

Origin of the Term "Hoosier"

By OSCAR D. SHORT

There has been a tradition in our family, which I have known since boyhood, that Aaron Short, an older brother of my grandfather, gave to the inhabitants of Indiana the name "Hoosiers".¹

So far as I know, my grandfather and his brother Aaron were the only members of the family present on the occasion in which Aaron used the word which later came to be applied to himself and other companions from the hills of Southern Indiana. They were then employed in construction work on the Canal at the falls of the Ohio River near Louisville, Kentucky.

Actual work on the Canal was begun in March, 1826. The first steamboat that squeezed through the Canal, the *Uncas*, made the passage on December 21, 1829, though the work was not yet completed. It was not in full operation till 1831.

During the last year of work on the Canal, that is, 1830, the incident occurred which, trifling as it seemed at the time, was to put the label "Hoosier" on millions born in or residing within the boundaries of Indiana since that date or who may be born in the State through the coming centuries. My grandfather died in 1898. I will present the story as he told it as nearly as possible.

John Short, a resident of Kentucky, migrated across the Ohio River into the hills of southern Indiana in the year 1815, entered a farm four miles south of Salem, known later as the Evans Wright farm. Here he lived and reared a large family of boys, some of whom had been born before he left Kentucky. Among these sons were Aaron Short, one of the oldest, if not the oldest, in the family, and Jacob Short, who was born in 1812.

Aaron and Jacob, the latter of whom was then only eighteen years of age, were employed on the Canal in 1830. The building of the project required the work of many laborers who were worked in gangs under separate bosses. In one of these gangs, there was a big Irishman who had made a reputation

¹ The writer of this sketch is a son of the late George W. Short of Salem, Indiana, whose father was Jacob Short, a brother of the Aaron Short, who is believed to have first used the word "Hoosier".

as a fighter, and whose foreman sent the word along the canal that he had a man who could whip any one on the job.

When the challenge came to the group where my grandfather and his brother Aaron were working, the latter accepted it promptly. The fight was arranged, and, although not carried on under the "Marquis of Queensbury's" rules, it proved to be a real fight. The battle was witnessed by quite a number of men, principally employees on the Canal.

Aaron was a large man of powerful build, a giant in strength, who weighed about two hundred fifty pounds. The combatants proved to be about equally matched. After they had fought for some time, and while they were in a clinch, they rolled off an embankment falling on a pile of rocks several feet below. The fall gave Aaron an advantage and he came out winner in the fight. Being elated over his victory and being very active, he did one of his "stunts" which was to leap into the air and strike his feet together twice before touching the ground again. As he did so, he yelled, "Hurrah for the Hoosier." What he tried to say, perhaps, was "Hurrah for the Husher," as I understand some such word was in common use in those days to designate the champion fighter. The one who could *hush* up all comers. Or it has been suggested that he was thinking of the "Hussars", hired British soldiers. Being comparatively uneducated, as was the rule at that time in the back woods of southern Indiana, he mispronounced the word, calling it "hooser" in attempting to allude to the Irishman's connection with the English.

In the first of these two hypotheses, he would have been alluding to himself, which would seem the more likely to be true. At any rate, whether he coined the word unknowingly, or whether he said what he meant to say, it seems that he and his crowd were, from that day forward referred to as "Hoosiers." The name spread to all others living on the Indiana side of the Ohio and finally to all living within the boundaries of the State.²

[The origin of the term *Hoosier* is one of the dark questions of Indiana history. Jacob P. Dunn, who loved to exercise his ingenuity on any historical problem that was characterized by an element of mystery, applied his skill to this one. The results of his investigation first appeared

² My grandfather remembered well the incidents of the fight and related the story interestingly, even in the later years of his life, almost seventy years after its occurrence. He always maintained that the time when his brother Aaron used the word "Hoosier" was the first time that he (my grandfather) had ever heard it from anyone.

in the *Indianapolis News* of August 23 and 30, 1902. Revised and enlarged in 1906, the article was published by the Indiana Historical Society in 1907 (*Publications*, Number 2, Volume iv), along with a short sketch of John Finley, by his daughter, Mrs. Sarah A. Wrigley. Finley was known as the "Hoosier Poet" before Riley's day. In February, 1907, prior to the printing of his paper, Mr. Dunn added a few paragraphs.

In this interesting and carefully prepared study, various stories concerning the origin of the word *Hoosier* were critically handled. No satisfactory conclusion was reached by Mr. Dunn before 1907. In his *Addendum* of that year (*ibid.*, iv, Number 2, pp. 28-29), he copied the following from *The English Dialect Dictionary*: "HOOZER, Cum. 4 (hu-zer) said of anything unusually large." By way of explanation, he added that the "Cum. 4" referred to *A Glossary of Words and Phrases pertaining to the Dialect of Cumberland* (ed. 1899). On the basis of this definition, Mr. Dunn was finally ready to state that in his opinion, this word *hoozer* is "the original form" or our word "*hoosier*".

If this opinion of Mr. Dunn is correct, it does not prove that Aaron Short did not use the term under the circumstances mentioned, nor that he was not the first to apply it in Indiana. It does, however, dispose of several older traditions as to the origin of the word, and it requires a new theory as to the reason for its use by the big canal laborer, Aaron Short, who had just overcome his antagonist.—*Editor.*]