

# What Is a Hoosier?

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I'm told, in riding somewhere West  
A stranger found a Hoosier's Nest  
In other words, a buckeye cabin  
Just big enough to hide Queen Mab in.  
Its situation, low but airy  
Was on the borders of a prairie.

In 1833, John Finley's poem "The Hoosier's Nest" appeared in print. The poem is still often cited as the first printed appearance of the term "Hoosier," and Finley's work remains the best-known early example of the word used to describe an inhabitant of the state of Indiana. In his verse, Finley created an image of a primitive log cabin snugly inhabited by a husband and wife, six little "Hoosieroons" with "white heads, bare feet and dirty faces," and three dogs. The stranger, offered a dinner of "venison, milk and Johnny-cake," eats while taking stock of the cabin: clothes hanging on one side and "skins of varmints" spread on the other, with dried pumpkins and "venison hams in plenty" hanging from the roof beams. "In short," Finley writes, "the domicile was rife with specimens of Hoosier life."<sup>1</sup>

Within just a few years of the publication of Finley's poem, Hoosier became a commonly used term for Indiana's residents. While some traditional state nicknames have since disappeared, Hoosier has persisted,

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<sup>1</sup>"Two Graphic Hoosier Pictures," *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* 1 (March 1905), 56-58.

both inside and outside the state, as a popular term for the citizens of the nineteenth state. Few residents of Indiana are insulted when called a Hoosier, and most take the term as a source of state pride. But beyond the basic, circular definition—that a Hoosier is someone born in and/or living in Indiana—lie unanswered questions.

What is a Hoosier? Where did the term come from, what does it mean, and when was it first used to refer to people who lived in Indiana? Libraries and historical societies across the state have been answering this question for decades. The Indiana Historical Society and the Indiana Historical Bureau have weighed in on their websites, as have, among others, the Indiana University library system and the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, the *Indiana Magazine of History*, too, has examined the term Hoosier from a variety of angles through its 115-year run. In our July 2016 issue, Barbara Roberts offered a story that she and her husband, distinguished folklorist Warren Roberts, had heard at a reception during an academic conference in St. Andrews, Scotland, in the 1990s. Having identified himself as a Hoosier, Prof. Roberts confessed that he was uncertain of the term's origin, only to be told by one of his Scottish hosts of a tradition that a wild and woolly "Hoosier" tribe had once thrived in northwestern Scotland.<sup>3</sup> To follow Mrs. Roberts's intriguing story—and to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Hoosier state—we now offer readers a compilation of the *IMH*'s "Hoosier" articles.

When *IMH* founder George S. Cottman put out the journal's first issue in March 1905, he included "Two Graphic Hoosier Pictures"—excerpts from a poem by James Whitcomb Riley and four stanzas from Finley's "The Hoosier's Nest." In his June issue of the same year, Cottman offered two historical articles on the word. One short piece reprinted an early article from the *New Orleans Picayune* on "the primitive and pristine simplicity of character and independence of mind about a Hoosier"; the second, an article by esteemed historian of Indiana Jacob Piatt Dunn, offered a serious historical search into the term's origins, which Dunn located in Anglo-

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<sup>2</sup>"What is a Hoosier," <http://www.indianahistory.org/teachers-students-hoosier-facts-fun/fun-facts/what-is-a-hoosier#.V2sni4-cHIU>; "What is a Hoosier," <http://in.gov/history/2612.htm>; Jeffrey Graf, "The Word *Hoosier*," <http://www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/internet/extra/hoosier.html>; "Where Did the Name Hoosier Come From?" [http://fs.usda.gov/detail/hoosier/learning/history-culture/?cid=fsbdev3\\_917557](http://fs.usda.gov/detail/hoosier/learning/history-culture/?cid=fsbdev3_917557). Graf's article is particularly detailed and includes a lengthy bibliography.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara B. Roberts, "Where Did the Word 'Hoosier' Come From?" *Indiana Magazine of History* 112 (June 2016), 116-19.

Saxon English and, more recently, in the development of the American South.<sup>4</sup>

The state's approaching centennial spurred interest in Indiana's historical roots, and writers continued to delve into the mystery of their state's nickname. In 1911, Dunn offered new information from his research: two 1832 newspaper articles, one from St. Louis and the other from Indianapolis, that predated Finley's poem. Two years later, the *IMH* reprinted an article from the *Indianapolis News*. In his "Concerning the Hoosier," Charles M. Walker looked at the Hoosier character via state history, but also took time to consider the origin of the term, deeming many previous attempts at etymology "too ridiculous for serious consideration." Walker's conclusions were similar to Dunn's: "The word is of English origin, was used in the South at an early day to designate an uncouth, boorish person and was originally applied to the people of Indiana in derision or ridicule."<sup>5</sup>

In 1929, Oscar Short came forward with a personal claim to the first appearance of the term in Indiana. Relating "a tradition in our family, which I have known since boyhood," Short wrote that in 1830, his grandfather and a brother had been canal workers in southern Indiana. His grandfather's brother, Aaron, accepted a challenge to fight a fellow worker, and upon his victory, he stood and yelled out "Hurrah for the Hoosier!" Oddly, Short identified the term as a mispronunciation of either "husher" or "hussar," but maintained that the term spread widely from that single incident. *IMH* editor William Lynch added a bracketed comment at the end of the piece, noting with skepticism that "the origin of the term *Hoosier* is one of the dark questions of Indiana history."<sup>6</sup>

Despite his note of scholarly caution, in 1932 Lynch himself added a dubious bit of information to the debate, telling readers that he had received a newspaper clipping from a librarian at the Indiana State Library. In May 1834, the *Logansport Canal Telegraph* had reprinted a piece from a Pittsburgh newspaper with the story (often repeated by the 1930s) that Hoosier had come from the phrase "who's here," called out by visitors

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<sup>4</sup>Jacob Piatt Dunn, "Origin of the Word Hoosier," *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* 1 (June 1905), 86-96; George S. Cottman, "The Primitive Hoosier," *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* 1 (June 1905), 96-97.

<sup>5</sup>Jacob Piatt Dunn, "The Word 'Hoosier,'" *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* 7 (June 1911), 61-63; Charles M. Walker, "Concerning the Hoosier: An Appreciation," *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* 9 (March 1913), 23-46.

<sup>6</sup>Oscar D. Short, "Origin of the Term 'Hoosier,'" *Indiana Magazine of History* 25 (June 1929), 101-103.

when approaching remote frontier cabins.<sup>7</sup>

Richard Lyle Power's "The Hoosier as an American Folk Type," published in the *IMH* ten years later, brought the Hoosier question into the scope of critical social-historical scholarship and remained for decades one of the journal's most requested articles. Power examined a variety of literary and folkloric evidence to consider "the Hoosier stereotype" and any basis it might have in "objective fact." Looking especially at newspapers and popular magazines, as well as other written sources, Power found a large body of nineteenth-century popular literature portraying the Hoosier as ignorant and disorderly, and generally proud to be so. He concluded:

In spite of its sometimes uneasy implications there are comforting reflections concerning the Hoosier stereotype. If peoples and regions are to be represented by tags and symbols, one may well prefer them to be of a thumping and positive sort. Gusty, full-blown and flamboyant, there was nothing half-way or milk-and-waterish about the Hoosier stereotype. In present days when it is common to deplore the prospect of eventual erasure of cultural variety it is a comfort that Indiana has the tradition of being different.<sup>8</sup>

Not until 1995 did the *IMH* again weigh in on the term Hoosier. William Piersen revisited Dunn's investigations into the term's early nineteenth-century southern origins, but he suggested that rather than looking into southern white culture, Dunn should have looked to African American history as a source for the term. "In the years when the term 'hoosier' was finding its first use on the Appalachian frontier," Piersen wrote, Rev. Francis Asbury and other Methodist preachers traveling throughout the region were accompanied by a black preacher named Harry Hoosier. Hoosier was an illiterate freedman who found his calling as a charismatic and popular exhorter during Methodist revivals; his death in 1806, however, left a gap of more than two decades between that event and the first appearances of the term Hoosier with a different meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In 2002, Stephen Webb again took up the cause of Harry Hoosier,

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<sup>7</sup>"Origin of the Term *Hoosier*," *Indiana Magazine of History* 28 (September 1932), 208-209.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Lyle Power, "The Hoosier as an American Folk Type," *Indiana Magazine of History* 38 (June 1942), 107-122.

<sup>9</sup>William D. Piersen, "The Origin of the Word 'Hoosier': A New Interpretation," *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (June 1995), 189-96.

delineating his life and career in detail. Webb suggested, as had Piersen, a possible origin for some of the negative stereotypes often associated with the term Hoosier:

It is probably no coincidence that the derogatory use of the term Hoosier begins to appear at the time of Hoosier's ministry. His congregations were rural and unsophisticated, and they mixed the races, two characteristics that would have prompted hostility and ridicule.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, neither Piersen nor Webb was able to locate any written sources to back up their suggestive histories.

Then, in June 2007, Jonathan Clark Smith published the findings of his research—the most extensive to date—in old midwestern newspapers and letters. Smith located multiple uses of the term Hoosier—and homophonic terms Hoosher and Husher—in 1831 and 1832, earlier than Finley's poem. A February 1831 letter by a Cincinnati businessman references his new steamboat, to be named "The Indiana Hoosier." In July of the same year, an article in the *Wabash Herald* refers to Indiana governor Noah Noble as having been "corned, littered, and kept in Indiana" and therefore qualified to "be called a Hoosher." Smith's analysis of these examples, and others from 1832, revealed that the term Hoosier first appeared in relation to the men who worked the canals and rivers that were so important for transportation within and beyond Indiana during the 1830s. "Known evidence," he writes, "suggests a word of relatively recent coinage, sometime around 1830, associated for some reason with Indiana flatboat or steamboat farmers, given currency by the Wabash—Erie Canal issue, and then rapidly embraced statewide after a celebrated poem on the first day of 1833."<sup>11</sup>

Smith admits that his research "brings us no closer to the precise etymology" of the term Hoosier. With the benefit of more than one century of scholarship and speculation within its pages, the *Indiana Magazine of*

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<sup>10</sup>Stephen H. Webb, "Introducing Black Harry Hoosier: The History Behind Indiana's Namesake," *Indiana Magazine of History* 98 (March 2002), 30-41.

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Clark Smith, "Not Southern Scorn but Local Pride: The Origins of the Word *Hoosier* and Indiana's River Culture," *Indiana Magazine of History* 103 (June 2007), 183-94. One year later, Smith added two more early texts to the mix, including a letter to the editor of the *Vincennes Gazette* dated February 19, 1831. Smith, "New Findings on the Earliest Written Uses of 'Hoosier,'" *Indiana Magazine of History* 104 (September 2008), 293-95.

*History* herewith offers the widest variety of articles available in a single journal on “the Hoosier.” But his or her complete identity remains an unsolved historical question for the next century of Indiana historians.

