

**Walks through History  
Couchwood Historic District  
601 Couchwood Rd., Hot Springs  
November 12, 2011  
By: Rachel Silva**



## **Intro**

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, one of 7 agencies in the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Welcome to the Walks through History tour of the Couchwood Historic District! I'd like to thank the Couch family, especially Cathie Matthews and Elizabeth Dober, for allowing us to tour the property today and for their help gathering information for the tour. Also recognize Becky Rimmel and Pratt Rimmel, Jr. & tell crowd that Elizabeth, Cathie, Becky, and Pratt are all grandchildren of Harvey Couch. Cathie Matthews is the Director of the Department of AR Heritage as well. Additional thanks go to the tour's co-sponsor, the Garland County Historical Society, and especially Liz Robbins for her help.

The Couchwood Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001.

## **Harvey Crowley Couch**

Harvey Crowley Couch was born on August 21, 1877, in Calhoun, Columbia County, Arkansas, to Tom Couch and his wife, Manie Heard Couch. Harvey was the first of 6 children and was raised on a cotton farm. Harvey Couch only attended school 2 months out of the year, which was typical for the children of farmers at

that time. Harvey's father, Tom, was in poor health and as his condition continued to worsen, Harvey's help on the farm became invaluable. Couch was fascinated with machines at an early age and was happy to take his first job away from the family farm at the local cotton gin, where he stoked the boiler for the gin's steam engine. When Harvey was 17 years old, his family gave up farming and moved to Magnolia, where he attended his first full 9-month school term. Couch was big for his age, already standing 6 feet tall, and because he was behind in school, he was placed in a class with 12 and 13-year-olds. This created an awkward situation for Couch, who felt out of place amongst the other children. He became discouraged and withdrawn. But this soon changed when Harvey's instructor, Pat Neff, had a talk with him and inspired Couch to stay in school and do extra work to catch up with the other students. After working with Neff for 2 years, Harvey Couch graduated from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Pat Neff went on to become governor of Texas and president of Baylor University.

Then Couch got a job as a clerk at Dr. H. A. Longino's drug store in Magnolia while he waited on his application with the railway mail service. When Couch was 21, he was hired as a railway mail clerk on the St. Louis to Texarkana route of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad. He was soon promoted to head mail clerk on the Memphis to Texarkana route of the St. Louis Southwestern or Cotton Belt Railroad. While on his route, he saw a crew installing telephone lines. Couch immediately saw an opportunity and paid another clerk \$50 to switch routes with him so that he could work on the train that ran from Magnolia down into northern Louisiana. Couch envisioned bringing telephone service to rural southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana. With a local postmaster as his partner, Harvey Couch started the North Louisiana Telephone Company. In 1904 Couch bought out his first partner and enlisted the support of his old friend and former employer, Dr. Longino. Later that year while he was working to establish telephone service in Athens, LA, Couch met and fell in love with Jessie Johnson. The couple was married on October 4, 1904. Harvey and Jessie Couch had 5 children: Johnson Olin, Harvey Crowley, Jr. or "Don," Kirke, Catherine, and William Thomas or "Bill."

Couch's North LA Telephone Co. eventually had to compete against Southwestern Bell for additional lines to more cities. Couch's company was successful, but by 1910 it was landlocked, surrounded by Southwestern Bell cities. So in 1911 Couch reluctantly agreed to sell the N. Louisiana Telephone Co. to Southwestern Bell. His share alone was over \$1 million, which in today's dollars would be about \$23 million. Couch could have retired right then, but he had a persistent drive to build

another company that would benefit the state of Arkansas and truly help the common man.

Drawing from his previous experience installing telephone lines, Couch set out to create an interconnected electric utility system for the state. He wanted to start near his hometown in south Arkansas, and Malvern and Arkadelphia emerged as good candidates because both cities were taking bids for a company to provide electric service. Couch first considered using hydroelectric power to generate electricity. Accompanied by veteran steamboat captain Flave Carpenter, Couch and Dr. Longino scouted the Ouachita River for potential dam locations. They presented their findings to Dean W. M. Gladson, Professor of Engineering at the University of Arkansas, who agreed that the construction of three dams was feasible on the Ouachita River from an engineering standpoint but recommended against it until there was enough demand for the amount of power the dams would generate. Couch and Longino agreed to wait on the dams but still had to find a way to provide electricity to Malvern and Arkadelphia.

In 1913 Couch approached H. H. Foster, president of the Arkansas Land and Lumber Company, which operated a sawmill outside of Malvern. Couch proposed buying steam from their boiler system to power his turbines and generate electricity for Malvern and Arkadelphia. Foster agreed and Couch's Arkansas Power Company soon provided Malvern and Arkadelphia with 24-hour electricity for the first time.

Because Arkansas banks had little faith in electric companies and weren't lending the kind of money necessary to finance the expansion of the AR Power Company, in 1914 Couch secured a loan of \$200,000 from an investment bank in New York City. With this amount of investment capital, Couch was able to recruit additional investors and in September 1914 the company name was changed to Arkansas Light & Power Company. In the following years Couch bought up failed electric companies in cities throughout Arkansas and added them to the growing AL & P system. He also marketed electric pumps to Arkansas's rice farmers and advocated the electrification of cotton ginning and compressing operations. To better serve and expand these new markets in the rice and cotton industry, Couch acquired a large power plant in Pine Bluff. At that time, the Pine Bluff plant was the most technologically advanced plant in the AL & P system, so in 1917 Couch moved his headquarters from Arkadelphia to Pine Bluff. Later that year President Woodrow Wilson appointed Couch Fuel Administrator for the State of Arkansas during the World War I fuel shortage (at that time, the major fuel was coal).

On a trip to Pittsburg in 1920, Couch heard a radio for the first time. He was immediately impressed and purchased one for himself. He thought it would be a great way to tell people about Arkansas and its potential for development so he built the state's first radio station. In February 1922 WOK radio ("Workers of Kilowatts") started broadcasting from Pine Bluff.

Couch had been waiting for the day when Arkansas's demand for electricity warranted the construction of a hydroelectric dam. And in the early 1920s he decided it was time. Couch took off for Washington, D.C. to get permission to construct the dam. When he arrived, Secretary of War John Weeks, who was in charge of the licensing commission, was about to leave for Alaska (to join President Warren G. Harding). Discouraged, Couch went back to his hotel and by chance, he ran into Col. Harmon Liveright Rimmel in the hotel lobby. Rimmel had operated a lumber company in Newport, AR, so he knew Couch. Rimmel arranged for a quick meeting between Couch and Sec. of War John Weeks. After Rimmel vouched for him, Weeks agreed to grant Couch the license for dam construction. In appreciation of this favor, Couch named the dam after the colonel.

Construction of Rimmel Dam began in May 1923 and was completed in December 1924. It would be the first and smallest of the three dams Couch planned for the Ouachita River. Rimmel Dam is 65 feet tall, 900 feet wide, cost over \$2 million to build, and had a 9,000-kilowatt capacity. Couch named the resulting lake after his only daughter, Catherine. Lake Catherine covers about 2,000 acres.

In 1926 Couch's Arkansas Light & Power Co. merged with Arkansas Central Power Company and other public service utilities to form Arkansas Power & Light Company or AP & L. The merger provided much-needed capital and allowed all of Couch's utility companies, Arkansas Power & Light, Mississippi Power & Light and Louisiana Power & Light, to expand.

Amidst all of this activity, Harvey Couch began construction of his country retreat, Couchwood, in 1927 with the construction of the Big House. More on this later...

After the devastating Mississippi River Flood of 1927, Arkansas Governor John E. Martineau appointed Couch Flood Relief Director for the State of Arkansas. Couch also served on the Tri-State Flood Commission, which worked to coordinate relief efforts in the Delta states of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. It was during this time that Couch worked with then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who was in charge of flood relief on the federal level.

After things got back to normal following the 1927 flood, Couch set out to build his second hydroelectric dam on the Ouachita River. Construction began on Carpenter Dam in February 1929, and it was completed in December 1931 at a cost of \$6.1 million. Carpenter Dam was named after Flave Carpenter, the steamboat captain who convinced Couch that the Ouachita River was suitable for dams. Measuring 115 feet high and 1,165 feet wide, Carpenter Dam was at that time the largest hydroelectric project in the Southwest. The associated lake, Lake Hamilton, was named for C. Hamilton Moses (or Ham Moses), Couch's longtime legal counsel. Lake Hamilton covered about 9,000 acres and would create 75,000 horsepower, which was sufficient to power 100 towns with populations of 10,000 people.

In 1928 Couch purchased the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad as well as the Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company. Then came the stock market crash of 1929 and the drought of 1930. In late 1931 President Hoover appointed Couch as one of 7 on the Board of Directors for the new Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which provided loans and grants to banks and industries as well as funding for public works projects like water and sewage systems, bridges, and electric lines. Couch would live in Washington, D.C. for three years while serving on the RFC Board of Directors. When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1932, he allowed Couch to remain in his position with the RFC. Some of the well-known projects Couch was involved with while at the RFC were the Oakland Bay Bridge in San Francisco and the Huey P. Long Bridge in New Orleans. Couch resigned from the RFC in 1934 and returned to Arkansas.

In 1937 Couch acquired stock in the Kansas City Southern Railroad, and the next year, assumed control of it. He combined his Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad with the KCS in 1939 to create a rail system stretching from New Orleans to Kansas City. In addition to other projects, Couch then announced the development of an air-rail-motor transportation system that ran along the KCS routes.

After attending the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1940, Couch went on to Baltimore to close a business deal. During his stay in Baltimore, Couch suffered a mild heart attack and was hospitalized. When he returned to Arkansas, he went directly to Couchwood to recuperate. He was moved to Little Pine Bluff because it could be cooled easily. Harvey Couch died on July 30, 1941, at Couchwood. He was buried in the Magnolia Cemetery next to his mother and father.

## Couchwood

After the completion of Remmel Dam and Lake Catherine, Harvey Couch chose this site on a peninsula overlooking the lake for his country retreat. In 1927 Couch hired Little Rock architect John Parks Almand to design the Big House in the Rustic style of architecture, featuring peeled log walls with cement chinking, dark wood siding, and rusticated stone to blend in with the surrounding environment. The central portion of the house with the log walls dates to 1927, while the east and west board and batten wings were added circa 1951. The original portion of the house was built with Cedar logs from Oregon. The kitchen and dining area was enlarged in the 1960s. The Big House has 5 bedrooms, 6 bathrooms, a dining room, living room, kitchen, and big back porch (2 levels & now 14 beds available in this house). Couch built the Big House to entertain family, friends, and business associates. As you heard earlier, he was very involved with bringing new businesses to Arkansas. Couch would invite bankers and businessmen from the Northeast and Midwest to come to Arkansas, take them on a whirlwind tour of the state, and then bring them to Couchwood for discussions and fun. He had annual “Round-ups” at Couchwood, which were organized gatherings or meetings for industrial, financial, or civic leaders—see the 1938 Round-up program on the back porch wall. Notable visitors to Couchwood include President Franklin D. Roosevelt and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who came to AR in 1936 during the state’s centennial celebration; Will Rogers, who gave out drought benefits in AR in 1930; then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who was in charge of flood relief efforts after the 1927 MS River Flood; and Postmaster General James A. Farley. Guests at Couchwood were asked to follow some simple rules:

1. When you come into the big gate, forget all your troubles (if any).
2. Be sure to sign the register. Couchwood is proud of its guests.
3. At meals take as many helpings as you desire.
4. If you don’t see what you want, ask for it (just like you would at home).  
At Couchwood everything is off the record.

In the Big House, you will see photos of many who visited Couchwood. Some things in the house are from Johnson Couch’s trip around the world, like the vases and mounted water buffalo horns. The wooden beds in the Big House were built by Harvey Couch’s neighbor, cabinetmaker Gordon LeCroy.

Harvey Couch was a friend of North Little Rock real estate developer Justin Matthews (Park Hill, Lakewood, the Old Mill). After Matthews recommended the work of Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez, Couch hired Rodriguez to do some

work at Couchwood in the 1930s. Rodriguez specialized in a technique called “faux bois” or “fake wood,” where he created a form with copper rebar covered in metal lathe and applied cement by hand. He used common kitchen implements to create realistic textures of trees, plants, toadstools, cut wood, etc. Then he concocted a secret mixture of chemicals to make the coloring agents. Rodriguez was so secretive about his sculpture technique and coloring agents that he often worked from inside a tent or mixed things in the trunk of his car, quickly slamming the lid if anyone approached. After he was done with the chemical containers, he removed the labels and broke the bottles.

Here we have a vertical log planter with knotholes, an owl face, and the initials of the Couch family members as well as split log steps up to the front porch. There is a set of faux bois steps and a stump soda pop cooler behind the Big House. And you’ll see a fallen tree bench and planter in front of Little Pine Bluff. This is the largest tree bench Rodriguez created.

### **Entrance gate, barn, bridge, boat house**

In 1927 Couch also constructed the Rustic-style entrance gate, the horse barn, the stone bridge connecting the mainland to the peninsula, and the boat house (which was renovated in 1930).

### **Calhoun**

Shortly after the Big House was completed in September 1927, Couch commissioned J. P. Almand to design a small cabin to the east of the Big House overlooking Tigre Bay. It was also built with Oregon cedar logs. Couch dubbed this cabin “Calhoun” after the town where he spent his childhood. Completed in 1928, Calhoun has one bedroom, a bath, and a living room. Couch liked to spend time down at Calhoun, and he could fish off the porch.

### **3 stone fish ponds**

Three stone fish ponds were built just below the Big House in 1928. They are empty now, but originally, water was pumped through all three ponds and spilled over from one pond down to the next. The top pond held minnows, the middle pond held medium-sized fish, and the lowest pond held large fish.

## **Garage & BBQ Pit**

The garage and barbecue pit were built in 1930. When you walk behind the Big House, you'll see the BBQ pit situated down the hill right on the water's edge. A concrete panel with a bas-relief of Harvey Couch's head was added to the stone chimney in 1976 for the Bicentennial (the panel itself was made by a friend of the Couch family in 1939 but wasn't installed on the stone chimney until 1976).

## **Little Pine Bluff**

Couch commissioned Almand to design one more cabin for him in 1932. It was also built with Oregon cedar logs. Couch called this cabin "Little Pine Bluff" because the Couch family lived in Pine Bluff after the AP & L headquarters moved there. Little Pine Bluff was built as a guest house, and the first guest was Postmaster General James A. Farley. The house has 2 bedrooms, 2 baths, living and dining areas, and a kitchen. In 1940 an addition was built on the rear of the house to expand the kitchen and add two screened porches. Couch stayed at Little Pine Bluff during the last months of his life and died there in 1941. His rocking chair is still on the front porch (marked with a "C"). Rodriguez fallen tree bench is out in front of Little P.B.

## **Rommelwood**

Rommelwood was designed by Harvey Couch and Gordon LeCroy and completed in 1941. Built using cedar logs from Arkansas. Couch built Rommelwood as a vacation house for his only daughter, Catherine, and her husband, Pratt Rommel (was mayor of LR beginning in 1951 and served in that capacity throughout 1950s; prominent Republican). Rommelwood has a distinctive 2-story front porch and a small balcony. The house has 3 bedrooms, 2 baths, and kitchen and living areas. Rommelwood was originally supposed to face south toward the lake, but Couch had them turn it to face Little Pine Bluff so he could sit on the front porch and watch its construction. Couch intended to build all of his children a house at Couchwood, but he died before he got the chance to do it.

## **The Magnolia**

The Magnolia was Harvey Couch's private railcar when he owned the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad (car dates from 1920s) and is named after the town of Magnolia, where Couch lived as a young man. The Magnolia has two parlors, two bedrooms, 2 baths, and a kitchen and maid's quarters in the back. The Couch



family found the Magnolia railcar in a junkyard in Louisiana and purchased it for the price of the scrap metal. The car was brought to Couchwood and installed on a set of track in 1969. There is a photo album of the moving process inside the Magnolia—very, very difficult to get it in here around the sharp corners and trees. Had to be brought down the driveway on rubber wheels and then transferred to the wheel base on the track.

### **Ellen & John's House**

House built in 1950 for Ellen and John, caretakers and cooks at Couchwood.

### **Horseshoe Pit**

The horseshoe pit was moved to its current location in the 1990s. It was originally right behind the Big House. Always a popular game at Couchwood.

### **Conclusion**

To members of the Couch family, Couchwood is much more than a place where important people visited. Couchwood was, and is, a family retreat and gathering place. The Couch family still gathers here for family reunions and certain holidays. During the summer months, family members spend time on the lake.

Today Couchwood is held in a family trust and is used primarily for family functions. However, the Big House and other cabins are offered for rent 9 months out of the year.

### **Additional Info:**

Story about cardboard cutout of Harvey Couch from Butler Center—someone picked the wrong Herbert Hoover out of a photo, saying “but he looked more presidential” about Couch.

Lightning struck Big House, sending splintered wood all over the main living room. Luckily Jessie Couch told everyone to get in a bed, saying if lightning struck, you couldn't be hurt if you were on a bed. This actually saved them from being injured because they were not in the room when the wood flew.

Native American artifacts in cabinet on porch—probably came from excavations during Rempel Dam construction. See painting by Adrian Brewer on the wall with the Indian chief in the clouds above Rempel Dam.

Lewis Warrington Baldwin, president of the Missouri Pacific RR, in photos of Couch, Hoover, and Neff.

Couchdale—FFA camp located SW of the Diamondhead entrance. Original 38 acres were donated by Couch, thus the name. Camp opened in 1930.

Lake Catherine State Park—Couch donated 2,150 acres around Lake Catherine to the State of Arkansas for a park. 1937—CCC workers cleared area for park. 1942-1945—German POWs there and built some stonework that remains today.

Couch often received animals as gifts from his associates, and he eventually had to put up a fence at Couchwood to keep them all inside. At one time, he had bison, deer, elk, peacocks, pelicans, etc. During World War II, most of the animals were given to zoos. A boat or raft was used to transport the bison across the lake.

Blakely Dam—Named after the nearby Blakely Mountain. Formed Lake Ouachita. Upstream from Carpenter Dam. It was supposed to be built by AP & L but World War II caused funding problems. After the war, the Corps of Engineers paid AP & L for the land and groundwork already done and built the dam (mid-1950s).

After Harvey Couch's death in 1941, Ham Moses succeeded him as president of AP & L.

In 1925 Electric Bond & Share Co. (EBASCO) consolidated with Couch's companies in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana to form Electric Power & Light Co. (owned by EBASCO and administered by Couch). In 1949 EBASCO became Middle South Utilities, Inc., which in 1989 changed its name to Entergy Corporation and continues to operate today.

Thank you!