

RESTORING the HAUNTED HIGHWAY of the NATCHEZ TRACE MURDERERS



Captain Bowman stepped forward, snatched open the man's buckskin shirt and revealed the tell-tale scar on the man who posed as Sutton.

Below, Andrew Jackson's old home, The Hermitage, near Nashville, Tenn., starting point of the Natchez Trace.

A reproduction of an old print showing Murrell gangsters with the body of a victim.

By Robert Talley

THE Natchez Trace, that historic wilderness trail which linked Nashville, Tenn., with the Spanish domains in the Southwest a little more than a century ago and along which bloodthirsty land pirates preyed upon unwary travelers with a fiendishness perhaps unmatched in the nation's history, is to live again.

Linking present with colorful past, a ribbon of concrete 550 miles long and fringed by beautiful parks and terraces, soon will curve its scenic way through western Tennessee, northern Alabama and central Mississippi. It is the Natchez Trace National Parkway—really an elongated national park—for which the federal government already has set aside more than \$10,000,000. Actual restoration work is starting this summer.

When the project is completed several years from now, at an estimated total cost of \$20,000,000, autos will speed along a modern highway following the route of this historic wilderness road so rich in the legends and the romance of the Old South. Over it Andrew Jackson marched his victorious troops homeward after the Battle of New Orleans. Henry Clay traveled it on horseback when he was seeking votes for the presidency. Jefferson Davis took the beautiful Varina Howell for his bride in a great old mansion near the trail.

THE Natchez Trace was a natural locale for crimes. From Nashville the narrow road led through a great wilderness. It was the only return route for traders who drifted their flatboats down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. These returning merchants offered rich pickings for land pirates.

Among these were Misajah and Wiley Harp, two brothers known as "Big Harp" and "Little Harp." They robbed and murdered a man named Johnson and threw his body into a nearby river. They tomahawked a pack peddler named Peyton. Farther into the wilds along the Trace, they

The Natchez Trace (above) with park areas shaded.

killed two more.

The fugitive Harps tomahawked a young man named Trabue. Another victim they captured and stripped, tied him to the back of a horse and drove the horse over a high cliff. A little later they paused at the cabin of Mrs. Moses Stiegal long enough to murder Mrs. Stiegal and her children, Mr. Stiegal being absent at the time.

Crazed with rage over his family's murder, Stiegal joined a posse organized by Capt. Samuel Leiper, one of Nashville's pioneer citizens. In a battle in the canebrakes, "Big Harp" was shot in the spine by Captain Leiper. As the bandit lay dying, the furious Stiegal jerked out his hunting knife and cut off "Big Harp's" head. He wedged the ghastly trophy into the fork of a tree and for many years that community was known as "Harp's Head." The younger Harp escaped and fled toward the Natchez Trace.

A little later "Big Sam" Mason spread a trail of murder and robbery all the way from Natchez to Nashville.

After the robbery of Col. Joshua Baker, a trader returning to Kentucky with his gold, Mason was captured and taken to Natchez. The punishment for murder in those days was hanging, but as Colonel Baker had not been killed, Mason got off lighter. He was sentenced to 39 lashes on the bare back, 12 hours with his neck and wrists

locked in the town pillory and branding on the thumbs with a hot iron, to mark him as a thief.

RELEASED, Mason rode out of town vowing vengeance and immediately started on a new campaign of crime. Robberies and murders followed in profusion, one haul netting as much as \$7000 in gold. Eventually Mason and seven members of his band were captured, but they escaped and resumed their depredations. Governor Claiborne, territorial ruler of Mississippi, offered a big reward for Mason's head.

A short time later two men appeared in the little town of Greenville, Miss. (now extinct, although there is another town by the same name), with a human head packed in a ball of blue clay. They demanded the reward. They gave their names as Mays and Sutton and declared they had followed "Big Sam" Mason to his lair, tomahawked him and chopped off his head.

In the crowd gathered on the public square was Capt. John Bowman, who had moved to Greenville from Knoxville some years before. Captain Bowman eyed Sutton.

"I think that man is 'Little Harp,'" he said. "If he is 'Little Harp' there is a scar on his left chest, for I cut him there in a fight in Knoxville years ago."

Captain Bowman stepped forward, snatched open the man's buckskin shirt

and revealed the scar on the man who posed as Sutton. Mays was quickly identified as another member of "Big Sam" Mason's gang, who had turned traitor.

Instead of collecting the reward, the two men were hanged.

Of all the desperate characters who roamed the Natchez Trace none was more colorful than John A. Murrell, that Napoleon of outlaws who dreamed of a robber empire in the Southwest with himself at its head.

In 1835, when he was near the peak of his lurid career, Murrell plotted his most daring venture of all. Through his agents he planned a rebellion in which the slaves would overthrow their masters, kill them, and set up Murrell as their ruler.

The uprising was set for Christmas Day, 1835, and was to begin at Natchez and sweep north and south through the valley. The plans for the wholesale massacre were discovered when a Negro nurse refused to murder the white baby entrusted to her care and revealed the secret to her master.

Murrell fled, but he was trailed to a point near Jackson, Tenn., and captured. He was tried and sentenced to 10 years at hard labor in the penitentiary at Nashville. He served his term but both his health and his mind cracked in prison and he came out an invalid and hopeless imbecile.

