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Joan 'named' by 1950s road sign

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YOUR NEWS

CLARK COUNTY CHRONICLES

Joan 'named' by 1950s road sign

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

The community of Joan (pronounced Joe-Ann) across the Ouachita River from Arkadelphia has also been called Bethlehem by locals. The origin of its name has long been a source of speculation.

In the early 1830s, settlers began to occupy the upland portion of what is now eastern Clark County along L'eau Frais Creek (often referred to as "Low Freight"). There they established various components of an ordinary community, including a church, a store and a school. The land proved to be well-suited for agriculture, and the farmers there prospered, encouraging further settlement. Later transportation improvements in the form of steamboats and railroads further elevated the area's economic potential.

Roads also traversed the area, and Joan grew up around an intersection of several. Today, those roads are known as Highways 51 and 128 and a county road (Mt. Morriah). A post office was established near the intersection in 1886 and operated from a general store. At that time, mail arrived from Donaldson (Hot Spring County) carried by wagon or buggy. Miles Hardy served as the first postmaster and was followed by Mollie Blacknall, Henrietta Harris, Millard Aud, William Hudson, Sarah Hudson and E.B. Finn. The office closed in 1925.

One store which provided supplies to the community was a large structure with a tall front façade which stood in the community's southeast corner. In the 1930s, a Mr. Bennett owned the store. Bennett was apparently quite an entrepreneur and had a motel of sorts along the store's south side. This "motel" was actually a group of small cabins he made available to travelers. Another venture was a cotton mill, although stiff competition from operations in nearby Arkadelphia made success difficult.

The store and surrounding lands were bought by C.C. "Charlie" Bradley in 1939. The Bradley family ran the store for many years. Jessie Bradley Pierce (Charlie's daughter) operated the business until she retired in 1990.

The Bethlehem School originally occupied the southwest corner of Joan, where the Methodist Church stands today. The community's first church was organized in 1849, and Gus Wingfield was dispatched to preach there. According to local legend, Gus Wingfield held a revival (or "protracted meeting" as they were called then) there and named the church "Bethlehem." Locals referred to the community by that name for many years.

The story of the town's name has long been a point of discussion. In the mid-1950s residents wanted the area's roads paved from Arkadelphia to Donaldson. Many recall that there were not any highway signs along the road until it was paved to Donaldson in the late 1950s. And, when directional signage and mileage markers were installed, the signs gave the Bethlehem community's name as "Joan." And, just up the road toward Donaldson, in the nearby community of Brown Springs, new signs posted along the highway showed that town's name as "Faber."

While Hot Spring County's folks were able to have their community's name changed on the signs to "Brown Springs," the Bethlehem community remained on the new signs as "Joan." According to some long-time residents of Bethlehem, they were not consulted about the name, and no one remembered a "Joan" that may have served as the source of it.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

A group from the Bethlehem School, located in what is now Joan, posed for this photograph around 1902. The name of the community has been a point of contention for many years.