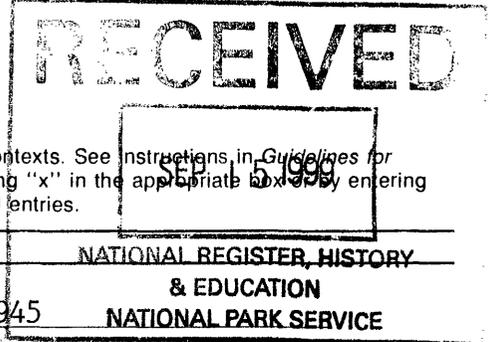


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form



This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Vertical Split Log Buildings of "Slabtown," Arkansas 1935-1945

NATIONAL REGISTER, HISTORY
& EDUCATION
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Vertical Split Log Buildings of "Slabtown," Arkansas

C. Geographical Data

Legal Boundaries of Grant County, Arkansas

See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Cathryn A. Sater
Signature of certifying official

8-31-99
Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Edson W. Beall
Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

10/14/99
Date

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Introduction

The vertical log buildings set among the hardwood groves along State Highway 167 south of Sheridan, Arkansas have long been of interest to motorists traveling along this major regional thoroughfare. Visibly constructed of split logs placed vertically, covered with simple gable roofs and a single story in height, they present a quaint, rustic appearance reminiscent of Depression-era recreational facility construction, and of automobile tourist courts in particular. And yet, while rumors have circulated regarding their origin, virtually no effort has been made to document their history in any serious fashion.

This multiple property nomination seeks to establish the historic context underlying the construction of these unique properties, to evaluate them against contemporary regional and national architectural trends, and to recognize those eligible through listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

History of Sheridan

Grant County (named by the state's Reconstruction legislature for the recently elected President, Ulysses S. Grant) was formally created on January 4, 1869 from portions of neighboring Jefferson, Hot Spring and Saline counties. Its seat of justice, Sheridan - named for the Union general P. H. Sheridan - was located upon forty acres of land in Sections 3 and 10, Township 5, Range 13, that were donated by a Mr. L. M. Veazey. The entire county, including the area in and around Sheridan, was a patchwork of woodlands (deciduous and coniferous) and open land located primarily along its principal waterways: the Saline River, and Lost, Hurricane, Derriousseaux and Deer Creeks. Considering that no railroads crossed the county until the turn of the century, its vast timber resources remained commercially unexploited until that time. As was the case in most of southern and eastern Arkansas, the principal industry in Grant County throughout the nineteenth century was agriculture in general, and the growth of cotton in particular.

The new century brought dramatic new developments to Grant County. The arrival of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad in the first decade of the twentieth century (connecting Sheridan with Benton to the northwest and Pine Bluff to the southeast) opened up the county's virgin forests to commercial timber harvesting and unlocked its rich economic potential by connecting it to burgeoning national and international lumber markets. The timber of Grant County included loblolly pine, short leaf pine, yellow pine, cedar, hickory, plus different varieties of oak, ash, elm, cypress, gum, maple and assorted

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other hardwoods. By the 1930's the county could boast of no fewer than thirty-five independent lumber mill operations that produced millions of board feet of pine, cypress and oak. The development of the automobile in the early twentieth century and the growth of the commercial overland trucking industry only exacerbated the fervent timbering and milling activity, so much so that even during the Depression the county remained an important source for wood products.

Naturally, as the county grew, so did Sheridan, and dramatically so after the arrival of the automobile. Located at the intersection of the railroad and two major south Arkansas roadways - State Highways 167 and 270 - Sheridan became an important overland transportation hub for the shipping of both raw timber and timber products. However, most of the timber industry was located near the center and to the east of town, which meant that as overland automobile and truck traffic increased, these roads were the first to be paved. Many of the surrounding roads - including several that today are considered principal traffic avenues - remained unpaved, in spite of the ever-increasing traffic.

History of "Slabtown"

The small, agricultural area located approximately four miles south of Sheridan's center was originally known as Pumpkin Center. The settlement there was largely composed of small farms dispersed along the Deer Creek bottoms and bisected by the rough, unpaved dirt road that connected Sheridan to the north with Fordyce and other Arkansas communities to the south. As such, it remained a community in name only until 1935, when the *Sheridan Headlight* noted the letting of the contract to the D. F. Jones Construction Co. for the construction of "grading, drainage structures, gravel base course and bituminous surfacing on highway 167, south of Sheridan 6.8 miles." The paving of the main automobile highway through this neighborhood dramatically improved access and provided the first real incentive for the development of potential house lots along this historic roadway, particularly given the generally poor state of the local roads that intersected it. With the significant increase in through automobile traffic that the paved road would bring, it also encouraged commercial investors to look seriously at the area's potential as a business location.

The Vertical Split Log Buildings of "Slabtown"

Not surprisingly, it was after this year that there appears the first

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organized attempt to encourage new residential and commercial construction along this stretch of State Highway 167. Hillary Henry "Pappy" Koon (born 1882) was born and raised in Sheridan by his parents, Daniel and Joann Koon. Pappy Koon's ancestors had emigrated from South Carolina, and from Germany before that. Though he made his living as a farmer, he was perhaps better known as a part-time carpenter who his neighbors called upon to help them with assorted construction projects on a regular basis. Through this continuous work and his genuine interest in construction, Pappy Koon became well-known as a dependable builder and craftsman.

His inspiration for building using this vertical, split-log technique remains unknown, though it was by no means unheard of by this time. However, the few vertical log buildings in Arkansas of which we have any knowledge were typically built by workmen hired by the assorted Depression-era public works agencies (of which we know he was not an employee) and we have no record of there being any of this type built in the Sheridan area. Rather, it seems far more likely that the active timber harvesting and timber products industry in and around Sheridan - and the abundance of experienced timber workers it employed - provided Pappy Koon with the exposure to this building type and its advantages.

Yet it should also be noted that the improved access to this area allowed for the establishment of smaller, mobile sawmill facilities that were usually powered by an internal combustion engine, and one of these played a critical role in providing Mr. Koon with the building materials he required. Owned by one Mr. Combs, a small "groundhog" mill was set up on the west side of the highway, near the southern end of this neighborhood, and it was this mill that split the logs that Pappy Koon used for his construction. Once split, Mr. Koon would strip the bark from the logs by hand with a drawing knife.

The first vertical, split-log house of which we have record, Koon House #2, was built about 1936 and was the home that Pappy Koon built for his own family. The building chronology of the vertical, split log buildings that followed is less clear, though it is fairly certain that most of them were constructed for neighbors - not as "spec" houses - and completed by 1940. The issue of the Sheridan Headlight of Thursday, May 2, 1940 carries an article the title of which is "Thirty New Houses South of Sheridan." Therein the author notes the construction of several new houses south of Sheridan as far as Deer Creek, and specifically notes the erection of a number of what are called "pole houses" among them. Furthermore, the article comments on the construction technique, noting that pine saplings are split with a saw, then peeled and stood on end to form walls. The author also

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concludes that this new spate of building has resulted in the addition of approximately 125 new people to this end of town.

Given this construction technique, it is not at all surprising that none of these buildings is more than a single story in height. The pine logs are indeed relatively small in diameter and, though strong, would not support a great deal of load above the first floor. However, given the cottage scale of these buildings, their construction appears to be extremely sturdy. The logs would be split roughly in half for their entire length, trimmed to fit and then finished with a tenon on each end that would be fitted to mortises in the sill below and plate above which would form the essential load-bearing structure of the building. The roof framing would be fitted to the plate, sheathed, and the house was essentially complete. Naturally, the interior finishes and other work would follow thereafter, but the structural integrity of the building required nothing further.

It is interesting to note that interviews conducted with residents who have lived within these houses have revealed that they have remained solid and structurally sound since their completion, and much more so than newer construction in the area. We do not have an accurate count of how many of these buildings have been either lost or so altered as to have become unrecognizable, but those that survive appear to be in extremely good condition, including the Slabtown Grocery Building, which a physical inspection revealed to be remarkably solid in spite of how many times it has been moved.

The effect of this "streetscape" of vertical, split log houses was immediate and not always favorable. Local residents who traveled this stretch of State Highway 167 - and who did not understand this construction method - dubbed the area "Slabtown" as they believed that these buildings were of slab construction (where a log is partially hewn on *both* sides and then either notched or mortised to fit into other logs). Fairly or not, slab construction carried the stigma of being a construction method favored by poor people of lower economic and social standing, and so "Slabtown" became somewhat of a pejorative name for this neighborhood of Sheridan. It is ironic that these buildings have held up so well over time, long enough to be considered for National Register listing, while so many other newer buildings have not survived, or not as well.

Conclusion

The vertical, split log buildings of "Slabtown" are unlike anything else

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in Sheridan, or Grant County, or, when considered as a group - all of which were designed and constructed by the same builder or someone working directly under his supervision - the entire state. It is only because we do not have an exhaustive statewide survey of such construction that we cannot responsibly elevate the level of significance to statewide. For south central Arkansas, however, we know that Mr. Koon's interest in these simple, affordable designs and how he manifested that interest in these small, humble buildings is unique and without parallel. It is this type of vernacular design and construction that has too often been ignored and unappreciated, and so allowed to disappear. Hopefully, this nomination will serve as a substantial step in the direction of preventing this from happening here and anywhere else in the state where local builders and craftspersons had the imagination to create their own vision and the courage to give it form.

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I. Name of Property Type: Vertical Split Log Buildings

II. Description:

The vertical split log buildings are all of a specific construction type: that is, the original structure of each consists of relatively small (+/- 6 inches in diameter) logs, split in half, that are placed vertically side by side and mortised into the sill below and plate above. The logs are uniformly place with the round or unfinished side facing the exterior and the flat or "split" side facing the interior, against which any interior wall structure and finish is placed.

Their elevations tend to be relatively irregular, with window and door placement varying widely, and most have experienced some later additions, though in most cases such additions have been placed toward the rear of the building. The plans tend to be relatively simple, as most are restricted to either a rectangular or "L"-shaped floor plan. They also tend to be no more than one-and-one-half storys in height, with any additional half-story being of frame construction.

As a group, these buildings tend to serve the purposes for which they were originally built, unless they are unoccupied. They have survived well over time and tend to be in at least good, if not very good condition.

III. Significance:

All the vertical split log buildings of Slabtown are significant by virtue of this unique vernacular building technique. They were either built by Koon or by others he trained directly, and so all are the product of his vision for these solid, relatively inexpensive buildings. As such, they are all significant on the local level under National Register Criterion C as examples of this vernacular, local design tradition.

IV. Registration Requirements:

The vertical split log buildings of "Slabtown" are significant by virtue of their unique design method. Therefore, to meet registration requirements, these buildings should have been built in the period between 1935 and 1945; they should retain sufficient physical features to identify them as having been built during this period; they should retain sufficient features to identify them with this unique construction technique; they should be relatively intact and unaltered, particularly from their front or principal elevation; and they should retain their integrity of setting.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- State historic preservation office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency

- Local government
 University
 Other

Specify repository: _____

I. Form Prepared By

name/title Kenneth Story, Preservation Outreach Coordinator
organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date 8/27/99
street & number 323 Center St., Suite 1500 telephone 501-324-9880
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

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The five buildings included within this multiple property nomination have been well-known to many Arkansans for years, given their unique appearance and close proximity to State Highway 167, a major north-south thoroughfare in southern Arkansas. Their uniformly "rustic" appearance prompted some to assume that they had been part of a tourist court; others believed a popular rumor that they were the product of a persuasive traveling salesman peddling a mysteriously obtained supply of telephone poles. However, everyone agreed upon their unusual construction.

Local interest in researching the origin of these buildings - coupled with an interest from AHPP staff in increasing both our survey inventory and National Register listings in Grant County (a county that has historically been underserved by AHPP) - resulted in the initiation of an exhaustive survey and documentation effort by AHPP staff in June of 1998. Reconnaissance-level survey fieldwork to identify all buildings of this construction type in this neighborhood of Sheridan was followed by individual property survey documentation efforts. A total of eight buildings were documented as part of this effort.

Concurrently, contact was made with the Grant County Historical Museum and research begun into documenting the historical background of these properties. Mr. Elwin Goolsby, director of the Grant County Historical Museum, worked closely with AHPP staff and proved invaluable in contacting the four surviving daughters of Mr. Koon, who were interviewed as a group initially and then contacted subsequently on an individual basis to answer follow-up questions. Furthermore, Mr. Goolsby provided AHPP staff with leads regarding contemporaneous newspaper articles and other primary source documentation that would later prove quite helpful in ascertaining information incorporated into the historic context (Sec. F) of this nomination.

This research resulted in the preparation of a preliminary historic context for these properties, which, when considered with the site-specific survey information gathered during the summer of 1998, provided sufficient historical information for AHPP staff to conduct a Determination of Eligibility. Of the eight structures identified as part of this project, three were found to be ineligible due to severe alterations or having been moved. The remaining five were determined to be eligible for listing; hence their inclusion here.

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"Contract Let On 167 South of Sheridan," *Sheridan Headlight*, Thursday, October 31, 1935, p. 1, c. 6.

Goolsby, Elwin L., *Our Timberland Home: A History of Grant County, Arkansas*, Rose Publishing, Little Rock, 1984.

Interview with Mrs. Ruth Stubbs, June 30, 1998.

Interview with Mrs. Faye Williams, June 30, 1998.

Interview with Mrs. Alice Donaldson, June 30, 1998.

Interview with Mrs. Alice Donaldson, November 18, 1998.

"Thirty New Houses South of Sheridan," *Sheridan Headlight*, Thursday, May 2, 1940, p. 2, c. 4.

WPA - Arkansas County Histories Collection, 1936-1941, Part V, Grant County.