

# THE ENDURING MYSTERY MAN OF KETCHUM

July 31, 1991

The last time Al Griffith saw David Ketchum was when they parted company in the Wood River Valley in the late fall of 1879, after finishing Ketchum's cabin. [This information has been passed down through several generations from Al Griffith by word of mouth.] Shortly after Al's return early the following spring of 1880 the first miners adopted the name of Ketchum for their new village.

By many accounts, David Ketchum was a Frontiersman who spent most of his years in the mountains of Idaho "beyond the range" (north of Galena Summit), where few men had penetrated his private life. In 1927, Elmer Ebb, builder and owner of Ketchum's new Casino Hotel was searching for information about the elusive David Ketchum. He learned from letters he received from Gardner G. Adams and James L. Richardson that they had business dealings with Ketchum, a reputed good packer who was familiar with the territory, in May of 1880. "He was about 40 years old, tall and slender. He was a bearded, gentle man, but a man not to be fooled with."

The Bannock Indians used areas around Salmon City for their wintering grounds. When gold was discovered white miners stampeded the area creating conflicts, and the U.S. Cavalry was called to drive out the Indians. Some speculate that this is where Ketchum spent time living with the Indians before the wars to learn about their culture and their medicines.

*In an unusual occurrence during a trip to Europe in April 1991, Corinne Marin, Al Griffith's great grand daughter, had a chance conversation in Paris with a relative of David Ketchum. John Maresca is the great grand nephew of David Ketchum, from an old, unusually interesting St. Louis, Missouri family.*

Jack Maresca was kind enough to engage in a correspondence with Mary Jane Conger about his long lost relative about whom even the family knew little until his return to his home in Missouri. I thank him for his permission to include excerpts of the letters in this Griffith History Book. The Ketchum name lives on.

Mrs. Mary Jane Conger  
Ketchum-Sun Valley Historical Society  
P.O. Box 2746  
Ketchum, Idaho 83340

Dear Mrs. Conger:

Many thanks for your letter of last April. I apologize for not answering sooner, but I have been very busy with other things.

My mother's maiden name was Glen Ketchum. She was born in St. Louis in 1898 and died in 1982. It was one of her uncles who left St. Louis to find his fortune and who wound up in Idaho. He left only his name in Ketchum, I'm afraid, and returned after some years to St. Louis. He was the subject of many stories in my mother's family, a combination of larger-than-life frontiersman and a bit of a black sheep. There were stories of his membership in an Indian tribe, and his secret Indian health potions, which were apparently quite successful, commercially, until he died.

My mother wrote a family history during her last years, and spent some time researching her (very colorful) ancestors. There was the glamorous "Missouri" Ketchum, for example -- a kind of Mata Hari figure who was hung as a Confederate spy in St. Louis during the Civil War. My mother even visited Ketchum and the nearby towns in Idaho to see what she could learn, which was not very much. Unfortunately, her family history is packed away in storage in Washington while I am stationed overseas, and I will probably not have access to it for another year or so.

If you are interested, I will see what I can dig up. My sister in Connecticut also has a copy of my mother's account of the Ketchums, and perhaps I can look at hers the next time I am there. It was really quite a fascinating frontier family.

By the way, my son's middle name is Ketchum, so the family name has not disappeared.

With best regards to your daughter and son-in-law.

Sincerely,  
*Jack Maresca*  
John J. Maresca



*John Maresca was a career Ambassador of the United States and is now (2010) the Rector (President and CEO) of the United Nations University for Peace, which has its main campus in Costa Rica and affiliated branches around the world.*

October 2008  
*Excerpts of Mary Jane Conger first correspondence in reply to the letter (left) originally sent by John Maresca in 1991:*

Dear Jack Maresca,

"Receiving information about David Ketchum seventeen years ago out of the blue from a chance meeting in Paris between one of his relatives and my daughter was mind boggling! And to realize it has taken me until this summer to get back in touch with you is even more unbelievable."

"As for your query regarding how might you help, I would greatly appreciate any additional information about David Ketchum, including photos, comments made in letters, etc, that would add to the history of this recognized frontiersman whose only legacy to Ketchum is his name. You mentioned once that your mother had written a family history to which that you could gain access. Your whole family history, renegades and all, would be a delight to read!"

"Little information of him is available. My grandfather, Al Griffith met up with David and spent the better part of a year with him, as far as I can tell, at the end of the Indian Wars in the Wood River Valley of Idaho, where we live. Griffith returned the following year to settle and remain here, but Ketchum never returned and his whereabouts remain a mystery. . . except that you told me he had returned to Missouri from Idaho."

— Mary Jane Conger

November 2008  
*John Maresca's last letter reiterating information from his first correspondence including additional anecdotes.*

Dear Mary Jane,

"How nice to hear from you again! But I am afraid I can't give you much information in response to your question. Here is what I know about David Ketchum, and how he fits into our family. It is a truly American story:"

"According to our family lore, David Ketchum was an adventurous spirit who decided to go west from Saint Louis at the time of the California Gold Rush. For some reason he did not make it to California, and stayed instead in the place in Idaho which eventually took his name."

"Some years later he returned to St. Louis. By this time he had become something of a legend. The story was that he had been made an honorary member of the local Indian tribe in the region of Ketchum, Idaho. He supposedly brought back with him the recipe for a cure-all medicine which he brewed and sold by the bottle, which made him quite rich. However, he died without passing on the recipe, having sworn to his Indian friends that he would not reveal it to anyone. He had no children that we are aware of."

"The Ketchums were a well-known family in Saint Louis in the nineteenth century. For example, one Ketchum ran for mayor of the city another — Using Ketchum — was a famous lawyer who Abraham Lincoln joked about in his speeches ("the law firm of U. Ketchum and I. Cheatham"), and another, a glamorous woman called Missouri Ketchum (so named because she was born into a family of brothers, and a long argument ensued over what to name her), who was hung as a spy for the Confederacy during the Civil War. So David Ketchum, with his Indian cure-all medicine, was one of a famous clan, about whom there were many stories."

"My mother wrote a family history during her last years, and spent some time researching her (very colorful) ancestors. She even visited Ketchum and nearby towns in Idaho to see what she could learn which wasn't very much."

All the best to you,

— John (Jack) Maresca  
 (Great-grand-nephew of David Ketchum)