

Worker feels special meaning passing family homeplace

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As you pass the intersection of Martin and Patton roads on Redstone Arsenal, you're probably thinking about getting to work on time, not what took place here more than 100 years ago.

But the intersection means something else to Brian Matkin, chief of the concepts and analysis division of the AMC Smart Weapons Management Office.

It's the approximate location of his grandfather's birthplace.

William "W.J." Matkin Jr., Brian's 81-year-old father who worked at the arsenal as an instrument maker for 21 years before retiring to his Morgan County home, said his father, W.J. Matkin Sr., once pointed out the spot to him.

"He was born in a log cabin in 1889," said W.J. Matkin Jr., who thinks his ancestors first came to the area around 1819, when it was still part of the Mississippi Territory.

Study a map of the topography of Redstone Arsenal, and "you will see hundreds and hundreds of streams coming into the Tennessee River from both sides," said W.J. Matkin Jr. "You can anticipate that the people that came into those areas probably came in boats, what they called long boats."

His father told him the cabin was near

"the best well on the water," W.J. Matkin Jr. said. "He remembered it from the time he was a child."

W.J. Matkin Jr. isn't sure how much land his kinfolk had. "I think land grants were something in the neighborhood of 940 acres," he said.

Although many of his ancestors moved to Texas, some of the Matkins family stayed in the area, and a mountain on post is named for the family — although it's spelled improperly. "Madkin" Mountain is visible from Patton Road.

"They were asking people in the area what the name of the mountain was, and that's the way they pronounced it," said W.J. Matkin Jr., who thinks the mountain was officially named in the 1930s.

The family also recently learned about a Matkin cemetery at Redstone Arsenal. Ironically, they discovered it through members of Brian Matkin's National Guard unit — Battery C, 1-203rd Air Defense Artillery.

When he heard about the cemetery near the Air Defense Training facility, W.J. Matkin Jr. visited the site with son Brian and daughter-in-law Brenda Matkin, who also works on post as an electrical engineer for MICOM.

Among several graves at the cemetery, they found the tombstone of W.J. Matkin Jr.'s great-great grandfather, William Blunt Matkin, who died in 1849.

Visiting the cemetery wasn't emotional, said W.J. Matkin Jr., "it was just interesting. Everybody's got great-great-grandparents."

But Brian Matkin can't help but think about his family history as he passes Sparkman Center, which sits on land his ancestors once farmed.

"The family and the people of this area gave up property in a depressed period of time in order to bring in jobs," he said. "I think they'd be proud of it."