

HOW DID SILVER CREEK GET ITS NAME?

There has been much speculation through the years as to the origin of the name of Silver Hills. Yet, oddly enough, the question has seldom been raised as to the origin of the name of Silver Creek. It has been called Silver Creek since the earliest days of white settlement in this area and the name seems intertwined with persistent legends of a silver mine somewhere along its banks.

The very earliest references to the Knobs northwest of New Albany always give them the name Silver Creek Hills. The name persists in printed records as late as the 1840s. Then the word "creek" was gradually dropped from the name and they became simply the Silver Hills. Real estate developers of the 1890s took the name, which had been applied to the whole range of Knobs extending north through Washington County, and applied it specifically to only the southern tip of the Knobs at the west end of New Albany – the Silver Hills of today.

So it seems that the mystery of the name of Silver Hills is really no mystery at all. They were named for Silver Creek which in its upper reaches skirts the base of the Knobs and received much of its flow of water by providing an outlet for streams and springs in the Knobs. The mystery now is the origin of the name of Silver Creek.

The creek apparently received its name sometime between 1776 and 1783. A map of the Falls of the Ohio made in 1776 shows many creeks in this area were already named – Beargrass Creek, for example. But Silver Creek is merely indicated on the map without a name. Land deeds dated 1783, when

the Clark Grant was appropriated to veterans of George Rogers Clark's campaign, refer to the stream as Silver Creek. So it would seem that the creek was not named until settlers began arriving. It would also seem that the settlers named it immediately. But why did they pick the name Silver?

From the sketchy information handed down mostly by word of mouth the name seems to have originated from the widespread belief that there was a silver mine or buried silver in the Knobs or in the vicinity of the creek.

All sorts of folk legends concerning this silvery treasure have hovered like shadows in the background of the authentic history of the area. The simplest of the legends says that about 1775 a band of roving Indians buried on the bank of the creek a keg of silver. Other stories say the Indians knew the location of a silver mine where silver was found in its almost pure state and that they carried this valuable ore to British traders in Canada. Other more elaborate legends tell of the Indians rewarding one or another early settler or hunter whom they admired by giving them a bag of silver under dramatic circumstances – the fortunate white man was blindfolded, then taken through the woods and deep into a cave. There the blindfold was removed and he beheld vast quantities of silver. After he received his gift he was again blindfolded, taken back to his camp or cabin and admonished never to try to find the cave. Even today a cave near Charlestown is known as the Cave of the Silver Find – though it is empty of silver.

Other versions say that early flatboat men floating down the river would point to the Knobs as they passed and say something to the effect that "Yonder range of hills is rich in silver ore." Probably they did, since the legend of silver in this area was so widespread.

Some legends are even more specific. There is one, for example, about Nathan Phelps who is said to have settled near the boundary of Clark and

Washington Counties early in the 1800s. During a hunting expedition in the Knobs, Phelps and a friend named Brooks are alleged to have discovered an excavation and near it a crude furnace of stone – the lost Indian mine. They are supposed to have smelted much silver. Then, the legend says, Brooks died of a rattlesnake bite and the Indian attack at Pigeon Roost in 1812 forced Phelps and his family to seek shelter at Louisville. Shortly after he went to New Orleans where he was taken ill with yellow fever and died.

But before he died he made a map showing the location of the mine. This map placed it in the vicinity of the Round Top, one of the Knobs some distance north of New Albany.

According to the legend the mine was in a heavily wooded ravine marked at its entrance by a picture carved on a tree of an Indian with drawn bow. The arrow of the bow pointed toward the mine, the story says. Settlers in the area searched for the mine in vain and later, the legend says, Phelps' son also attempted to find the mine but was unsuccessful.

Another version of the story tells of a man named Marshall who discovered the mine and smelted the ore into silver.

Whatever grain of truth may or may not be contained in these legends, it is a matter of official record that some early settlers in this area took the story of the silver mine very seriously. There exists in the files of the U.S. State Department in Washington early letters concerning the attempt of a group of inhabitants to lease land where the silver mine supposedly was located, but the letters do not give the location. A Joseph Paddocks of Harrison County, along with others whose names are not recorded, wanted to lease the land in 1812 and sought permission to coin U. S. money from the silver. Permission to coin the money was denied by the Treasury Department, but what further developments occurred is not known.

A clue as to the origin of the story of silver may be contained in a report of the Indiana Geological Survey back in the 1870s. A state geologist making surveys in Harrison County heard stories of an old Indian silver mine which was located on the farm of Philip Blume on the west side of Indian Creek in Scott Township. Investigating the site he found that there was indeed an old excavation which had been made many years before. Then examining closely he found what the Indians had been seeking. There, intermixed with the limestone, he found flint – a special kind of flint which could be easily worked into arrowheads and other implements. It may be significant that this type of flint only occurs where argillaceous limestone is found – a geological term meaning silvery limestone. The old stories of Indians who returned to this area long after white settlers moved in and then went back home with loaded leather bags probably arose from Indians returning to this area to dig for flint, the geologist concluded.

That's as much as is known about the legend. Perhaps that's all that ever will be known. And so the mystery remains – did the Indians seek out the silvery limestone because that is the location of good flint, or is there a lost silver mine somewhere near the Silver Creek?

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