

The Life and Times of John Sites

Excerpts from a talk given by Sue Stubbs

Introduction

These are excerpts from a talk given at the annual meeting of the Friends of Arrow Rock in May, 1990, by Sue and Roy Stubbs. Roy spoke of the happenings in the world beyond Arrow Rock that would have impinged on the Sites' life. Sue focused on the local scene. This is what is included here.

In preparing and revising this I am indebted to the following: Tom Hall, father and son, for their work on the Sites gunsmiths and the family history; Jean Hamilton for her extensive research, historical and archaeological, in connection with the restoration of the Sites' home and gun shop by the Friends in the 1970's. Jean compiled the chain of title on the property and much other valuable information and kept excellent records. I have used her Arrow Rock, Where Wagon Wheels Started West, 1972, and Charles VanRavenswaay's Arrow Rock, the Story of a Town Its People and Its Tavern, April 1959. I am forever grateful for the DAR getting T.C. Rainey to record his recollections of early Arrow Rock citizens, and published later in Along the Old Trail. Rainey makes the historical figures come alive, and it is his reminiscences that give us the anecdotes about John, Nannie, and their contemporaries. I have read the daybook of Ben Townsend, an Arrow Rock merchant, which records his business transactions from 1859-80, but unfortunately lists most purchases as "merchandise". The account book is in the Western Manuscript Collection at the Univ. of Missouri, Columbia – No. 2501. Also there are the WPA records on the Arrow Rock Christian Church, which the Sites helped organize and for which John probably gave the land. There's nothing like newspapers to get a feel of the times. I read the "Arrow Rock Enterprise" from the first issue on July 24, 1891 until October 6, 1893 when it ceased publishing. I didn't realize until I read Nannie's obituary that the editor, R. L. Sandridge, was a nephew of Nannie Sites, which explains frequent references to them. I used a portion of the microfilm file (State Historical Society of Mo.) of the "Arrow Rock Statesman" from January 1897 until the time of Nannie's death in 1900. It was there I read her obituary. I also did some work in the "Saline County Progress", published in Marshall. The Sites' family Bible, given to the Friends by his descendants, has the Sites' marriage certificate and vital statistics, mostly on Nannie's family, the Tools, probably recorded by her and spelled without an "e".

The Life and Times of John and Nancy Sites

What do we know about John and Nannie Sites? First of all, their world encompassed more than three-quarters of the 19th century with all the changes that brought. They lived to see manufacturing replace hand craftsmanship, which certainly affected John's highly skilled trade, and railroads largely replace steamboats which doomed Arrow Rock's future as a trade center. They probably prospered with the Santa Fe trade and the westward expansion the Mexican War brought. They survived the terrible ravages of the Civil War in Missouri and the decline in the fortunes of the area which followed the war.

John P. Sites, Jr., "Uncle Johnnie" as he was later called, was born in Rockingham Co., Virginia, on May 31, 1821, about the time Missouri became a state. One family member has traced their history to a Johann Peter Seitz who arrived in America on September 21, 1727. Descendants lived in Maryland and Lancaster Co., Pennsylvania, before migrating to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and anglicizing their name. In 1834 John Sites, Sr. moved his family to Marion in Cole Co., Missouri, and the next year he set up a gunsmith shop in Boonville and had a thriving business there until his death in 1853.

John Jr. worked as an apprentice to his father for seven years and on September 23, 1841, he married Nancy Jane Tool (spelled without an "e", probably by Nannie, in the family Bible). John was twenty at the time of their marriage and Nancy Jane was sixteen. She was born April 3, 1825, in Kentucky, the daughter of Ruth Faris and William Tool who were married in Madison Co. in central Kentucky on August 13, 1818. Possibly the Tools moved as a family to Missouri as Nannie had brothers and sisters in the area as well as a sister in Arkansas.

After their marriage, John set up a gunsmith shop in Clifton, Cooper Co., Missouri. They moved to Arrow Rock in 1844, three years after they were married, and again John set up a gunsmith shop. Their only son, Charles B., was born on October 22, 1844, and "departed this life", as Nannie sadly recorded it in the family Bible, on July 31, 1855. They raised a great-nephew, Ernest Randolph.

They lived in the town twenty-two years before purchasing the brick house on lot 91 we today call the "Sites house". The property records on that lot, carefully researched by Jean Hamilton, indicated a house on that lot by 1837 when it was used for security on a note for \$1200. The changing fortunes of Arrow Rock are reflected in property values. The Sites paid \$500 for the lot and improvements in 1866. It was assessed at \$800 in 1877 after extensive improvements were made, but sold for \$595, little more than the purchase price, after John's death in 1904.

John Sites was described by T. C. Rainey as never losing faith in the future of Arrow Rock, but he apparently came close. The "Saline Co. Progress" (Marshall) carried an ad for four weeks in January 1868, about valuable property being for sale by John P. Sites "being desirous of closing out and winding up business – on the most reasonable terms." This property included the lot and dwelling house on block 27-lot 91; the shop on Main St. (about where the Arrow Rock sign is now); a vacant lot 30' x 60' on Main St. just above the Masonic Hall; also a tract of land on the Missouri River below Cambridge and upstream from Glasgow-not as far as Miami-15 acres under cultivation and a good log house; and a tract in Atchison Co. (far northwest Mo.)

John did sell the gunsmith shop on Main Street in April 1868, having already bought in March part of lot 92 back of the Masonic Hall where the gunsmith shop is today. Apparently he had no takers for his Arrow Rock home in these post Civil War days and we can only guess that he and Nannie decided their best choice was to stay put.

By 1872 Nannie perhaps had persuaded Johnnie that they needed a bigger house. The account book for Ben F. Townsend's general store shows that J. P. Sites rented a house and lot from Townsend for \$6.00/mo. (reduced to \$5.00 the last two years) from November 1872-September 30, 1875. We can presume that this was while they were enlarging the house on Fifth Street by putting in a stairway, raising the roof, adding the two bedrooms, upstairs hall, store room, and the Victorian style porch which was so beautifully restored in the 1970's. John may have done much of the work himself as a newspaper account indicated in 1875 he broke a collar bone in a fall from a ladder while working on his new brick home. It is this period of occupancy, 1870's-1900 (when Nannie died and John moved out) that has been interpreted both inside and outside the house.

Incidentally, Sites didn't pay his bills promptly with Townsend for the "merchandise" he bought. By November 1875, he was paying interest on his account and settling in part with merchandise such as powder and shot, gun wads and work on "John T. gun". Barter was a common practice as other accounts were settled with wood, saddles, oats, apples and the like.

What was life like in Arrow Rock? The population of the town had peaked in 1860 at around 1000. A citizen wrote to the "Saline County Progress" in Marshall on February 27, 1868:

We wish to call your attention to conditions in Arrow Rock:

Over 100 dwelling houses, 9 of which are brick; 14 stores, 11 brick;
10 dry goods and groceries, 2 drug stores, 1 jewelry store; 1 Odd
Fellows Hall, 1 Masonic Hall, 2 Churches (Methodist and Cumberland
Presbyterian) 2 schools (1 African), 2 blacksmith shops, 2 wagon maker
shops, 1 boot and shoe shop, 1 bakery, 1 cooper shop, 1 dentist, 4
Physicians, 1 dressmaking and millinery establishment, 1 express office,
1 furniture store, 1 gunsmith shop, 2 hotels, 1 insurance office, 1
livery stable, 1 lumber yard, 2 saddlery shops, 1 paint shop, 1 steam
saw mill, 2 flowering mills, 1 brick yard, 1 carding machine, 1 woolen
factory, 1 shingle and steam planing mill, 1 billiard hall, 1 bank,
1 broker and exchange dealer, 1 art gallery, 1 state and post office.

C.K.I., as he signed himself, goes on to mention building plans including large brick Masonic and Odd Fellows Halls, a large brick Male and Female Seminary, and one of the largest and best brick warehouses in the "upper Country" to be built by Wood and Huston. He goes on to praise other Arrow Rock attractions:

We have a calaboose or jail usually empty probably because we
have neither Editor or Lawyer.

Our sidewalks are well paved and our main Street is macademized (sic.),
a thing no other town in our County can boast. Taking all things into
consideration, Arrow Rock is one of the most quiet, orderly and well

regulated town on the Missouri River.

By 1873, however, the population had shrunk to around 600 with 20 business firms and two steamflour mills still operating. The town's decline was hastened by several disastrous fires. As Charles VanRavenswaay tells it (*Arrow Rock, The Story of a Town, Its People and Its Tavern*, p. 20)

.....in the early morning of December 28 (1873). It started in the upper floor of John Gilpin's saloon on Fourth Street, north of Main, an area of frame shops and homes. The flames spread quickly, destroying an entire row of buildings along Fourth Street, and those on the half block facing Main. Only energetic action on the part of volunteer fire fighters, and a windless, snow-covered night, prevented the rest of the downtown section from being destroyed. Three other fires, a few days later, led to the suspicion of incendiarism, and three young men in the town were blamed. One of them was hanged by a mob; the other two were later reported lynched.

The town was declining, but life for the Sites went on. John continued to operate his gunsmith shop and by 1891 an ad in the new "Arrow Rock Enterprise" under the heading "Sporting Goods" said:

If you want anything in the line of Guns, Ammunition, Fishing Tackle or anything of the kind, call on J. P. Sites

Another advertisement mentioned repair on locks and guns. This ad ran only twice, but there were frequent notices imploring readers to settle accounts with J. P. Sites. Business may have been slow, but Sites did all right. The 1906 inventory of his estate after his death in 1904 lists his property as including Lot 91 and part of Lot 92, in other words his house and gunsmith shop, a lot across the street and land south of Arrow Rock on the Arrow Rock-Boonville road. This is likely the farm where his peach trees were. They are mentioned several times in the "Enterprise".

The Sites could have shopped for most of their needs in Arrow Rock. We know from his account book that they patronized Townsend's store although their purchases are listed only as "merchandise". T. C. Rainey tells (*Along the Old Trail*, pp. 43-4) that Nannie was very delicate, "though she looked well."

They lived only a short block and a half from my store, but often Nannie positively could not walk to it. John would hitch his gentle old horse to a buggy, and Nannie would ride down. She was a handsome, tidy lady, but also very timid, so that John would have to lead the horse, to be sure of the safety of his precious freight. She would be all dressed up, and here they would come, John leading and looking admiringly around, as if Nannie were a great pound cake with icing all over.

Rainey commented further on John and Nannie's relationship: "They had no children, but Nannie was the apple of his eye, and took kindly to all the petting he bestowed." He makes it clear, however, that Nannie upheld her end of the bargain:

A more gallant and devoted husband never lived, and Nannie knew it. she kept his house neatly, did the domestic work which John did not voluntarily take off her hands, fed him on diet well prepared and was a faithful, good wife.

Nannie may have been too frail to walk to town, but she could travel. At one time in the 90's she went by train to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, to visit a sister, Mrs. Oldham. More frequently the paper mentions that she has gone to Marshall to visit relatives, probably her sister, Bettie Noble. One trip in 1878 resulted in a mishap. Mrs. Sites hitched her buggy at the Courthouse Square. When the band started to play, the horse broke loose, went at full speed down Jefferson Street, "upsetting and smashing the buggy to pieces in the rear of Wood and Huston bank."

In the 1890's when there are Arrow Rock newspapers to read, there were dealers in staples and fancy dry goods and clothing, groceries, farm implements, buggies and wagons. The Miller Drug Co. advertised drugs, medicines, chemicals, books, perfumes, soaps paints, oils and glass, watches, clocks, jewelry, etc. Lumber could be bought locally and you could hire painting, paper hanging, and graining. There were four doctors in town, a milliner and dressmaker. Huston and Turley advertised groceries, canned goods, hardware, queensware (dishes) and glassware

with country produce taken in exchange for goods. For a time, there was a barbershop and a photographer, but in October, 1892, the latter “pulled out for Rocheport”. In May of that year, the editor mentions that John Sites has just received an immense stock of fishing tackle and “fishermen would do well to call on him”, and in October there is a notice that “J. P. Sites carries a full line of guns, pistols, ammunition, etc.” The editor of the “Arrow Rock Enterprise”, R. L. Sandridge, was Nannie Sites’ nephew so John may have gotten free advertising, and the Sites were mentioned frequently in the local news.

On November 18, 1892, the editor states that Arrow Rock has about 700 inhabitants. Among the “splendid inducements” he cites good education “away from demoralizing influences”. By that year there was a white school and a colored school. On August 5 of that year the “Enterprise” mentions that the old school house was torn down and lumber and brick moved to a lot in the northern part of town where a Negro school is being built. On October 7, the editor expresses thanks for donations of \$5.25 and materials for the colored school house and states that school will begin on the 10th. On April 8, he mentions that the winter term of the colored school ended and 34 scholars marched to the colored Methodist-Episcopal church. The white school closed on May 6. On September 15, 1893, he reports that the white school had 90 students and the colored 38. There was also a private school, the McMahan Institute. An ad on August 21, 1891, in the “Enterprise” stated that it was opening for its 26th annual term with tuition in the English branches, music and the use of instruments. Boarding for ten months cost \$120 with \$30 additional for English instruction and \$40.00 for music. Pupils could enroll any time during the year. Arrow Rock may have had three schools, but there was no compulsory school law. Mr. Sandridge comments on November 2, 1893, that all hours of the day school children are seen on the streets of Arrow Rock exercising their own will in regard to going to school.

What of entertainment? To judge from the newspapers, visiting was a common recreation. Games at a party for young people included croquet, hammock swinging and promenading. On October 7, 1892, the paper mentioned that a paw paw hunting party had a pleasant trip down the river on the ferryboat “Minna” but few were found. On August 18, 1893, another excursion on the “Minna” was mentioned to look at the “quaint village” of Lisbon. There was a band along. There was also notice of people going to Chouteau Springs. On October 14, 1892, there was a big Democratic rally with a parade of 1500. There was a soda pop store on Main St. and on Saturday and Sunday, J. H. Long’s restaurant on the south side of Main Street served ice cream.

Religion also provided an outlet. There were four white churches in Arrow Rock by 1891 as well as two churches in the Afro-American community; Freewill Baptist and African Methodist-Episcopal. According to the newspaper, the Christian Church had preaching on the first and fourth Sundays, the Methodist-Episcopal the second and fourth, the Cumberland Presbyterian the 3rd and the Baptist also the third. Prayer meeting nights were staggered. The editor in 1893 complains of poor conduct in church on Sunday evening during a sermon and opines: “This is a failing of some of the young men and women of Arrow Rock that is deplorable in the extreme”.

Religion brings us back to John Sites. Rainey describes him as “good-natured; stammered badly and when he was using his mouthpiece as a gateway for profanity, he smoked”. He goes on to say that Johnnie had no use for churches or religion but was loyal to Nannie who was a Campbellite. As there was no church of that denomination in Arrow Rock, he took her once a year to a protracted meeting in Cooper County. At one of these meetings in 1865, John “repented”, was baptized, and joined the church. When he came home, Rainey says he rejoiced in his change and wanted everybody to know it.

We did not believe it was possible for John to quit both smoking and swearing as he proposed to do. We thought if he did not smoke he would swear on account of it and if he did not swear he would have to smoke to console himself....but we were mistaken. I never knew such another change in a man. He stopped swearing; he stopped smoking and became an active, zealous, missionary Christian to the end of his life. He was largely instrumental in building and supporting the Christian church in Arrow Rock.

Rainey further states that “John could not read nor write,” (not uncommon for an artisan raised on the frontier) “but he had strong common sense and a remarkable memory, as most illiterates have.” To illustrate this, he tells that John loved to argue doctrines of his church and quoted frequently from “The Book” which he couldn’t read. If

someone argued with him and used a quotation he didn't know, "he would fire off another citation at you, and then, taking his cane out from under his arm and smothering your voice with loud laughter, would walk off triumphant." (p.43). Thank heavens for Rainey's memoirs that give us these personal glimpses of the Sites.

Times were hard for Arrow Rock and the nation in 1893. Businesses in Arrow Rock changed hands frequently. January 29, 1892, the "Enterprise" reported that the Arrow Rock Mercantile had closed and on February 3, 1893, that the Arrow Rock bank had failed. On May 5 the suicide in St. Louis of A. K. Florida, former president of the Bank of Arrow Rock, was noted. He committed suicide by using prussic acid. There are pleas to pay up accounts and patronize home town merchants. On February 17, the paper mentions that school continues even though funds were in the defunct bank and that a Merchants and Traders Association was organized to try to get credit from deadbeats. The editor was secretary. On April 14, 1893, his discouragement is apparent. He comments that the "Enterprise" tried to boom Arrow Rock for two years but that every good move had been knocked in the head by personal rivalry and the jealousy of citizens. He concludes with a plea to work together stating: "We have an old town, a rich town, a moral town, but it could be better." To make matters worse, it must have been a cold winter. On January 6, the paper notes that the river was blocked with ice, and the ice houses were being filled and on February 17 that blocks of ice 30" thick were being taken from the river. All was not lost; however, as John Sites had examined the buds on his peach trees and very few have been killed, and he went on to predict a big crop unless there was more cold weather. By June 2, the river was open as the editor mentions one boat had steamed between St. Louis and Kansas City. The "Enterprise", however, did not last out the year. The last issue was published October 6, 1893, and Sandridge blamed the closing on lack of support of the businessmen of Arrow Rock.

John Sites, though, continued in business. The new paper, the *Arrow Rock Statesman* on January 8, 1897, and for the rest of that month carried a front-page ad:

HUNTERS

If you want Anything in the
Sporting Line

CALL ON

J. P. Sites

He carries a general stock of

Guns, Pistols, Ammunition

Fishing Tackle

He Makes a Specialty of

Lock and Gun Repairing

Nannie lived into the new millennium, but the *Statesman* on December 7, 1900, reported her death of typhoid pneumonia at her home on Thursday evening, November 29. Cemetery records say Nov. 26th. Funeral services the following Saturday were conducted by the Rev. Blaloch. The obituary mentioned that she was born September 3, 1825 (the Bible says April 3), and had passed her 70th birthday. She was four years younger than her husband who was then 79. She and John were married in 1841 and had lived together for over 50 years (closer to 60) in peace and harmony, living for each other. She was a devout member of the Christian church. She was survived by four sisters and one brother, as well as her husband.

The *Statesman* reported on December 21 that Tom Sites of Cooper County was in Arrow Rock last Saturday assisting his Uncle John in his business affairs. They further mention that the Sites sale is tomorrow. Unfortunately, it was not the custom at that time to print the sale bill in the paper, but there are so few goods in the inventory made after John's death in 1904 that we can assume most of their personal possessions and possibly the contents of the gun shop were included in that sale. The house was rented to T. G. Sutherlin. John spent the last years of his life with his nephew, Capt. Tom Sites, who farmed and operated a steamboat "Nadine" on the Lamine and Missouri rivers. (Thomas B. Hall, *Two Missouri Gunsmiths of the Boonslick Area*). After John Sites' death on April 9, 1904, the estate was sold for \$595 to W. H. Edwards. The Hamiltons and the Millers interviewed his son before beginning restoration of the home in the 1970's, and though he was a child when he lived there, his recollections and a photograph he furnished were of immense help to them as they removed 20th century additions and returned the house to the way John and Nannie Sites would have remembered it.