

RESEARCH NOTE

New Findings on the Earliest Written Uses of “Hoosier”

JONATHAN CLARK SMITH

I recently ran across what is (to the best of my knowledge) the earliest known *printed* instance of the word “hoosier,” and just eight days later than the date of the Murdock-Tipton letter,¹ the earliest known instance in manuscript. The item is in the *Vincennes Gazette* of February 19, 1831, and it reads, in its entirety, as follows:

Mr. Editor:

As an example of the astonishing increase of population in our state, which has taken place in a few years, and within my own observation, I send you the following statement of the representation in 1826 and in 1831, of the country north, east, and west of Vigo county, at the different periods.

Jonathan Clark Smith is professor of English at Hanover College, Hanover, Indiana. His article “Not Southern Scorn but Local Pride: The Origin of the Word *Hoosier* and Indiana’s River Culture” appeared in the June 2007 issue of the *IMH*.

¹Smith, “Not Southern Scorn,” 186. G.S. Murdock’s February 11, 1831, letter to Gen. John Tipton references a new steamboat which was to be named “The Indiana Hoosier.”

In 1824, Parke and Vermillion had one representative; Putnam, Montgomery, and the country north, north-east, west, and northwest, one representative; the whole of the above, with Vigo attached, one senator—In all, representatives, 2, senators, 1=3.

By the bill lately passed both branches of the legislature, and approved 30th Jan. 1831, the same district of country has, representatives, 14—senators, 7=21.

The “Hoosher” country is coming out, and the day is not far distant, when some states which have hitherto looked upon us as a kind of outlandish, half-civilized race, will have to follow in our train.—Let the “Half-horse, half-alligator” coun [sic] country look to it.² Yours, &c.

RACKOON

This item is consistent with my findings published in the June 2007 *IMH*, that “hoosier” was initially identified with farmers on the Wabash, while the final sentence gives further credence to the explanation in the October 14, 1833, *Cincinnati Republican* that the word began life as a fighting term.

Another interesting document of which I was hitherto unaware was brought to my attention by Steve Haller of the Indiana Historical Society. It is Virtulon Rich, *Western Life in the Stirrups* (ed. Dwight L. Smith, Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1965), a journal of a trip west to Indiana and Illinois in the spring and summer of 1832. Unfortunately, as the editor notes, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact date at which Rich transcribed his travel notes into this smoothly written manuscript; my guess would be the winter of 1832-1833 which he spent in Indianapolis. The journal uses the word “Hoosher” much more freely than anything else I have seen from 1832, and that would be consistent with the “hoosier fever” in Indianapolis in January, 1833, in the wake of the Finley poem.³ In any event, Rich also gives a history of the word (p. 71), almost certainly earlier than the Cincinnati one, and consistent with it: “The people of Indiana are called “Hooshers”—a name which is said to

²The false start on “country” comes at the end of a line, and is just a printer’s error.

³Smith, “Not Southern Scorn,” 191. On January 1, 1833, the *Indiana Journal* published a poem, by John Finley, which described a “Hoosier’s nest,” i.e., a primitive log cabin.

have originated with an Indiana ruffian, who having severely flogged a Kentucky boatman of superior size, 'jumped up' and exclaimed, 'I am a hoosher.'" This seems to be the most commonly accepted story of the word's coining among people who were actually alive at the time.

