

AH, MYTHICAL MUDSOCK. NOT EVEN RAND McNally himself seemed to know exactly your location or what secrets you once held. Stopping at the intersection of Roberts and Rome-Hilliard roads in Franklin County, I fumbled for both definition and my highway maps. All around me were buildings in various stages of construction. There was not, most assuredly, any sign for or sign of a town named Mudsock, Ohio. In fact, the antithesis of my imaginings about Mudsock—vinyl and particle-board—had managed to sprout all over the horizon.

The 1993 McNally road atlas showed only a black dot and the word *Mudsock* squarely at this point; the official state maps showed less. Obviously, Mudsock was missing. On Rome-Hilliard Road, I saw fancy housing developments called Western Lakes and Hyde Park. No Mudsock Manor. No Mudsock

Hills. No sign of country. The area is defined by a main subdivision street named Reebok Drive, which almost made Whispering Way sound sincere. Still looking, I drove west on Roberts Road into the green fields of August, watching a couple of lonely stone-chimneyed farmhouses jockey hopelessly with the new strip shopping centers, the twenty-first century nudging out the twentieth.

Quintessential Mudsock, ghost-town nonpareil, is one of those hidden places in history's twilight. In one century, Mudsock went from small town to large joke, and then it disappeared. Of all Ohio's nineteenth-century towns, the name *Mudsock* might be the oddest. It might also be the best example of that curious pioneer amalgam of eccentricity and practicality. People once named their towns

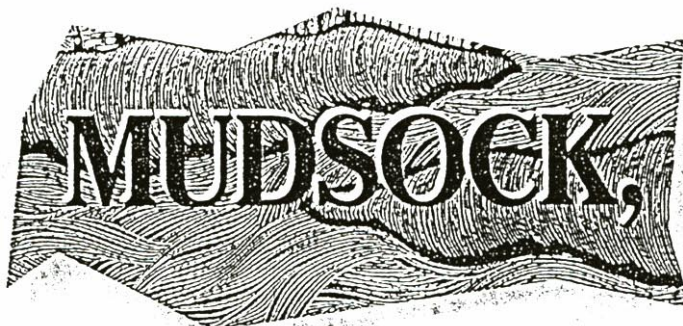
in the most pragmatic of ways, and in choosing *Mudsock*, the residents left no illusions about their community, nor did they try to impress neighbors with a pretentious euphemism. Now, these qualities have all but vanished, and Mudsock is a metaphor for dead towns. Its weary farmers of old certainly wouldn't need the Sundash Tanning Center in the shopping strip on Rome-Hilliard Road to give them that outdoors look, but they might appreciate a visit to its chiropractor at the end of a long day of plowing.

Always bluntly picturesque, the name was also popular, for at the turn of the last century, at least four small Ohio towns were named Mudsock. Today, only two can be identified—one in Franklin County, the other in Gallia. Franklin County's Mudsock popped up among the fields of Brown Township, which was formed in 1830 as the young county continued to grow. In 1847, a school for black children was estab-

lished there; in 1848, the Darby post office opened. From 1840 to 1850, the township's population increased from 425 to 681, a significant boom for that place and time. Today, as suburbia camps at its doorstep, the township is poised to receive a wave of new people who will forever change the face of their adopted home.

I wasn't present when this Mudsock lived or died, but I witnessed its internment on a humid summer day when big yellow machines scooped and loaded another field to make way for a subdivision. It happened within sight of Mudsock on Roberts Road, just past the Columbus limits sign. As the capital city expanded west, like a little galaxy of its own, it engulfed everything in its path.

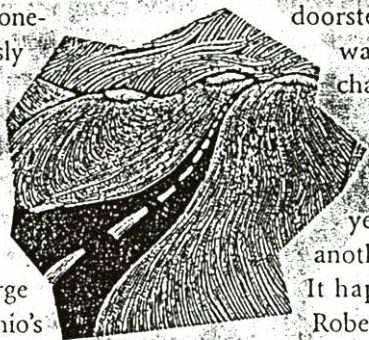
People like Hubert Hayes, a farmer who has lived near Mudsock for 56 years, wait apprehensively. They



We Hardly Knew You

Ohio's Essential Podunk

BY RANDY McNUTT



know the area will change radically in the next few years, but they can't predict exactly what will occur. The cornfields become battlefields of cultural difference, at least until the older people leave or die. Mudsock has been transformed into unfamiliar territory. Or, depending upon one's perspective, *familiar* territory. For the coming transient population, the name *Mudsock* will mean nothing.



HAYES, LIKE MOST RESIDENTS, ISN'T old enough to remember Mudsock's heyday, but he does recall two missing landmarks: a dry goods store that became an antiques shop before closing in the late 1980s and a county truck garage. Not that Mudsock was ever much of a place. It was more of a focal point for neighbors, he said, a place to go back to. In 1941, Rand McNally reported its population at a modest 15 people.

The self-contained Mudsock actually died long before most of the new subdivision developers were born. As early as 1956, writer Margaret Yost described Mudsock as an obscure place. "Mudsock, no more than a wide place at the intersection of the Alton-Darby and Roberts roads," she wrote in a local newspaper, "has been standing a few miles from progress for over 100 now. Legend has it that Mudsock got its name when a farmer, traveling through the muddy area on horseback, dismounted to give his animal a rest. The farmer stepped into the thick mire and found that he couldn't extricate his feet. First off came his shoe, and then his sock, both stuck fast in the quagmire. Whatever happened then to the farmer, no one recounts, but the tale of the sock in the mud passed on through generations of residents, who told the tale as an explanation of their community's name."

According to a variation of the legend, horses constantly had mud on their legs, which looked like brown socks. How Mudsock was named is no burning question on Roberts Road today. Time has disarranged the community and left no trace of a business or residential center. But Yost wrote that in 1956 Mudsock consisted of a dozen houses, George Harlow's old dry goods store, and the Colwell Methodist Church, founded in the 1850s. The church was named for parishioner John Colwell, who called prayer meetings when the minister wasn't available. In 1876, the minister suggested that members of the congregation vote on

a name for the new church, and submit five cents with each vote. Yost said that Ann Colwell, John Colwell's wife, bought \$25 worth of the members' votes to win the name for her family.

Ben Hayes, the late Ohio folklorist, contended that the Franklin County Mudsock got its name from a wholesale grocery salesman after his first trip to George Harlow's general store.

The mud was so bad, it took a horse and its stallmate to pull out the salesman's car. "So from the beginning," Hayes said, "Mudsock was a two-horse kind of place. . . ."

Not knowing I was only a mile or so away from Mudsock, I stopped at the school to ask for directions.

"Excuse me," a secretary said. "Did you say *mud*?"

"Yes, Mudsock."

"Well, I've never heard of it."

"*Mudsock*?" somebody said from behind her.

"It's on my map," I said.

The skeptical secretary pulled out a detailed Franklin County map and pointed to the unnamed area, only to prove the community's nonexistence.

"Maybe," a co-worker said, "Mr. McNally should take Mudsock off his map."

About a mile to the east, at the intersection of Alton-Darby and Roberts roads, I found Eugene Hamilton mowing his grass. "One day," he recalled, "somebody asked me if I'd ever heard of the place, and I said no. Then somebody told me, 'Eugene, you

The mud was so bad, it took a horse and its stallmate to pull out the salesman's car.

live right in the middle of it.' But I've only been around here 20 years. I guess that doesn't make me much of a geography expert."

BEN HAYES HAD A STORY HE HAD HEARD ABOUT Franklin County's Mudsock. In the 1930s, a stranger walked up to a cab driver named Jarvis Denton in front of the Neil House in Columbus and said: "Here's \$25. I want you to pick us up at the Mudsock Post Office at 11 o'clock Sunday night, then you'll take us to Union Station. We're catching a train out." As he departed, the stranger promised a big tip.

In those days, gangs of safecrackers roamed the Midwest, so the cab driver assumed a gang would hit the post office near Mudsock. He alerted Sheriff Holy-

cross. "They're gonna blow the safe in the Mudsock Post Office Sunday night," Denton said. By 10 o'clock Sunday night, officers with machine guns were patrolling the countryside. When they didn't find any safecrackers, they ordered the cabbie to drive slowly toward the post office as planned. Suddenly, two people ran toward his cab, apparently newlyweds carrying traveling bags and running away from a belling. The groom looked familiar to the embarrassed cab driver. The bride lived in a nearby farmhouse. After the matter was explained, officers fired their machine guns into the air to salute the honeymooners in what was surely Mudsock's only machine-gun wedding.

By the 1930s, generic Mudsock had come to represent small-town Ohio. Instead of joking about life in Podunk, comedians joked about life in Mudsock. "Mudsock was taking the abuse of touring comics," Hayes said. "Muddy roads were considered funny. That Mudsock was a tiny place was not kidded. Its mud was the thing. 'I just got in town from Mudsock and I'm [simper] I'm [simper] getting my shoes cleaned up a bit.' A comic on stage at Keith's Theater in Columbus would continue: 'Lost both my socks. There was one mudhole. I stepped in it, and the mud pulled my socks off and right through my shoes.'"

HAYES, WHO STUDIED RURAL OHIO FOR YEARS, believed that three other Mudsocks developed—one near Upper Arlington, another of unknown geography, and a third in Gallia County. On State Route 776 in Gallia County, Mudsock consisted of 50 people, the Walnut Methodist Church (its five members called it Mudsock Methodist) and Drummond's General Store. Cy Drummond, the store proprietor, turned 88 in 1976. He told a newspaper reporter that the town was called Sand Fork for many years, and when he inherited the store in 1918, he decided to rename the town Mudsock.

"People got Sand Fork Church, about six miles from here, mixed up with the village. They'd come to the village instead of the church and there was all kinds of confusion," Drummond explained. "So I just changed the name myself, partly because of the confusion and also because of the muddy roads leading into the village."

Appropriately, Drummond's store was an anachronism in an anachronistic town. The store featured two signs: "If you want credit, see the credit maneger [sic]. He has been dead for 10 years." And: "Smokers and chewers: Please spit on each other and not on the stove." Drummond also contended that Mudsock had died for the sins of bucolic burgs everywhere. "As long as they are razzing Mudsock," he said, "they are leaving Peoria, Podunk, Puckerbrush, and Yellowbud alone."

Ben Hayes was fond of Mudsock and he once wrote, "In recent winters the Gallia County Mudsock has been cited poetically in descriptions of sleighing parties from Lecta to Cadmus, linking it with two other population specks among river hills to convey an over-hill-over-dale cadence." Thus, Mudsock became a stop on Hayes' Cadmus-Mudsock-Lecta "See Ohio" tour.

Perhaps because Gallia County is a well-hidden treasure in rural southeastern Ohio, its Mudsock never achieved the fame of Franklin County's. But Gallia County's muddy town had more to offer: a "Gallipolis Weekly Tribune" columnist who used the pen name Reuben "Rube" Radway of Mudsock. In the 1890s, Radway was a low-budget cross between his Ohio peers, Charlie Weaver and Kin Hubbard. No doubt the author took the name Reuben for its double meaning because it was the most recognizable country man's name. No doubt the writer chose Mudsock as home because it was Ohio's essential hick town, and so the writer perpetuated the stereotype of the rustic philosopher.

"MUDSOCK WAS SORT OF A SYMBOL TO CITY FOLKS of how things were in the country," observed James Sands of Springboro, a former Gallia County resident and United Methodist minister. "There were times when Reuben would spin out some yarn about possum hunting. At other times he talked about going to the big cities like Pittsburgh, having accompanied a local produce dealer up there with a load of eggs or something. Occasionally, Rube would be the butt of derision—like the time he ordered his water at the Park Central boiled because he thought it came through the pipes as dirty as what the Ohio River looked." Rube's motto was:

*Just ask for Reuben Radway,
Who never was on Broadway.
Never saw the hootchy-kootchy
on the bow'ry,
Never married no rich gal
with a dowry.
We always answer the door
whenever you knock,
At 4444 Center Street, Mudsock.*

In time, Rube Radway and Mudsock vanished. So did Cy Drummond and his store. Sands said the town's church, funeral home and two-room school finally closed by the early 1960s. "Every county has bunches of towns that prosper then die," said Sands. "There are plenty of them in Gallia County: Buzzard Ridge, Tick Ridge, Punkin Town, to name a few. I'm guessing that Mudsock was a common name for a lot of little towns all over Ohio years ago. I'm sure Gallia County's version earned its name because there in the Symmes Creek Valley it can get very muddy and difficult to get in and out of in the spring."

These days, no sign welcomes strangers to Mudsock. Deputy Sheriff Dave Whealdon, who lives nearby, said the place probably isn't worth the trip for sightseers. All they'd see, he said, is the sign for Mudsock Road.

"You know you're in Mudsock when you see that sign," Whealdon said. "You're in downtown Mudsock. So stay alert, and don't blink." ♦

Randy McNutt, a contributing editor from Hamilton, never blinks.