

“Forty Years a Legislator”

Memoir of a Hoosier Boyhood

ELMER THOMAS

The title of this book is “FORTY YEARS A LEGISLATOR.”

The author served thirteen years—from Statehood in 1907 to 1920—in the Oklahoma State Senate; four years—1923 to 1927—in the National House of Representatives, and twenty-four years—1927 to 1951—in the United States Senate.

In order that those who read these lines may have some understanding of the background, education and qualifications of the author to serve as the representative of the people of a district and a state of some two and one half million people, it is deemed appropriate that a brief history be outlined in this, the first chapter.

ANCESTORS—The name “Thomas” is one of the most common for both personal and surnames in the entire list of American names. An early Thomas family originated in Wales and dates back to antiquity.

Editor's note: This is the first section of Thomas's 1954 memoir, taken from a typescript of unknown date, and reproduced in its entirety. The author's original subheadings and paragraph structure have been maintained, with the exceptions that follow. Several penciled-in letters, all added to correct misspellings, have been silently included. Some quotations with only a beginning quotation mark have silently been given an end quotation mark. When periods appear outside quotation marks, they have been moved to conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Finally, a few typographical errors have been corrected with the use of square brackets[].

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My forebears on the Thomas side migrated to Pennsylvania prior to the Revolutionary War. From Pennsylvania my great grandfather moved to Bath County, Kentucky, and from there my grandfather moved on to Indiana.

My grandfather Joel Thomas, was killed November 8, 1884, while attending a Democratic jollification over the election of Cleveland and Hendricks, which had just occur[r]ed.¹

My father, William Thomas, was born June 17, 1844, in Putnam County, Indiana.

My mother, Elizabeth Ewing Thomas, was born October 5, 1842, in Montgomery County, in the same State.

My father and mother were married on January 1, 1863, and began housekeeping in a log house in a heavily timbered area in Indiana.

On my mother's side, the Ewing family came from the Lowlands of Scotland. From Scotland to Ireland, thence to Cecil County, Maryland, then on to Pennsylvania where my great, great grandfather purchased 322 acres of land from the government. From York County, Pennsylvania, the family moved to Kentucky. The town of Ewing was named for the early settlers from Pennsylvania.

My father's and mother's ancestors were predominantly merchants, farmers and live stock raisers.

My father was the eldest of a family of ten children—nine brothers and one sister—and all, of necessity, chose farming as a mode of life.

My father was a rugged individualist, and educated in the pioneer common schools of Indiana. Early in his twenties he purchased some timbered land and spent much of his life in clearing the land and earning the money to pay off the mortgage. He received his economic start by helping build the grade for the Big Four railroad which ran east and west through the center of the state.² He took an interest in public affairs and

¹Democratic jollifications or "walk-about" were held in cities and towns nationwide following the election of Grover Cleveland to the presidency in 1884. These "celebrations of the democratic process" featured parades, fireworks, and alcohol, and were attended by thousands of people. Thomas's grandfather died not at the jollification, but on his way home from it, when a Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis ("Big Four") locomotive struck and killed him as he walked along the tracks. Jesse William Weik, *Weik's History of Putnam County* (Indianapolis, 1910), 504.

²The Big Four, formed in 1889 and headquartered in Indianapolis, ran primarily through Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. See the *1913 Annual Report of the New York Central Railroad System* (New York, 1914) for a history of the line, which was later absorbed by the New York Central.

always held some position in the Democratic political organization of Putnam County. He held minor public offices but never tried for an office which would take him away from his home and farm.³

ELMER THOMAS—The subject of this sketch was born September 8, 1876, in a modest frame house in the center of a wooded area near the county line between Putnam and Park counties located in west central Indiana.

I was the seventh child of a family of seven boys and five girls. Our family bible shows that I was born only a few days after the nomination of Samuel J. Tilden for President. My ancestors on both sides were Democrats and as was customary in those early days in Indiana, boys were named for popular personages. Because the Democratic nominee seemed certain of election, I was named "Tilden Thomas."

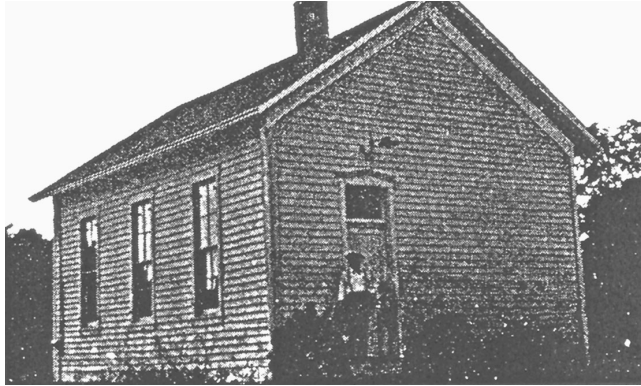
My first trip away from my isolated wooded home was made on October 8, when I was just four weeks old. The occasion was a Tilden Democratic rally held at Greencastle, the County Seat of Pu[t]nam County. In my mother's arms, in the spring seat on a high wheeled farm wagon, decorated with red, white and blue bunting, together with the entire Thomas family, we participated in the Democratic parade and rally.

In the election soon to follow Tilden received a quarter of a million more votes than Rutherford B. Hayes, his Republican opponent, thus causing a contest to develop. The Special Commission set up to consider and determine the election decided the contest by awarding 185 votes to Hayes to 184 for Tilden.

While my father and mother were loyal Democrats, when Tilden was defeated, and for reasons sufficient to them but never satisfactorily explained to me, my name was changed from Tilden to John William Elmer, and as I have stated many times, I have always regretted that Tilden was defeated.

EARLY DAYS IN INDIANA—My early days in Indiana were duplicates of the days of other farm boys similarly located. I attended the Brunerstown one room school where all eight grades were taught. In 1891, at the age of 15, I completed the grades, but not having access to a

³Jesse William Weik, early twentieth-century historian of Putnam County, notes that William Thomas "served seven years as a township trustee," but, "did not care for or seek office." *Weik's History of Putnam County*, 504.



The Brunerstown School, Brunerstown, Indiana, n.d.

Thomas attended this one-room school from 1883 to 1891.

Courtesy Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma

high school, I had to content myself with attending the same school for another year. At that age I was over six feet tall, but weighed scarcely one hundred thirty pounds. General farm work was my lot, but not to my liking.

We started the farm work year by opening the sugar camp in the early spring. When the sugar water was not running we had plenty of rail fences to re-set. This meant tearing down sections of old fences in order to throw out the decayed rails. To get new rails we had to cut the trees, saw the logs, and then split the rails to replace the ones rotted away.

Then there was always some additional land to be cleared. One year the trees, large and small, would be deadened. This was accomplished by hacking the bark about waist high all around the trees. This caused the trees to die and by the next year the dead trees would be felled and sawed into logs—some for rails, some for fire place and cook stove fuel and the balance made ready for a log rolling the following spring.

Not being physically strong, I did not choose to try to make my living as a farmer. My great problem was to find some way to get away from the farm. In those days money was scarce, which meant that dollars were valuable and prices were low. Plenty of farm labor was available at \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day—working from early sun to almost darkness. Hired hands drew from \$25.00 to \$30.00 per month.

While timber land was cheap, the timber had little value. The work and expense of clearing the land was substantial and I saw no attractive future through trying to farm in my section of Indiana.

My early days were typical of the pioneer era which thousands of other farm boys went through in Indiana and the central west. On one occasion in the United States Senate I had the following to say about my boyhood days in Indiana:

"During my early days my knowledge that others lived was by the sound of wooden-wheeled wagons slowly traveling over frozen roads in winter, or by the sight of clouds of dust following those same early day wagons in the good old summertime. I know our rural people and I know their way of life. I know of their lack of almost [all] the necessities of existence. I can never forget the early day lighting systems: the coal oil lamp, the lantern, the candle, the woolen rag in the greasy skillet, and the glowing blaze in the open fire place."

"I know of the early-day roads in Indiana. Uncomfortable in the frozen winter, impossible in the spring thaw-outs, and suffocating in the summer dust."

"I know the hardships of rural pioneer life. In my early days I worked at every job connected with an Indiana farm. During one summer when my mother was ill I was assigned to work at the house where I did everything that a hired girl was supposed to do."

Being one of a large family, without wealthy parents and not having access to a high school, my problem of getting away from the farm was one which at times seemed impossible of solution. I knew that I had to secure an education in order to be able to do anything other than to work on a farm.

MY FIRST GUN—What I did then could hardly be done now. I always had plenty of clothes suitable for farm work and isolated country life. Likewise I always had a pleasant home, plenty to eat and an over abundance of work to perform. My father owned two farms, one in Putnam County and the other just across the road in Park County. The land was mostly rough and wooded. Game such as rabbit, squirrel and quail was plentiful and I liked to hunt but I did not own a gun. At that time the cost of any kind of a gun seemed out of the question. However, I had to have a gun.

In the neighborhood I found the remains of a single barrel shot gun that had been through a fire. All that was left was the barrel. The stock was gone and the lock was missing, so all I had was the muzzle loading barrel minus stock and lock. With such farm tools as a handsaw

and drawing knife, I fashioned a stock which served every necessary purpose.

Being without a lock I had to find some means to fire the gun. I managed to get some powder, some shot and a box of caps, but I had to devise a plan to make the barrel and stock perform. It seemed impossible at first but later it was simple and easy. To load the gun I first measured in the palm of my hand the required amount of powder and then the powder was poured directly into the muzzle of the barrel. Then a wad of common paper was placed in the muzzle and rammed down against the powder. All muzzle loading guns, both shot guns and rifles, had to have ram rods. The paper on the powder had to be compressed so that the ram rod was used until it would almost jump back out of the barrel. When the powder was compressed, the shot was likewise measured in the palm of the hand and then poured into the muzzle of the barrel. Again a wad of paper was placed in the muzzle and the ram rod was used again to press the paper against the shot. The paper was not rammed against the shot as had been done with the wad of paper against the powder. At the breech of the barrel was the mechanism for firing the charge. This consisted of a hollow cylinder screwed into the side of the barrel and into the cylinder was likewise screwed what was called the tube. The tube was for the cap which was necessary to complete the charge or load. With the powder and shot in the barrel and a cap on the tube, the gun was loaded ready for discharge.

All this I had, but still no lock—the device containing the hammer, spring and trigger—considered necessary for a shooting iron. Not to be denied the pleasure of the hunt, I found and carried with me a short bolt with a square tap on the end. To fire the improvised shot gun I had to take sight and then to tap the cap on the tube with the substitute hammer, spring and trigger. At first the operation was cumbersome and awkward but with practice it came to be sort of second nature. At stationary targets the task was easy and accurate, but for moving game the accuracy was greatly interfered with. However, it was with such an improvised, single barrel, muzzle loading shot gun that I learned to shoot.

It was at that time I came to understand the meaning of the old adage: "Necessity is the mother of invention."

BLACKSMITH SHOP—It was about this time in my existence that I developed my own blacksmith shop. Such shops were common in Indiana and farmers were their exclusive patrons. My shop was the crudest of the crude, but in it I was able to do a lot of work. The building was a sort of "lean-to" against the wood house. Save for the back and roof it

was an outside affair. The fire box was built up of rough rock with the saucer shaped top lined with small slabs of limestone and Indiana clay for a binder. The bellows was home made and worked, but inefficiently. A real bellows, when pumped, blows constantly, but my bellows being only the upper half blew or forced the air into the fire only after it was filled and then compressed, but like the shot gun, it worked.

For an anvil I had a two foot section cut from the end of a railway rail. The hammers, punch, file and drill came from the meager list of farm tools. The tongs I had to make.

We lived adjacent to coal fields so that along all creeks and streams there were outcroppings of thin veins of coal; hence, I supplied my crude shop with coal dug from our own land. The fine points of blacksmithing were learned from the proprietor of the shop my father patronized. Simple welding was soon learned. Many farm items were made and repaired. Laprings and clevices were easy to make.⁴ Steel pointed breaking plows were sharpened. The cast iron points had to be sharpened by nicking the cutting edge. We secured an iron vise which was useful both for iron and wood work. In addition to work in iron, we had much to do with wood and lumber. Wagon tongues, neck yokes, double trees, single trees, hoe, axe, hammer and even plow handles had to be provided and kept in repair.⁵

SHOE REPAIRING—Living so far from town we found it necessary to repair our own shoes and boots. Half-soleing and patching footwear had to be learned. Thick leather for the half soles had to be bought but the hickory pegs for attaching the soles were made on the ground. A short section—about one-half inch in length—of well seasoned hickory was sawed, then split into segments about as thick as cardboard. One edge of the segment was sharpened to resemble a wedge, then the wedge shaped piece of hickory was separated into small particles resembling a piece of wooden match, about one-half inch long and sharpened on one end. After the heavy sole leather had been cut in shape to fit the shoe or boot, it was dampened with warm water so as to make it pliable.

⁴The word *lapring*, as paired here with *clevice*, may actually be *spring*, because clevices could contain springs for adjustment. It is possible that the typist of Thomas's original manuscript mistook a hastily handwritten "s" for "la."

⁵"Single trees" and "double trees" are the wooden pieces that make up the pivoted swinging bar to which the traces of a buggy or wagon harness are fastened, and by which the vehicle is drawn. A clevice (also clevis) is a U-shaped metal fastening device secured by a bolt or pin through holes in the end of the two arms.

When all was ready the shoe or boot was placed on a crude iron last, the softened leather half sole was fitted on and with an awl a hole was driven through the half sole and into the old or permanent sole. Then a dry wooden peg was inserted and driven through against the iron last. Thus the wooden peg was riveted at both ends and the half sole was secure in place until it was worn away.

The pioneers had to get along with such equipment as they could secure.

CANE CARVED AT THE AGE OF TWELVE—On one occasion, when swimming in a nearby creek, I noticed a root containing a natural crook and knot and it occurred to me that a cane could be made from the freak growth of timber. The specimen was found among a mass of tangled roots from trees which had grown along the water's edge.

The particular root which had attracted my attention had grown many feet underground and when the creek bank caved off into the stream the mass of roots was exposed. The specimen was very soft so I had no trouble in cutting out the part wanted with my barlow jack knife.⁶

When I began to carve the piece of underground root I had no idea just what it would look like when completed. The work of carving the cane was performed with different sized blades of a common pocket knife of a type which every farm boy possessed.

I do not remember any reason for carving a black snake coiled around the cane, save such snake was the common type in our section of Indiana.

The cane is a solid piece of wood and having been at that time very soft, the shaping of the snake was not difficult.

General George Washington was always my ideal patriot, soldier, president and citizen; hence, I tried to engrave his likeness on the knotty knob of the cane. The other crude efforts at engraving were of objects such as a butterfly and wild flowers most common on the farm. As a symbol of identification of the carver of the cane, I cut my initials E. T.

LAND DRAINAGE—To drain flat land, ditches were dug.

For the want of regular tile, substitutes had to be used. In our case we used wooden fence rails and oak slabs or short clapboards as

⁶A Barlow knife features a single blade, a huge metal bolster, and a teardrop-shaped handle. The Barlow was designed to be tough and affordable: the blade was high carbon steel, the handle was bone, and not much time was spent in polishing it. Carried by George Washington and mentioned by Mark Twain, Barlows were treasured by American boys of Elmer Thomas's era.

substitutes for tile. The rail was placed on one side of the ditch and the slab or clapboard was leaned against the rail so as to make an opening for the water to drain through and then run off down the ditch. Always the ditch would be refilled so as to leave no trace above the ground save it was certain that better crops would grow over and for short distances on either side of such oaken drainage ditches.

MAPLE SYRUP—In our sugar camp of some 100 trees, we used spiles made from elder bushes and the sugar water was caught in wooden troughs chopped out of half logs and made on the ground. The sweet sugar tree water was reduced to maple syrup through a series of large iron kettles placed over a rock and clay lined furnace.

In the early spring the work of making maple syrup consisted of repairing the furnace and fitting the kettles in place. Next was to cut and provide the necessary wood for fuel. Then late in February or early in March, depending upon the weather, on the first warm day the trees were tapped by the use of a brace and bit about one-half or five-eighths inc[h] bore. The hole in the tree was bored to about 1 1/2 to 2 inches when the elder spile was inserted and driven in so as to catch, conduct and cause the sap to drip in the wooden trough. The water or sap was gathered by emptying the trough into an open barrel on a sled pulled by one or two farm horses. In favorable sugar weather the one hundred trees would provide enough water each day to make from 3 to 5 gallons of syrup prior to stirring off and clearing.

The latter process was always performed in the kitchen of our home. Maple sugar and taffy candy were made by a third process by a further boiling and concentration of the maple syrup.

PIONEERS—In the early pioneer days farmers, of dire necessity, had to assume to be general specialists. To clear the land, break out the sod, and make a living by farming, pioneers had to do and perform many classes of work. Without the benefit of schools and colleges, farm boys were do[o]med to continued existence on the farm, either as a hired hand or with a renter or tenant status.

To leave the farm and to enter any other work or calling was a problem that only a very few of my boyhood friends ever successfully solved. Before explaining the route I had to travel to get away from the Indiana farm, I may say that it was and still is possible for a boy with my early background to make the transfer. Of my several brothers who lived to reach manhood, all left the old homestead just as soon as they could develop the opportunity.

Henry, my oldest brother, left the farm to enter an iron casting foundry in Indianapolis. Oscar, next in line, became a teacher, first in the grade common schools and later in the Greencastle High School and eventually as County Superintendent of Schools in Putnam County. Charles, just younger than myself, became a successful undertaker and is now located in Terre Haute.

Cleve, the next brother, owns and operates a casket factory, also in Terre Haute, where my undertaker brother takes much of his output.

The youngest brother, Fred, is an attorney with offices in Fairborn, Ohio, and Richmond, Indiana. My sisters all passed away in infancy or early youth.

Some members of my family and numerous friends have suggested facetiously that I missed an opportunity and that instead of going to Oklahoma as a home seeker, I should have remained in Indiana, studied medicine, become a doctor, and thereby being able to produce business for my undertaker and coffin maker brothers.

WILLIAM THOMAS—MY FATHER—During his entire adult life my father operated, in season, threshing machines and clover hullers. He began his long record as a thresherman with an early day horsepower outfit. Later he used a portable steam engine for power and still later he used the so-called “self tractor” which not only furnished the power for the threshing machine but in addition furnished the power to transport the entire outfit from farm to farm.⁷

In the early days threshing grain was a sort of a picnic or festival occasion. Neighbors would club together, as it required a number of wagons equipped with hay frames to gather the bundles shocked in the fields, and haul the wheat, rye or oats to the threshing outfit. In addition to the farm wagons, men equipped with forks had to be secured to pitch the bundled grain from the shocks to the wagons. At the threshing machine the services of two men had to be secured to cut the bands made of either twine or straw and in addition the straw from the machine had to be stacked.

In such work, misnamed a picnic, it became my lot to work at stacking the straw. The task was neither laborious nor difficult, save in handling bearded wheat and rye straw. In such cases the long, sharp

⁷See Sanford J. Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988).

beards seemed to enjoy working their way through overalls and hickory shirts, so that by night fall the bodies of the straw stackers were almost raw from the effects of the sharp barbs.

It was a great relief for the straw stackers when the threshers were equipped with blowers and cylindrical chutes so that the straw could be blown into a stack without the aid of human labor.

The only part of the threshing picnic that was properly named were [sic] the meals prepared for the hungry men. As the men assembled to perform the work of threshing the grain, the farm women likewise assembled to prepare and serve the meals. This was the real enjoyable part of the threshing season.

At the end of my father's career as a thresherman, serving parts of two counties, in Indiana, one of the leading farm journals accorded him the distinction of having the longest continuous record as a thresherman and also of having threshed more grain than any other person engaged in that service for farmers.

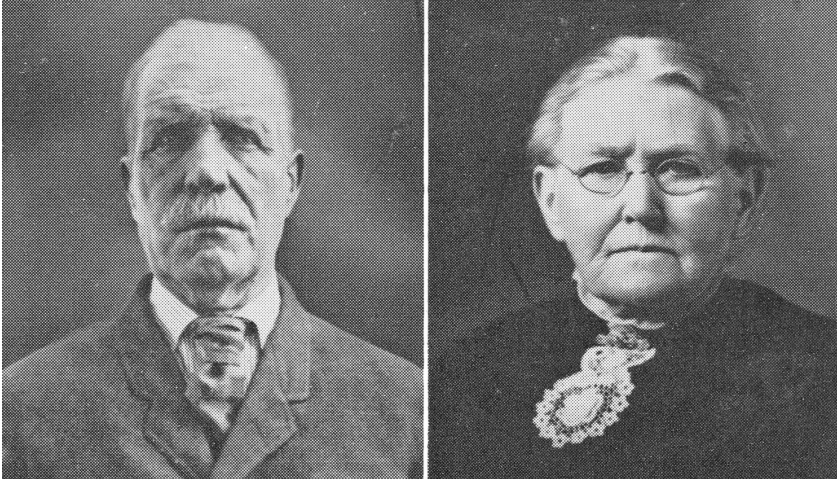
ELIZABETH EWING THOMAS—MY MOTHER—Prior to her marriage my mother taught country schools so that I always had her sympathy and support in my desire to secure an education in order to be able to teach in the schools of Indiana.

In honor and in memory of my father and mother, I am glad to be able to show their pictures taken at a time when I still resided on the farm.

Also, in order to clarify some of the statements made in this chapter, I am showing a picture of my birthplace taken from the nearest public highway in the year 1900.⁸

CUFF—One of the early major losses which I sustained was the death of our family dog—"Cuff." The dog was a large black compound mixture of bull dog and was only a few years younger than myself. Cuff had been my constant pal and had accompanied me on every possible occasion. The mastiff was a first class watch dog but not so good as a hunter. However, he had a natural antipathy for all kinds of snakes and was death to ground hogs. We could never teach him to tree squirrels and he paid little attention to rabbits. He was not interested in hunting at night, however, he watched over our fowls to protect them from night

⁸This photo, contained in the original manuscript, is not of sufficient quality for reproduction here.



William and Elizabeth Ewing Thomas, n.d.

Thomas's parents as they appeared at a time when he "still resided on the farm."

Courtesy Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma

prowlers and enemies. As we both grew up and older I realized that Cuff was slowing down and that he was greying around his eyes. Although growing old and feeble, he would never admit that his work was done and that he was down and out. During his last days he had the best of care and plenty of good food.

He passed away on Easter morning, 1890. I never realized exactly what death really meant until Cuff was no more. As a funeral for the dog I fashioned a box to fit his body. On the bottom of the crude unpainted casket I placed some straw and covered the straw with a piece of worn home made rag carpet and on such couch I placed the remains of Cuff. On a hill side in the nearby orchard and in the shadow of a persimmon tree, I dug a grave and buried the box and body of the dog.

In order to pay my respect and love for the companion of my youth, I went to the sandstone cliffs nearby and selected a slab of soft brown rock about three feet long, eighteen inches wide and ten inches thick. The rock was sandstone and could be shaped and worked with crude tools. With a worn out axe I shaped the rock to resemble a tomb stone. On one side I chipped off the rough rock for the inscription. Then with a cold chisel and hammer, I cut a groove into the rock forming a life size profile of Cuff's head and underneath the head I cut the following grooved inscription:

CUFF
Died 1890

I was not sufficiently skilled in rock work to shape an embossed or raised dogs head. Also, instead of trying to cut raised letters I had to content myself with chiseling [sic] out grooved letters and figures. When my work was completed the profile and inscription did not show up as I had hoped, so to make the data understandable and readable I secured some left-over pure white lead and filled the grooves flush with the surface of the rock so that no mistake could ever be made about the nature of the tomb and that it was for a dog named “Cuff,” who died in 1890.

At the burial no prayers were said and no funeral was preached, nevertheless I left nothing undone to show my regard for Cuff—“My dear dumb friend lying there a willing vassal at my feet,” the departed family dog.



EFFORTS TO SECURE AN EDUCATION—When I had completed the eight grades in the one room country school I found that I would be unable to enter the nearest high school located at Greencastle, the county seat, some ten miles away.⁹ The unimproved roads and the means of travel made such an effort impossible. From my viewpoint, my only out was to go away to some higher school in order to prepare myself for teaching. My father’s ancestors had been farmers in Indiana, Kentucky and as far as we could trace back in Pennsylvania. As a member of a large family of boys and girls, residing a substantial distance from any town or

⁹*The Thirty Sixth Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (Indianapolis, 1888) lists 266 high schools throughout Indiana, most located in larger communities.

city; with the money income from our land used for interest, taxes and necessary living expenses, there was nothing left to pay expenses of going away to college.

It is true that dollars were more valuable in those days—1890-93—than they are today. With scarce and highly valued money, prices were correspondingly low. In some way I learned that there was a normal school located at Danville, the county seat of an adjoining county, and that the expenses of attending the school were very reasonable. This fact gave me hope that I might get together enough money to attend the college at least during one eight week spring term.¹⁰

With such an opportunity I felt that I could prepare myself to take the examination and perhaps thereby make a six months license to teach. To get the opportunity to attend the school I had to secure two things: first, the money to pay the costs and, secondly, to secure permission to leave the farm during the busy spring season when all hands were needed to plant and tend the crops.

EARLY DAY COLLEGE COSTS—Through inquiry as to the cost of an eight week spring term at Danville, I was advised that the cost of a railway ticket would be \$3.00. Tuition for the term would be \$8.00. Room with another boy would cost \$.50 per week, or \$4.00 for the term, and board would cost \$1.50 per week, or \$12.00 for the term. The estimate for fuel through March and April was \$1.50. Coal oil for our lamp would cost an additional \$1.00. Then for necessary laundry, rental of books and incidentals, an allowance of \$1.00 per week, or \$8.00, was estimated. Finally, car fare back to Lena, our nearest railway point, necessitated another \$3.00; hence, the budget for the “going away to college” totalled [sic] the sum of \$40.50.

DECISION TO GO AWAY TO SCHOOL—When I was fifteen years of age, with a desire to leave the farm because I could see but little future through remaining a farmer and with knowledge that I could go to the normal school for one spring term for an outlay of something like \$40.00, I made, to me, the moment[o]us decision to work and save the necessary funds to pay the expenses of the venture.

¹⁰Thomas refers here to Danville Central Normal College, which moved from Lagoda, Indiana, to Danville in 1878. As a normal school, it specialized in training teachers, but was also known for its strong business curriculum. Peak enrollment, around 1890, was 1,300 students per year, but by 1945 the number dwindled and the college closed. Howard County Indiana History and Pioneer Genealogy, <http://www.countyhistory.com/howard/start.html>.

In those days—the winter of 1891-2—with hard times on the farm, brought about by the lowest prices in decades, the task for a fifteen year old farm boy to make and save \$40.00 seemed next to impossible. In our section of the state land owners had but little money. Our grocery bill was limited to such items as coffee, brown sugar, soda, pepper and spices, all secured in exchange for butter and eggs at either the huckster wagon or the nearby small country store.¹¹

The fall shoes, boots and winter clothing for the family were secured in exchange for the year's crop of turkeys. To secure the money to pay the interest and taxes we had to depend upon the sale of calves and hogs.

We raised wheat for flour and seed but none for sale. We raised corn for meal and feed for hogs, horses and cows. Timothy hay was raised for tiding such livestock as we had through the seemingly long and cold winters. For the want of money, most transactions with the proprietor of the huckster wagon, as well as at the country store, were on a barter basis. Produce sold and goods purchased were valued in dollars and cents but little real money actually changed hands.

It was under such conditions that I had to work and save sufficient money to even pay for one spring term at the nearest available normal college. My problem was to make the money as I had no trouble in saving what I could make. Where I lived there was not much to spend money for.

HOW I FINANCED FIRST TERM—During the winter when I was fifteen years old I managed to secure a few steel traps which I used in trying to trap possum, skunk, mink and coon. Such fur bearing animals existed but were not plentiful either on our land or nearby. Also, prices for pelts were very low. An o'possum pelt brought from 15 to 20 cents. Skunk pelts were valued according to the white fur contained and brought from 20 cents for wide strips to \$1.00, for pelts graded as stars. The top price was for a large pelt of good fur and with only a small spot of white on the head. Mink and coon pelts were graded according to size

¹¹Thomas refers to the roots of the Depression of 1893, which historians have blamed on such issues as the deflation dating back to the Civil War, the gold standard and monetary policy, underconsumption, and government extravagance. For agriculture in particular, storms, drought, and overproduction during the preceding six years had reversed the remarkable prosperity and expansion of the early 1880s in the wheat, corn, and cotton belts. See Douglas W. Steeples, *Democracy in Desperation: The Depression of 1893* (Westport, Conn., 1998).

and the quality of the fur and only the best grade brought as much as \$1.00 per pelt.

In addition to trapping, I devoted much time to hunting for fur bearing animals at night. Usually I accompanied two of my nearby neighbors who owned a first class coon dog. Neither the trapping nor the night hunting was profitable, however, when we sold our accumulation of pelts and divided the proceeds I found that my winter's work had netted exactly \$4.00.

My next problem was how to invest the \$4.00 so as to make some additional money. In the neighborhood I learned that I could purchase two very young runt pigs for \$2.00 apiece. I made the purchase and carried the two small porkers home in a pasteboard box. At home we had milk and "slop" to feed the pigs and in the face of jibes and considerable merriment about my venture, the pigs soon began to show signs of growth. In a relatively short time they outgrew their wrinkles and became regular members of the hog family. This was in the early spring of 1892. In due time the pigs developed into real hogs. We always killed and put up our own supply of meat, so instead of selling my two hogs on the market, I was able to sell them to my father to go into our next year's meat supply. I do not know how much the hogs weighed and did not know what was their worth, but when my Father offered me \$40.00 for the two hogs a sale was promptly made. With the sale price of \$40.00 in my possession, my long dream of going away to college to prepare myself for teaching was at last a real possibility.

I did not have too much trouble in securing the permission of my father to be away during the maple syrup and the plowing and spring planting seasons, but it was understood that I would be back to help out with the harvest.

LEAVING FOR NORMAL SCHOOL—I saved what additional money I could make and was ready to leave for college in late February, 1893. Packing my belongings was no problem. I borrowed an oil cloth covered valise from an older brother and packed such clothing as I did not plan to wear and included such books as I had and thought I might need. When I had included all items, I found that the valise was not nearly full, so I filled the empty space with crumpled newspapers in order to hold everything in place.

When the day came to leave, clad in my best suit, with my possessions in the worn oil cloth valise and with a little more than \$40.00 in my pocket, I took the slow "Big Four" train, consisting of engine,

baggage car and coach, at Lena and was on my way to the Central Normal College located at Danville, Indiana.

ARRIVED AT DANVILLE—At the college town, the county seat of Hendricks county, I found conditions as advertised so that I was able to live within my budget. However, I learned that some students were able to make some money by soliciting for the town laundry; for securing new students to patronize the boarding clubs, and performing odd jobs around the college. The spring term at the college had the largest enrollment of the year. During the other terms the regular enrollment was about 500, but during the spring term, due to the number of youngsters who wanted to try to get a license to teach in the common schools, the enrollment increased to 1,000 or to as many as could be accom[m]odated.

The student patronage was confined almost entirely to boys and girls from rural areas and from small towns. Most of the students went to the Danville Normal because it was the only school they could enter due to meager finances and limited educational qualifications.

At the college I enrolled in classes which I thought would help me pass the examination—a necessary preliminary to securing a license to teach. The term was uneventful save plenty of study and class attendance. For the lack of money I was relegated largely to the role of an observer. It was my first trip away from the farm; hence, everything was new and strange. The little county seat town, although only twenty miles distance from Indianapolis, was very primitive. Both streets and sidewalks were of gravel. Student rooms were lighted by coal oil lamps. The heat was provided by small coal stoves. Very few houses had running water. The college rooms were as primitive as the residences of the town. Danville had neither a theater nor a place for public assembly. Save the college auditorium and class rooms, the only places of assembly were the churches; hence, they were always well attended.

The eight week spring term was soon over when I again packed my belongings and caught the accommodations—Big Four—train for Lena, the nearest station which was four miles from home. Because of the lack of communication facilities, I did not advise my parents the date of my arrival. They received mail but once a week and I had not advised my family just when the term would be completed.

After patronizing the railway to Lena, in order to reach my home I walked and carried all my baggage, which although after a term in college was anything but heavy. I arrived just in time for dinner—the noon day meal. In passing I might suggest that upon my return I had some of

the original \$40.00 left. The only change in my budgeted expenditures was due to the fact that I was allowed a rebate on my board in the sum of ten cents per week for each student I induced to take (his or her) meals at our boarding club. However, I was never able to get my board for less than \$1.00 per week.

FIRST TERM COMPLETED—My first term in college served to teach me plain and solid economics and the real value of a dollar. Today when I reflect back upon those early days I am compelled to admit that sometimes things moved rather swiftly. On a single day—I checked out of college; packed my books and clothes; took the train for home; carried all my baggage; walked four miles and spent the entire long afternoon between the handles of a double shovel plowing ankle high corn on my father's farm.

A SCHOOL TEACHER—Later in the summer the County Superintendent of Schools held an examination for those who were applicants to teach the following term. I took the test and was awarded a license to teach. With the license I was able to secure a school located far back in the woods at a point known as "Happy Hollow." I began teaching on the first Monday in September, 1893, a few days before I had my seventeenth birthday.

The school term was for six months, or 120 teaching days. My salary was \$2.00 per day. I boarded at home and walked back and forth to school, a distance of three miles each way. I had an average of 50 pupils and taught all of the eight grades.

The school term was out about the middle of March, and realizing my lack of qualifications, I left home again for the same normal school. Having saved practically all my salary, I was able to remain in the normal during both the spring and summer terms. However, I was through in time to return to the farm to help out with the harvest.

During the summer of 1894 I secured another license to teach and was assigned to the same "Happy Hollow" institution. The term was six months again and the pupils were practically the same. About the only difference was that my salary had been increased to \$2.75 per day. With the low prices current in the early nineties, the salary was much more than it now appears.

The school year was a duplicate of the year before and not knowing of any other school I was qualified to enter, I again went to the Danville private normal college. During the two terms I took a course in public speaking and at the end of the year all students in the class were

required to prepare and deliver orations on subjects to be assigned by Miss Dorsey, the teacher in charge. My subject was "Fine and Liberal Arts in America."

I was able to tell all I had learned about my subject in about eight minutes. The address was delivered before the student body assembled in the college auditorium. The foregoing however was not all the use I made of my oration.

My home county of Putnam was the seat of DePauw University. At DePauw, being a Methodist university where many young men prepared themselves for the ministry, the subject of oratory assumed a major status. Such student names as Daniel W. Voorhees, James E. Watson, Albert J. Beveridge, E. Jean Nelson, James H. Wilkerson, and Tom Nadal were famous as public speakers throughout the countryside.¹²

Having been born during one of the warmest political campaigns in Indiana history, I became convinced very early that the ability to speak in public was a necessity if one aspired to get ahead. Hence, my interest in public speaking.

WON ORATORICAL CONTEST—At Bainbridge, in my county, was held an annual fair, typical of other county fairs held throughout the state. In preparing the program for the 1895 fair, the managers arranged, in addition to the regular exhibits, an oratorical contest. The contest was open to both teachers and pupils in the common schools of the county.

The prize for the winning orator was a one year's scholarship at the normal school which I was at the time attending. Being 18 years of age and a Putnam county teacher, I was eligible for the contest. This contest afforded a possible further opportunity for me to increase my time at college. I made application to enter the contest and at the same time I secured permission from my father and mother that in the event I won that I could spend the following entire year in using up the scholarship.

On the appointed day I appeared at the fair and spoke from the grandstand. It so happened that I could use the same oration that I had delivered the day before at the Danville normal. There were seven other contestants and for reasons sufficient to the judges, I was declared the

¹²Voorhees (1827-1897), Watson (1864-1928), and Beveridge (1862-1927) all served Indiana in the U.S. Senate; E. Jean (Nelson) Penfield (1872-1961) was a women's rights attorney and orator; James H. Wilkerson (1881-1950) served as a U.S. district court judge in Chicago; Thomas Nadal (1875-?) was an academic administrator in Michigan and Missouri.

winner. The winning of the contest was the outstanding event in my life up to that time.

As per promise and plans, I entered the Central Normal at the beginning of the 1895-6 college year. At the end of that year I had completed eight terms and was advised that if I could attend another full year that I could complete the course prescribed, which would entitle me to a diploma and a degree. With such an outlook it was not difficult to secure both permission and finances to attend the college during the year 1896-7.

BECAME INTERESTED IN POLITICS—During my attendance at the Danville college, my interest in public affairs from a democratic viewpoint was greatly intensified. My home county had always been solidly democratic, while Hendricks county and Danville, its county seat, were as strongly republican.

At the college each party had well organized political clubs and as always in Indiana during campaign years, partisan activity and enthusiasm ran high. The clubs selected representatives to meet and debate the issues declared as paramount by the respective national conventions. Such political debates were always well attended and vociferously conducted.

After I had won the oratorical contest and re-entered college, I found that in addition to college club debates, I had invitations to make political speeches outside the college town and even in distant counties.

From the day that William Jennings Bryan was nominated for president on the Democratic ticket at Chicago, I was one of his most enthusiastic supporters and followers. Coming from the farm and knowing of the low farm commodity prices, I was attracted by the Democratic platform which “demanded the free and unlimited coinage of both silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16 to 1.”¹³

It was because of the Bryan campaign in 1896 that I became interested in the science of money. After studying the 1896 democratic platform declaration on silver, I was convinced that the hard times in the early nineties, culminating in the lowest prices ever in 1896, were the result of a dearth of money in circulation.

¹³Bryan (1860-1925), three-time Democratic presidential nominee, ran his 1896 campaign on a “Free Silver 16:1” platform, calling for coinage at a ratio of 16 ounces of silver to 1 ounce of gold. Republican presidential nominee William McKinley won the election with the support of those who rejected the free silver idea.

I interpreted the democratic program, wherein the free and unlimited coinage of silver was demanded, to mean that if such program could be carried into effect that to the extent that silver was brought to the mints, coined into money and placed in circulation, money would become more plentiful and thereby cheaper in term of all kinds of commodities, goods and property. To me this meant a rise in farm prices.

FREE SILVER CAMPAIGN OF 1896—At that time I was nineteen years of age, six foot two inches tall, weighed less than 150 pounds, so did not make a very imposing figure as a campaign speaker. However, I knew the farm and farm life so I thought I was able to explain the “free silver—16 to 1 issue” in a way to appeal to farm and small town audiences. The burden of my speeches was to try to show that the Bryan democratic program would raise farm prices and thus bring about better times and promote prosperity not only for farm people but for all the people of the entire country.

In addition to debates wherein I tried to uphold the democratic platform I made some thirty speeches in various parts of Indiana. When Bryan visited Indianapolis and made his tour through Indiana, I attended a number of his major rallies. When the campaign was over Bryan lost Indiana by only 8,181 votes.

BURIED IN EFFIGY—In the entire United States the Democratic ticket lost by only 567,692 votes. Although defeated, I was not discouraged, however, I had to experience some embarrassments. On the next day after the election result was known, members of the McKinley club shaped a mound on the college campus and placed at the head a board on which was printed “HEREIN LIES ELMER THOMAS WHO DIED FIGHTING FOR FREE SILVER.”

In Indiana political contests were not only enthusiastically waged but they often became bitterly contested. In those earlier days issues did not count for as much in some places as did something of more concrete value. Prior to 1900 it was often said that the party raising the largest campaign fund always carried the election.

There were three parties or groups of voters in the State: The Democratic Party, the Republican Party and a sizeable group known as doubtful or floaters. The floaters claimed to be regular party members but they were known to be susceptible of influences at election times.

In certain areas on election days the voting wage schedule was definite and well known to the electorate. Votes known to be delivered in sup-

port of one party commanded in at least one election the sum at \$50. In that same election the wage for remaining away from the polls was \$25.

Before the Australian voting system was adopted in Indiana, blank ballots could be secured, then marked away from the voting place, and when such already marked ballots were accepted and deposited in the boxes, the honorarium was paid to the professional floater.¹⁴

During my last years at the Danville college I decided that I did not want to continue teaching as a profession and, as most of the men participating in political affairs in the state were lawyers, I decided to study law. The college provided a course in law and the instructors were active practitioners and members of the Hendricks County Bar. In addition we had lectures on special subjects by some of the prominent Indianapolis lawyers.

Upon being graduated in August 1897, I was awarded a diploma in law and on graduation day the members of the class were admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the State.

Having received the benefits from the scholarship and having exhausted my savings from teaching, I found it necessary to resume teaching in order to make some money to enter DePauw University where I planned to complete my college training.

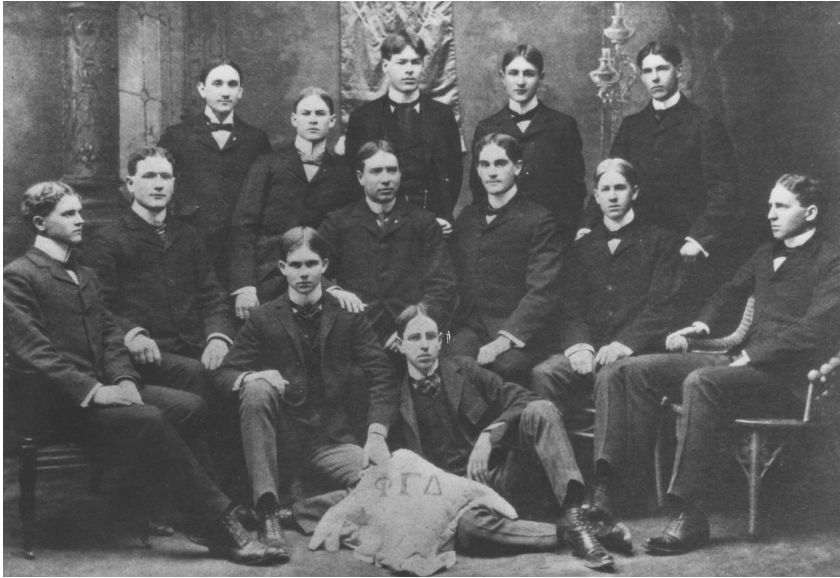
After completing the course at Danville, I was able to secure a higher grade of teachers' license and, being better prepared, I was able to secure a school near Greencastle and at a higher salary.

ENTERED DEPAUW UNIVERSITY—At the conclusion of my third full year of teaching I entered DePauw University for the spring term of 1898. At that time I had been teaching and attending the normal college for six years, so I decided to make every effort to remain in college until I could be graduated.

With the credits accepted by DePauw officials, I was able to plan to complete the selected course in June of 1900.

Upon entering the University I had bids to join Greek letter fraternities. At that time, Charles A. Beard¹⁵ was one of the most promising of

¹⁴The Australian or "official" ballot was instituted in most states in the 1890s. Before its introduction, each party created its own unofficial ballot or "party strip" listing only its candidates and had "party hawkers" offer the party strip to the voters in and around the polling station. The Australian ballot was state-prepared and state-administered (hence, an official ballot); it listed the candidates of all parties, and it was secret. The new system thus offered the voter an impartial, multiple-choice instrument upon which to deliberate and make a decision in the privacy of the voting booth.



Members of the Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity, DePauw University, n.d.
 Thomas writes that he refused to join Phi Gam because he thought it “specialized too much in athletics.” Historian Charles A. Beard is seated at right.

Courtesy Archives of DePauw University

the student body. He was an outstanding student and a famous debater. On behalf of his “frat” he gave me a bid to join his group. Had all the members of his organization measured up to his standard I would have gladly become a DePauw “Phi Gam.” The reason I rejected the bid was due to the fact that I thought the “frat” was specializing too much in athletics.

With the opportunities available to me, I accepted the bid and became a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity.

Having to still live on a very economical basis, I had to govern all my activities accordingly. The Phi Delt group of boys were not as a rule of wealthy parents. The membership had various and varied interests

¹⁵On the early years of Charles A. Beard (1874-1948), American historian, see John Braeman, “Charles A. Beard: The Formative Years in Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 78 (June 1982), 93-127.

which covered most of the university activities. The fraternity had more chapters in the State Colleges and Universities than any other national organization; hence, Phi Delt controlled such inter college activities as the State Oratorical and State Athletic Associations. The fact that the group of boys more nearly represented what I thought a fraternity should be was the deciding factor in my decision which was then considered important.

Later my early judgment was vindicated. With a large local membership and with more chapters in the state than any other fraternity, I found many benefits and advantages that were not made known to me when I was solicited to join the group.

Being interested in public speaking, in my junior year, I tried out for the debate team but as was customary, the DePauw representatives in all inter collegiate contests as a rule were selected from the senior class. However, during such year, by virtue of our numbers and through assistance from friendly fraternities, I was accorded a place on the editorial staff of *The Palladium*, the University paper.

At the close of each college year the junior class selects the Editor in Chief and the staff to get out the *Mirage*, the college annual. Again, I was selected to be the Editor in Chief of the souvenir of the class of 1900.

The work of preparing the text, securing the pictures and financing the publication was laborious but it was worth all its cost. Because of his great reputation in Indiana, the book was dedicated to U. S. Senator Albert J. Beveridge.

During my senior year I tried out again for the debate team and was successful. Our debate was with Butler College located in Indianapolis and the contest was held in the Capitol City. The question to be debated was: "Resolved that United States Senators should be elected by popular vote."

As a member of the team I had to support the negative of the question. In the contest, DePauw lost.

PLANNED ROAD IMPROVEMENT—When I had completed my work at DePauw, I realized that I was in debt, so the item had to have attention. Here, again, some plans had to be made and carried out. Our home was located adjacent to the county line which meant that we were almost ten miles from the county seat. The roads were open but almost wholly unimproved. Culverts and bridges of sorts were in place and some drainage and grading had been provided and constructed, but even

the main roads were at times next to impassible. All my life I had heard complaints against the roads leading to Greencastle. In those days the roads were under the jurisdiction of the townships which formed the counties. The roads for a few miles in each direction from the county seat were improved with grading, culverts and bridges, but there were no such roads in our township.

While at DePauw I pursued my law studies in the office of P. O. Colliver, one of the most successful attorneys of the county.¹⁶ Realizing the need for improved roads in our section, and believing that the free holders would vote bonds to grade and gravel at least two roads across the township, I prepared the necessary preliminary petitions in order to give the proposal a test. The petitions, under the law, had to describe the exact location of the roads to be improved. Also, the nature of the improvements, and the estimated cost had to be set out. The law required that a certain number of signature [sic] must be secured prior to the presentation of such petition to the Board of County Commissioners.

As before stated, DePauw University was located in Greencastle, the county seat of my home county, so I was in a position to look after all phases of the proposed road improvement program. All the time I had in mind that if the project went through that I might get a job in connection with the construction of the highways.

The Board of Commissioners approved the petition and ordered an election to permit the tax paying voters to pass judgment on the project. Prior to the election the details of the proposed project had to be explained so I announced public meetings to be held in each school district. The campaign was similar to all public bond issue proposals. In the election an approved number of qualified voters favored the bonds to finance the roads. The next step was to have the necessary surveys, plans and specifications made preliminary to advertising for bids. All necessary steps were taken and the actual work of construction was begun only a few days before my graduation from DePauw which occur[r]ed early in June of 1900.

Again immediately after I left college I began work as a gravel hauler on the roads under construction. My father furnished the team, wagon and gravel bed, and I did the work on a fifty-fifty division of the

¹⁶Presly O. Colliver (1852-?) was a well-respected Putnam county attorney. By 1910, a decade after Thomas's internship, Colliver was serving as judge of the 13th judicial district of Indiana. Weik, *Weik's History of Putnam County*, 434.

wages collected. My job as a gravel hauler lasted five months, beginning about the middle of June and lasted until about the middle of November. During this period I had plenty of time to consider and develop plans for the future. Teaching school had lost its appeal because of the short terms and low salaries paid. Entering the practice of law in our county seat town likewise offered little to look forward to because of the lack of legal business in that section of the state. The younger lawyers were not meeting with success and the older attorneys were barely getting by.

HEARD ABOUT OKLAHOMA—Some time during the summer of 1900 I happened to see in the Lena railway depot a poster advertising the Rough Riders Convention to be held in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma Territory, later in the year. The railway fare was very low and from the poster I learned that a railroad ran from St. Louis to Oklahoma City. The railway poster advertised that Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, former commander of the Rough Riders and at the time the Republican nominee for Vice-President, would attend the convention.

I was unable to take advantage of the low fare to the convention, but the poster gave me information that led to an investigation of both Oklahoma and Indian Territories. The west half of the Indian populated area was designated "Oklahoma" and the eastern half was designated as "Indian Territory." I learned that most of the west half had been opened to white settlement by the famous "Run of 1889."¹⁷

OPENING OF INDIAN RESERVATION—At about this time the Congress passed a law authorizing the opening of a large area in Southwest Oklahoma known as the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache Indian Reservation. The land was to be divided into three counties and disposed of by lottery. In order to be qualified to participate in the government lottery, the individual had to be twenty one years of age, single or the head of a family and not having already had the benefit of the public domain homestead laws.¹⁸

¹⁷The Land Run of 1889 opened large parts of modern day Oklahoma (Canadian, Cleveland, Kingfisher, Logan, Oklahoma, and Payne counties) for settlement. The run began at noon on April 22, 1889, with an estimated 50,000 people lined up for their piece of the available two million acres.

¹⁸The Homestead Act, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, gave 160 acres of undeveloped western land to any adult who would occupy and develop the land for at least five years. The act helped to create more than 372,000 farms.

This Federal program opened a field of speculation which some one hundred and ten thousand persons sought to take advantage of. It was this opportunity which caused me to decide to go to Oklahoma.

With the proceeds of my five month's work on the gravel road, I was able to pay some of my accumulated debts and to purchase a one way homeseekers excursion ticket from Greencastle to Oklahoma City.

At that time I had just passed my twenty-fourth birthday; the road work completed, all school terms were under way, so, being unemployed, I found no objections from any source to my decision "To go west and grow up with the country." My leaving the farm was of little, if any, interest to either the members of my family or to the neighbors, as I had already spent four full years away in college. Besides, I was convinced that most of my friends thought I would soon return.

LEFT INDIANA FOR OKLAHOMA—As I was placing my still meager baggage in the two wheeled cart, my Mother asked, "When will you get back?" Conscious of my thin pocket book and knowing little of conditions in Oklahoma and the Indian Territories, my answer was, "Probably as soon as I can work my way home."

Fred, a younger brother, drove me to the train on Saturday and I was soon on my way to a strange and unknown country.

