the advice of the local historical society.

Mr. Hunt, 85, who was born and lived his entire life in the area, said he's always had an interest in the markers.

"I keep thinking I'll go someday and see if I can't track some more down," he said. "But I never do, and I probably won't now."

It's that local interest, Mr. Hayes said, that helped make the project a success.

"It's amazing how well the local people have preserved the location of the monuments," he said.

But some, he added, were a bit wary.

"They were all very helpful, but it was always like, 'We'll show you where it is, but it better be here the next time I come back.' They're pretty protective of them. They're kind of local landmarks."

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