

# Photo of the Month

B.F. Sikes Log Cabin



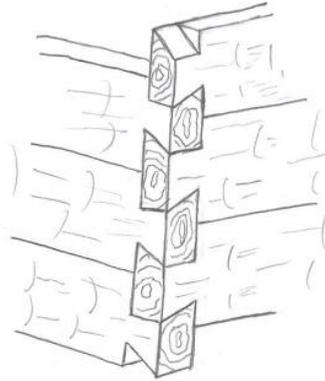
B.F. Sikes' log cabin, c. 1881,  
which once stood east of the current location of  
Arkansas Street between East Elm and East Poplar Streets,  
Rogers, Arkansas.  
Neg. # N010938



UNHEWN LOG



PLANKED LOG



HALF DOVETAIL  
CORNER

“Americans are obsessed with houses – their own and everyone else’s. Houses are equally rich in meanings. They dignify families and help to structure their working lives...they claim a place for the individual and the family in time (history) and space (community)...” (Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States*). Houses, then, reflect more than just style or function; they also help tell the story of the people who once lived in them. By studying historic homes, we can begin to understand how the city we see today once existed.

Pictured at the top is the B.F. Sikes log cabin, which is credited as being the first home in Rogers. It once stood east of the current location of Arkansas Street between East Elm and East Poplar Streets, which would place the site beyond the Frisco Stage. The picture is believed to have been made in approximately 1881.

During the previous year in the summer of 1880 the Frisco Company surveyed the area and selected eastern Benton County for the railroad due in large part to the good terrain, presence of springs, and the convergence of established roads. It just so happened that the site selected for a depot was on the farmstead of B.F. Sikes. Mr. Sikes then went to work establishing the layout of the new town. These new town blocks—containing a total of 180 lots—were divided into three rows of five blocks, with two rows located on the west side of the track and one block on the east side. All of the lots were sold by the end of 1881 and the first new building was either used as a saloon by John Cox or a grocery store by Lowry and Scroggins. The population of Rogers reached 600 citizens during the time Sikes’ farm transformed

into a town.

In 1901, Sikes recalled in a Rogers Democrat article that “part of the present townsite was under cultivation in 1881, but that most of it was covered with scrub timber and brush.” There were also many other farmsteads and buildings scattered throughout Benton County at that time and, in particular, Sikes noted the presence of the tavern and stage shed at Callahan’s Station. But even though the cabin was lost during the early years of the town, it can still tell us a great deal about B.F. Sikes. Log construction represented a very common building method in frontier areas and the styles and techniques used by builders often hinted to their places of origin and cultural heritage.

The Sikes cabin is identified as a two-pen dogtrot style cabin built of planked logs with half dovetail corner joinery. But what do these terms mean? Most scholars and log builders point out that a cabin is a single pen structure, it can have a variety of corner joints, and it can be constructed in the most basic form with only a few tools. Other cabin types are very sophisticated and require a great deal of knowledge, technical skills, and many tools to join the logs. However, modern popular images of this type of construction are often mistakenly associated with something akin to “Lincoln Logs.”

Log homes could be made according to several different ground plans and each plan is typically based on the “pen,” which is a basic log building unit. It is usually a 16 square foot box structure with limited door and window openings because they generally weaken the overall structure. The somewhat standard dimensions of the pen were defined by the size of a log that a man could harvest, move with a mule, and then lift with help from another individual.

In the Ozarks, settlers often chose to build with oak since it was readily available and long lasting. The choice of this type of wood also indicated that cabins were built with care so as to last many years. If a new dwelling structure, such as a balloon frame building made of dimensional lumber, was built by a family, the old cabin would usually be put to use as a barn or outbuilding and remain part of the farm.

Jean Sizemore generalized traditional Ozark house types as following “the English folk tradition of being one room deep...with the exception of a rear room or ell...and have gable-end roofs and entrances transverse to the ridge pole.” As families grew and prospered, the single pen structure could easily be joined with other pens to create larger dwellings. Pens were typically added side by side in one row, but ells could also be attached to a pen with a shed type roof. Chimneys were also usually placed on the outside of each gable end of the pens to accommodate this type of addition. Each pen would also have its own exterior entrance.

In the case of the Sikes cabin, the two pens are joined with a single, open passage or breezeway, which gives the structure the dogtrot name. The wood shingled roof was extended to cover both pens of the cabin and the dogtrot. The central dogtrot allowed for air flow through the cabin and was an important place for the family to work or even live during warm weather. A common belief for the origin of the name dogtrot comes from notion of family dogs running free through this open space.

Corners done in the half dovetail style are also widely seen in this area, which indicates a strong connection to settlers from the Upland South. According to Sizemore, “the half dovetail is easier to make [than the full dovetail], yet provides a good slope for water runoff.” The tightly interlocked corners provided structural stability, resisted rot, and signaled a high degree of log-working craftsmanship. The planked log and half dovetail notch are illustrated at right.

This “English folk tradition” was carried into the Ozarks by families such as the Sikes, who were of English stock and from Tennessee. Arriving in the area in 1853, B.F. Sikes’ father, Robert Sikes, made the original purchase of the tracts that would eventually become Rogers. At the time of Robert Sikes’ death in 1856 these five tracts of forty acres each were divided among his children. B.F. Sikes initially returned to Tennessee shortly before the Civil War, but came back to Benton County and settled on his inherited farm land in 1876.

It is interesting to note that the earliest English settlers did not have cabin building knowledge as part of their cultural heritage. The British Isles were not heavily forested, so other building methods and materials were used there. Settlers from northern and central Europe, such as the Swedes and Germans who came from densely forested regions, are largely responsible for bringing this knowledge to the American Colonies. Given the wealth of timber resources in the New World, it is little wonder that this building method became so prevalent among all cultural groups on the American frontier.

The German style of log building proved to be the most influential in America in the way logs were prepared and notched. German style cabins usually had evenly finished corners, which presented a more refined look than the Swedish style of construction with logs extending beyond the corner joints. In the Ozarks, builders also usually planked logs—a method where logs were flattened on the inside and outside only, with the top and bottom left round with bark attached. This method saved work and created a rough surface for adhering chinking, which is a mortar of mud and clay or lime mixed with mud, clay, or sand that served to insulate and seal the cabin from the elements. But the finish chosen for a structure also depended on the intended use. For instance, dwellings were usually done with planked logs and finished corners, whereas log buildings used for barns might be built more simply with logs left in the round.

By studying the cabin in this way, it certainly seems to represent an important form of vernacular architecture in the history of Rogers. Vernacular structures come not from architects or by mimicking new styles, but from the cultural memories, skills, and available resources of individual builders. However, this does not mean that vernacular structures are crude or plain. In this case, B.F. Sikes’ cabin provides us clues to his cultural heritage and how people once lived in this area.