

Walks through History
Marked Tree Commercial Historic District
Begin at the Poinsett Co. Drainage Dist. No. 7 Office, 11 Frisco St.
December 14, 2013
By: Rachel Silva



Ritter Estate Building, 1926

Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of the Marked Tree Commercial Historic District! I’d like to thank the Marked Tree Chamber of Commerce for co-sponsoring the tour, and Soozie Williams for her help organizing the tour.

The Marked Tree Commercial Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2009 and represents the historic commercial core of Marked Tree.

Brief History of Marked Tree

Poinsett County was formed in 1838 and was named in honor of Joel Roberts Poinsett, secretary of war under President Martin Van Buren and the botanist who introduced the poinsettia to the United States. Located in the southeastern

part of the county, Marked Tree is situated between the St. Francis and Little rivers in the area known as the “sunken lands,” which was created by the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812. According to local legend, the town acquired its name from a large white oak tree on the bank of the St. Francis River that was marked with an “M” in the 1830s by John Murrell’s gang of outlaws. The “marked tree” indicated the spot where river travelers should land and drag their boats a quarter mile overland to the Little River, instead of making the longer trip around the St. Francis River bends to get upstream. The “marked tree” fell into the river after a flood in 1890. In 1971 a tree was pulled from the river and was thought to be the same tree. The tree was displayed near the corner of Frisco and Elm streets (only a stone marker remains at the site).

Marked Tree prospered after the completion in 1883 of the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad (which later became the Frisco). By the 1890s, the timber industry dominated the local economy. The region was plagued by frequent flooding, and in response to the devastating Flood of 1927, the Corps of Engineers constructed the Marked Tree Lock & Siphons in the late 1930s to control flooding and provide transportation along the St. Francis River (siphons listed on the NR in 1988). As the land was cleared of trees, better flood control methods allowed farmers to grow more crops, including cotton, corn, soybeans, and rice.

Frisco Street

Farmers & Merchants Bank (now Poinsett Co. Drainage Dist. No. 7 Office)
Constructed in 1917 for the Farmers & Merchants Bank, this building exhibits elements of the Neoclassical style with Tuscan columns in the recessed entrance and a shaped parapet. A stone panel engraved with “Farmers and Merchants Bank” remains on the building’s rear elevation. The Farmers & Merchants Bank closed in 1931 during the Great Depression, and in 1932 the Marked Tree Bank moved into this building, where it remained until 1971. The building sat vacant for a few years and has since housed the office for Poinsett County Drainage District No. 7. Drainage districts were created to collect taxes to pay for maintenance on

drainage ditches, levees, the Marked Tree Siphons, and the Rivervale inverted siphons.

The Marked Tree Bank replaced some of the original windows with glass block. Pressed tin ceiling still up above the drop ceiling.

Night-time deposit box on front façade and vault inside building.

Marble floor back to the front counter.

HPRG recently paid for new roof and window restoration on rear elevation.

To south of bank building on site of carwash—

There was a 3-story brick hotel on this site from about 1903 until about 1932, when it burned. A restaurant and commercial spaces occupied the first floor, and hotel rooms were located on the upper floors. In 1908 it was called the Merchant's Hotel, followed by the Central Hotel in 1915. By 1919 it was called the Busy Bee Hotel and Café. A raised boardwalk assured patrons dry passage between the hotel and the St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad Depot, which was located up the hill by the tracks. A water tank for the railroad was situated right behind the hotel as well.

Ca. 1930—Strand Theater in part of building. Singing cowboy Tex Ritter played on stage.

After the hotel burned, a filling station, auto sales & service company, and a restaurant (White Pig Café) were built in this location.

Point to area north of the Frisco Street & Hwy. 63B intersection (where Family Care Pharmacy and the revenue office are now located)—

Several historic buildings were located on the north side of Hwy. 63B. From right to left, there was a 2-story building constructed by the first mayor of Marked Tree, John Krier ("Kerr"), about 1910 to house his mercantile business. There was also a ca. 1918 building with a barrel roof that housed the A. B. Jones Wholesale Grocery and later the American Legion Hut (by the 1930s) and Western Auto (by the 1950s). The 2-story Keith Hotel was built about 1918 right next to the St. Francis River.

Back to Frisco Street—West side of street, going south

There used to be a railroad spur track that came off the main line southeast of the depot and crossed Frisco Street before straightening out and continuing northwest toward the Chapman & Dewey Lumber Company, which operated a lumber yard, sawmill, and box factory. You can still see the tracks in a few places (barely see them crossing Frisco; more visible as they run in front of Scott Furniture and cross Hwy. 63B). Toward the Ritter gin and grain elevators today.

There were two 1-story buildings at the corner with 4 storefronts, one of which was Stignani's Grocery. No longer extant.

Scott Furniture (20 Frisco)—built ca. 1918 and housed a grocery store before becoming G. W. Short General Merchandise in the mid-1930s.

Vacant lot—three ca. 1918 storefronts burned about 2010?? In the 1920s and 30s, they housed (right to left) a printing shop, the Economy Store (dry goods, clothing & shoes), and J. A. Price Jewelry. The city may turn this into a pocket park.

Crockett Furniture/Simmon's Flea Market (28-30 Frisco)—built ca. 1918 and originally featured a symmetrical, stepped parapet with a tile cap (the 28 Frisco parapet has been redone, possibly to repair fire damage). The building also has minimal decoration on the upper façade with a header course of brick forming a large rectangle and inset cast-concrete squares at each corner. By the early 1930s, the storefront on the right housed the Eagle 5 & 10-cent store (dry goods/variety store), and the storefront on the left was the Arkansaw Drug Company (see it written on the black Carrera glass transom).

Linda's Gifts, Craft Jewelry, building with green Carrera glass next door (32-34-36 Frisco)—built ca. 1925 and looked alike; had slightly arched parapets shaped like the portion outlined in white near the top of the Linda's Gifts façade. 32 Frisco—Katz Dry Goods; 34 Frisco--??; 36 Frisco--??.

Absolute Care Management Corp. (38 Frisco)—built ca. 1925. Tapestry brick with buff brick accents. What was here?

Fabulous Touch Beauty Shop (40 Frisco)—simple buff brick commercial building with darker brick accents and inset rectangle on façade. Was Merle Norman. Anyone remember something else?

Shinny's NYAL ("Nyle") Drug Store, People's Choice Clothing (42-44 Frisco)—built ca. 1910, this building features brick corbelling, decorative vents, and a tile-capped parapet. In 1892 Dr. J. R. Black established the first drug store in Marked Tree. In 1910 Dr. Black's store became part of the NYAL Drug Store chain. NYAL is an acronym for New York and London Drug Company out of Detroit, Michigan. The parent company imported and manufactured the best quality drugs available and packaged them for distribution to small drug stores. This gave the people of Marked Tree access to reasonably priced, high-quality medicines previously available only in large cities. Ownership of the NYAL changed a few times before 1954, when it was purchased by E. L. "Shinny" Shinabery, Jr., the first Marked Tree pharmacist to hold a Bachelor's degree in Pharmacy. Shinny and his wife, Marie, operated the NYAL until their retirement in 1992. Shinny and Marie's son, Randy, who started working for his parents at the NYAL in 1974, and his wife, Becky, continue to run the NYAL today. The NYAL had a soda fountain, which was removed in 1974, and it used to be the Greyhound bus stop in town as well. People's Choice Clothing (44 Frisco)—This storefront housed a grocery store (possibly Kroger) in its early years, and it was also home to Western Auto.

Turn around and mention the Depot location—

Frisco Depot—The St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad's freight and passenger depot was located along the tracks. It may have been constructed as early as the 1880s. Anyone know the construction year? It appears on the 1908 Sanborn. Railroad passenger service through Marked Tree stopped in 1965, and the depot was demolished in 1981.

Abundant Life Community Church/Sugar & Spice (46 Frisco)—built ca. 1915 but has a completely new façade (ca. 1980?). This was Schonberger & Blum’s General Merchandise Store. Schonberger & Blum sold staple and fancy dry goods, ladies’ ready-to-wear, men and boys’ clothing and furnishings, shoes, groceries, fresh produce, hardware, farm implements, tools, etc. The business later became Schonberger & Weir, and then just Schonberger’s Dry Goods (upscale).

E. Ritter Building, 1910 (50-52 Frisco)—constructed by E. Ritter & Company in 1910. Buff brick building with cast-stone details and some original cast-iron storefront columns. The storefront on the right housed the John & Frank Drug Store beginning on March 10, 1915; see tile at entrance reading “John-Frank Drugs, since 1915” (relocated earlier this year). John Brunner (“Bruner”), Sr. arrived in Marked Tree in 1910 and started working for Dr. J. R. Black in his drug store. John’s brother, Frank, followed in 1915, and the brothers purchased the Crescent Drug Store and changed the name to John and Frank Drug Store. The slogan, “Live Druggists,” was taken from a popular phrase of that era. If someone were called a “live wire,” they were progressive and up to date. The store had a soda fountain and sold a wide variety of things in addition to medicine, including stamps, toiletries, stationery, cameras and supplies, paints, cigars and tobacco, and phonographs.

The storefront on the left was the Superette Grocery.

Point out wooden box on pole by Elm Street crossing of tracks—there used to be a telephone in that box for use by local police and railroad employees.

Elm Street

Vacant lot—site of a 3-story building constructed about 1910. The first floor housed a bakery and general store and later a grocery. The telephone exchange and dentists’ and lawyers’ offices occupied the second floor. The third floor was rented as hotel rooms. In 1915 it was called the Chicago Hotel, and by 1919, it was the Marked Tree Hotel. In the 1960s the first floor was a restaurant (Martin’s and later, Scott’s). This building was demolished in the 1970s.

Ritter Estate Building, 1926 (14-30 Elm)—The Ritter family had a huge impact on the development of Marked Tree. Ernest Ritter came to Marked Tree from Iowa in 1886 and worked in the Oliver Davis Sawmill. In 1889 he opened a mercantile, which was very successful and grew quickly. He opened a sawmill on the Little River in 1892 and cut all the timber within reach. Ritter opened a commercial fishing business in 1895. In 1907 E. Ritter & Company was founded with Ernest Ritter, W. B. Miller, M. W. Hazel, and C. A. Dawson as stockholders. Before 1908, this corporation built an ice plant, cotton gin, grain elevator, and gristmill on the land at the end of Elm Street along the St. Francis River bank. In 1906 E. Ritter was granted the franchise to install and operate a water system, electric light company, and telephone company in Marked Tree. After Ernest Ritter's death in 1921, his son, Louis Ritter, took over the family business. Louis Ritter, Jr., was the next successor, and the company has been passed down through the generations to this day. In 1947 E. Ritter & Company bought out the holdings of Chapman and Dewey Lumber Company, further diversifying the Ritter Company's interests.

The 1926 Ritter Estate Building was built to house the offices of the family trust, as well as the Star Theater, post office, the *Marked Tree Tribune*, Burke Dabney's law office, and a hamburger joint called Doc's (Doc's also served stew and chili, and it was popular to mix them together).

Buff brick with tile (12 Elm)—built sometime between 1941 and 1950. Housed Baddour's Dry Goods (bargain prices) and later AP & L offices (in the 1970s and 80s).

Ritter Estate Building, 1937 (11-21 Elm)—built 1937 but rebricked ca. 1989. Some things that had been located in the 1926 Ritter Building later moved across the street to the 1937 Ritter Building, like the post office, the *Marked Tree Tribune*, and Burke Dabney's law office (now Mike Dabney's law office). The current location of the beauty shop was Dr. V. B. Smith's office (family practice). O. H. Cleaners moved from a small, white, wood-frame building located next to John & Frank's and the Superette Grocery down to the 1937 Ritter Building. The cast-iron

columns supporting the awning were salvaged from the old Prince Hotel on Frisco Street.

If we walk over and look at the St. Francis River—there was a notorious riverboat saloon/pool joint called the “Floating Palace” near the bridge. It burned in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

Extras:

Marked Tree UMC—built in 1926 for \$36,000 on site of earlier Methodist church from 1904.

3-story Ritter Building—built 1961.