

INTERNAL IMPROVEMENT IN INDIANA.

NO. I—THE FIRST THOROUGHFARES.

The Indian Trails—Pioneer Traces—The First Road System; Legislation of 1820; Road Building in that Decade; Wretched Character of the Highways and Difficulties of Early Travel.

[This article on Early Thoroughfares, originally prepared for State Geologist, W. S. Blatchley, to form a chapter in the thirtieth annual geological report, is here reprinted as the first of a series that will deal with the principal internal improvement works that have developed within the State. The plan, as at present conceived, will take up besides this theme, road improvements, canals and railroads.—*Editor.*]

THE first thoroughfares of Indiana, while somewhat remote, perhaps, from present interests, have yet some relation to the after history of the State, besides possessing a certain historic interest of their own. Of these primitive ways for travel and transportation the earliest, long antedating the white man's advent, were the Indian trails—narrow, winding routes beaten by many feet traveling in single file, and akin to the paths made by animals. It should be noted, however, that there was one radical distinction between them and the animal paths, for while the latter had the feeding grounds for their termini, the former, primarily, conducted from abiding place to abiding place. In other words, the human propensity for intercommunication as distinguished from mere gregariousness was revealed by those obscure forest highways, and by virtue of that they were something other than mere random ways—they were a system.

If this system could be restored in a chart we would be surprised, no doubt, to find what a network it formed, reaching over the country in various directions. No such restoration would be possible now, however, for, though there are many allusions to them in our local histories, what information we have about these old trails is scattered, meager and indefinite. About all we know is that the various tribes and bands of Indians occupied each their own territory, usually along the valleys of the principal rivers, and that they visited to and fro more or less for the purposes of counsel or other reasons. Between the tribes of this

region little hostility is recorded, and there seems to have been considerable friendly intercourse and formal visiting among them. Following the rivers from town to town, and across from valley to valley, their paths can be traced. It is likely that the Miami town of Ke-ki-on-ga, where Ft. Wayne now stands, was, from its important command of the Wabash portage, the converging point of many trails, for Little Turtle, in his speech before Anthony Wayne at the treaty of Greenville, refers to the place as "that glorious gate through which all the good words of our chiefs had to pass, from the north to the south, and from the east to the west."

At the junction of Fall creek and White river, also, several paths seem to have met, by reason, it is said, of a good ford across the river that existed there. Such at least has been affirmed by the late J. H. B. Nowland, a very early pioneer of Indianapolis, who has told the writer definitely of several trails—one from Vincennes, one from the falls of the Ohio, one from the Whitewater, and others from the upper Delaware towns on White river and the Pottawattamie and Miami towns on the Wabash, all of which converged at this point. The one westward from the Whitewater valley ran about where the Pennsylvania railroad now has its right-of-way and that from the Ohio falls paralleled the present Jeffersonville railroad. The latter route was, seemingly, traveled by all the Pottawattamies, Miamis and Delawares of the upper Wabash and White rivers in their excursions to the Kentucky hunting grounds, as, after crossing the above-mentioned ford, it sent off branches to the towns of those tribes.

The Indian pathmaker not infrequently marked the way for the white man's thoroughfares, and his work was thus perpetuated in the civilization of his successors. Out of his thorough knowledge of the topography of the country he found out the best routes, not only for his kind of traveling, but for the kind of traveling that was to come after. When James Blake and William Conner viewed, as commissioners, the first road between Indianapolis and Ft. Wayne, they found after leaving White river that they could not improve upon the judgment of the Indians as shown in their old trace.

One of the earliest wagon-ways out of Indianapolis, the old Centerville road, which led to Wayne county before the coming of the National Road, was laid out on the Whitewater trail above referred to, just south of the Pennsylvania tracks, and mention may be found here and there of other roads that were similarly determined. Moreover, the earliest pioneers were benefited directly by these aboriginal trails, for not only did they first follow them from one place to another through the otherwise trackless wilderness in search of desirable regions, but their rude "traces" for subsequent ingress and egress were frequently but their improvement on the red man's too-narrow footpath. Perhaps it is not venturing too much to say that they were at times an influence in the locating of white settlements. For instance, the first settlers on the spot where Indianapolis now stands were, if tradition is to be trusted, led hither by the Whitewater trail. When the commissioners appointed by the legislature came to locate the capital, the presence of the squatters at the mouth of Fall creek was undoubtedly a factor in determining the choice of that spot; and so it might not be considering too curiously to reason out a relation between this obscure path through the forest primeval and the exact locating of the State's capital with all that that implies.

Before anything like permanent roads could be established a considerable population of settlers had taken up lands in the interior of the State, and there had to be makeshift thoroughfares not only for guidance to various localities, but for the transportation of the immigrant's possessions. These traces, as they were called, were the rudest of forest roads, cleared away sufficiently to permit the passage of the mover's wagons, and marked along the route by "blazing" or marking the trees with an axe.* These traces from east and south, with their various branches leading to this or that settlement, were well known to the immigrants in their day, but, like the Indian trails, they are long since obliterated, and, for the most part, only vague allusions to them are to be found in local histories. Of at least two of them, however, some record has been preserved, and these are of special interest because they were the trunk lines, so to speak, over

*A road running southward from Indianapolis, called to the present day the "Three Notch Road," took its name from the three distinguishing ax marks.

which the first waves of immigration found their way in to people the central portion of the State. They were known respectively as the Berry and Whetzel traces.

The Berry trace, marked out by a Captain John Berry, or, as Judge Banta gives it, Richard Berry, joined and followed the Ohio Falls Indian trail above mentioned, which crossed White river at Fall creek. It was the chief line of travel from the south. The best account of this route is given by Mr. Nowland in describing the journey of his family to Indianapolis from Kentucky in 1820. According to him it began at Napoleon, Ripley county (south of that being settled country), and thence ran almost west to a point on Flatrock river about nine miles north of where Columbus now stands. At the end of this stage of perhaps thirty miles stood the first house after leaving Napoleon. Then the trace turned north to follow the said Indian trail, and this, with two or three more cabins on the way, brought them to the embryo capital. Further information concerning the pioneer whose name has been perpetuated by his old trace the present writer has been unable to glean.

What was known as the Whetzel trace was made in 1818 by Jacob Whetzel, one of the four brothers famous in the annals of Indian warfare. It afforded ingress from the already settled Whitewater region on the east, and is also described by Mr. Nowland. It began, he tells us, in Franklin county, somewhere near where Laurel now stands, ran west till it struck the Flatrock river seven miles below the site of Rushville, thence to the Blue river where Marion and Shelby counties join, thence west to the bluffs of White river. This was the most notable of all these early traces, for by it, we are told, hundreds of immigrants came to settle Shelby, Morgan, Johnson and Marion counties. Those bound for the new capital followed it till it reached the Berry trace, then turned north on the latter, and many of the first families of Indianapolis were beholden to the sturdy old Indian fighter for his unrequited service, which, indeed, he had performed at no small cost to himself. He and his son Cyrus, with the help of four good axemen, cleared the way for "a width sufficient to admit the passage of a team," as Judge Banta tells us, through vast stretches of tangled forest and swamp lands where of nights they had to build up brush piles to sleep on.

In 1825 a petition, presented to the legislature by William Conner in behalf of Jacob Whetzel, prayed compensation for the cutting of this road, the eastern terminus being there designated as "Summerset." Said petition, along with various others, was referred to a committee on roads, which reported back that, "in the opinion of the committee, it would be inexpedient to legislate on any of the aforesaid petitions." (See House Journal, 1825, pp. 89 and 170.)

At the intersection of the Whetzel and Berry traces (about two miles southwest of Greenwood, in Johnson county), a man named Daniel Loper "squatted" and offered entertainment, after a fashion, to incoming travelers. Before long, however, a fellow named Nathan Bell ousted Loper by falsely representing himself as the legal purchaser of the land, and next took possession of the desirable point, where for a good while he kept a disreputable sort of a place, surrounded by "his clan of adherents, generally bold, bad men," the history of which place and clan would, according to Judge Franklin Hardin, a reminiscence of Johnson county, "make a large volume." Loper moved along the trace some miles farther east, and, still bent on "entertaining," pitched his shanty on Hurricane creek, where was the first good water and the first good camping place after coming out of the swamps. He stayed there a couple of years, then went none know whither, but his pole cabin, long known as Loper's, continued to be a favorite halting place for incoming travelers, the dilapidated hut being facetiously dubbed the "Emigrant's Hotel." Judge Hardin describes the place as several acres trodden over by men and animals, with many inclosures of poles and brush put up by sojourners to keep their stock from wandering.

By 1826 Whetzel's trace was no longer used, at least at the west end, being impeded with fallen trees. By this time, too, many State roads were being opened into the interior, and the need for the first traces ceased to exist. Not having a legalized right-of-way it was in time, of course, taken up by private owners as the land was entered, and so long since lost the last evidence of its identity.

It was not until four years after Indiana had been admitted as a State that any definite system of roads was projected within her

borders. Prior to that general laws had been framed touching the opening of highways, for with the first tides of immigration, of course, came the question of intercommunication; but they provided only for the opening of local roads on petition. In those first years there was little pressing need for other than local roads, for Indiana was, for the most part, strung along the Ohio and Wabash rivers, which were the generally used, natural highways. Versailles, Vernon and Brownstown, but a few miles back from the Ohio, were, until 1820, on the extreme frontier, the vast country on the north and west of them being an unbroken wilderness, and the principal centers were contiguous to one or the other of the two rivers named.

In 1820, however, there arose new reasons for extensive road-making. The great tract known as the "New Purchase," comprising all the central portion of the State and as far north as the upper Wabash, was thrown open to settlers in that year. Somewhere in the heart of this territory the seat of government was to be located at once and it was obvious that the capital and the settlers who would people the newly acquired tract must have some way of reaching the older parts of the country and the world's markets. This would seem to be the rational explanation of the sudden legislation on State roads that appears in the statutes at this time. In 1820 not less than twenty-six roads were projected, and as many sets of commissioners appointed to view the lands and mark out the routes. The roads not only connected the older towns of the State, but extended into the interior. Five were to lead to the proposed capital, and one was from Lawrenceburg to Winchester, this latter being by a subsequent act extended to Fort Wayne. During the next ten years there was repeated and lengthy legislature on this subject of State roads, showing the paramount importance of highways in the early days of the new commonwealth. Many other roads were added to the original system, some were relocated, and there were various modifications. In the main, however, the first ideas were carried out, and on a road map of 1835, now existing, at least two-thirds of the State is pretty well criss-crossed with highways other than the local or country roads.

The revenue and labor for the opening and maintaining of these roads were derived from three distinct sources. The first was known as the three per cent. fund, and was a donation from

the general government. Out of the sale of public lands five per cent. was set aside for purposes of internal improvement. Of this, two per cent. was to be expended by the United States on works of general benefit—such, for example, as the National Road—and the remaining three per cent. was given to the State for improvements within her borders. Into this fund there was paid, altogether, the sum of \$575,547.75.* A special agent was appointed for disbursing the fund, and his duties were defined at length.

Another internal revenue was derived from a "road tax" levied upon real estate. Farm lands were assessed "an amount equal to half the amount of State tax," and town lots "an amount equal to half the county tax." Non-resident land-owners were assessed an amount equal to both half the State and half the county tax. Such road tax the land-owner was entitled to discharge in work on the roads (see Acts of 1825).

The third source of maintenance was a labor requirement, which made it incumbent on all male inhabitants between the ages of twenty-one and fifty, except preachers and certain other exempts, to work on the roads two days in each year, when called out, or pay an equivalent thereof. In the New Purchase, where the labor necessary was still greater than farther south, the demand was for four days each year, but this provision was repealed in 1827.

But establishing roads by legislative enactment was only a first and very inadequate step toward easy travel and transportation. Moreover, it was not altogether a satisfactory first step, for then, as now, there was much log-rolling, self-seeking and lack of economy in public works, and in Governor Ray's message of 1825 the question was raised as to whether the large expenditures "have answered the expectations of the public"—whether they had not been used extravagantly in the employment of too many commissioners, in the opening of useless roads, and in suffering roads to become useless by a second growth and the failure to keep in repair. Aside from this, after the highways were cut out and the labor of the population expended upon them, they were hardly more practicable than the drift-choked streams which were fondly regarded as navigable.

Of the atrocious character of those early highways much has

*Elbert Jay Benton, in "The Wabash Trade Route," p. 41.

been said, and yet the subject, seemingly, has never been given justice. From the hills of the southern counties to the prairies beyond the Wabash, the State was, for the most part, a level plain covered with a forest that shut out the sun from the rank mold, and this, like a sponge, held the accumulated waters. Vast areas were nothing but swamps, which the streams never fully drained.* Most of the year a journey over the roads was simply a slow, laborious wallowing through mud; the bogs were passable only by the use of "corduroy," and this corduroy of poles laid side by side for miles not infrequently had to be weighted down with dirt to prevent floating off when the swamp waters rose. In a book called "The New Purchase," which purports to depict life in central Indiana in the early twenties, the wagon trip to Bloomington is described in the author's peculiar, half-intelligible style. He speaks of the country as "buttermilk land," "mash land," "rooty and snaggy land," with mudholes and quicksands and corduroys, "woven single and double twill," and there are fords with and without bottom." In the early spring, he says, the streams were brim full, "creeks turned to rivers, rivers to lakes, and lakes to bigger ones, and traveling by land becomes traveling by mud and water." As one proceeded he must tack to right and left, not to find the road, but to get out of it and find places where the mud was "thick enough to bear." The way was a "most ill-looking, dark-colored morass, enlivened by streams of purer mud (the roads) crossing at right angles," and these streams were "thick-set with stumps cut just low enough for wagons to straddle." Innumerable stubs of saplings, sharpened like spears by being shorn off obliquely, waited to impale the unlucky traveler who might be pitched out upon them, and the probability of such accident was considerable as the lumbering wagon plunged over a succession of ruts and roots, describing an "exhilarating seesaw with the most astonishing alternation of plunge, creak and splash." Ever and anon the brimming streams had to be cross-

*Mr. William Butler, a pioneer of Southern Indiana, has told the present writer of a trip he made to Indianapolis in the thirties. He stopped over night with a settler in Johnson county, and, inquiring as to the country east of them, was told that there was no other residence in that direction for thirty miles. "And what's more, there never will be," the informant added, his reason being that the submerged land was irreclaimable. It may be remarked, incidentally, that the swamp in question has long ago been converted into fine farms.

ed, sometimes by unsafe fording and sometimes by rude ferries. In the latter case the ferry-keeper was apt to be off at work somewhere in his clearing, and the traveler had to "halloo the ferry" till he could make himself heard.

This seemingly exaggerated account of the author might be confirmed by many references, but three or four brief anecdotes which the writer has gleaned at first hand from pioneers will do. The first of these, told by the late J. H. B. Nowland, of Indianapolis, is that once, when on his way by stage from Madison to Indianapolis, he was upset in the middle of a swollen stream, and in the effort to save his life he lost his coat, which, with thirty or forty dollars in the pocket, was swept away. Another is that of Mr. George W. Julian, who, when a child, traveled by wagon from the Wea plains on the Wabash to Wayne county. Crossing a stream, the water proved unexpectedly deep and the bank so precipitous that the horses lost their footing and were forced entirely under the flood by the descending wagon. Similar to this was an experience of Mr. William Shimer, of Irvington. When his family moved to Marion county they entered a stream by a descent so steep that a great feather-bed stowed in the front of the wagon rolled out and covered the driver. Mr. Nowland also relates in his book of reminiscences that a migratory wag once wrote these lines in the register-book of a Franklin tavern:

"The roads are impassable—hardly jackassable;
I think those that travel 'em should turn out and gravel 'em.

Such were the early thoroughfares of Indiana, and these, with the exception of an uncertain outlet by the larger streams, were the only means of travel and transportation for the greater part of the State with its growing population. That the character of the thoroughfares impeded growth, handicapped commerce and held in check the influences that are essential to development is very obvious to the student of that development within our borders. The difficulties that were overcome and the building up of the commonwealth in spite of such handicap is an evidence of the sturdiness of the stock that peopled the State.

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[Next number, the *National and Michigan Roads, and Road Improvements.*]