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The Old Chicago Trail, and the Old Chicago Road

ELMORE BARCE, Fowler, Ind.

To the Indian, the Grand Prairie, notwithstanding its vast stretches, was as an open book. He traveled without compass, but that instinct which guides the animal through the forest, and the fowl through the air, guided the wary savage to far away hunting grounds, or to the wigwam of his enemy, with unerring footstep.

Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, a historian of the Northwest, says:

Their (the Indian's) knowl-edge of the geography of their country is wonderfully exact. I have seen an Indian sit in his lodge, and drape a map in the ashes, of the Northwestern states, not of its statistical, but its geographical features, lakes, rivers and mountains, with the greatest accuracy, giving their relative distances, by days' journeys, without hesitation, and even extending his drawings and explanations as far as Kentucky and Tennessee.¹

Notwithstanding this intimate knowledge, however, the wilderness of the early days was marked by many Indian trails, caused by different parties of Indians traveling frequently over the same route, to hunt or trade. These trails usually followed the path of least resistance, avoiding swamps, bogs and stony places, and choosing the high and dry ground.² Sometimes they followed the traces made by the buffalo or the deer in

¹ *Wau-Bun, The Early Days in the Northwest*; by Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, Chicago, 1855, p. 367.

² *Bureau of American Ethnology. Handbook of American Indians, Part II*, pp. 799-800.

going to watering places or salt licks. It is certain that a route would always be adopted, at least in times of peace, where water and fire would be available, and where the hunting parties would be afforded an opportunity, if possible, to camp and rest in the groves and woodlands. Mrs. J. H. Kinzie mentions a great trail made across the prairies of Illinois, by the Sauk Indians, in going to Fort Malden and Detroit, to hold councils and trade with the British agent. She describes it as "a narrow path, deeply indented by the hoofs of the horses on which the Indians traveled in single file. So deeply was it sunk in the sod which covers the prairie, that it is difficult, sometimes, to distinguish it at a distance of a few rods."³ This great Sauk trail passed through Lake and Porter counties, in Indiana, running by Cedar Lake, where fish and game were abundant.

It must not be understood that these trails were always plainly marked. In places they were lost in the expanse of the plain, or disappeared in marshes and lowlands. However, the general outlines of the larger trails were fairly well fixed. There might be two or three paths in some places, but these would later converge and run together. In places the track might be entirely obliterated, but would later appear again.

There is now no doubt that an early Potawatomi trail, of great importance, extended from Kick-a-poo Falls, on the Wabash river, near the present site of Attica, to the old Indian trading post of Chicago, coursing through what is now Benton and Warren counties, in Indiana, and entering the state of Illinois near the present town of Sheldon, and thence extending a little west of north, to Lake Michigan. The route of this trail may be more explicitly described as follows: Commencing at Kick-a-poo Falls, it extended almost due northwest through Warren county, to the present site of Rainsville; thence northwest to the prairies of what is now Benton county, crossing Mud Pine creek near Chase; thence extending due northwest across the prairie to Parish's Grove, and from thence northwest to Sugar Grove; it then ran to the State line, northwest, between Indiana and Illinois, somewhere west of Raub; thence northwest to a point near the present town of Sheldon, Ill.; thence to Bunkum, on the Iroquois, or Pinka-

³ *Wau-Bun, The Early Day in the Northwest*. By Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, Chicago, 1855, p. 143.

mink river; thence extending in a northerly direction on a general line with the towns of Donovan, Momence and Blue Island, and passing on to the post of Chicago. It crossed Beaver creek on the Illinois side, and also the Kankakee or Theakiki.

At the point where this main trail entered Parish's Grove, it was joined by another trail or feeder which led off to the southeast, in the direction of the old Indian trading post of Ouiatenon, just below the present site of Lafayette, following the general route of what was afterwards denominated the Lafayette road. This side trail would extend in the general direction of the present towns of Oxford, Otterbein and Montmorenci.

The line of the main Potawatomi trail, as it passed through Warren and Benton counties, was well marked as early as 1824. It is recorded that in the fall of that year, Berry Whicker, Henry Campbell and other Ohio land hunters, joined a party of Potawatomi who were going to Beaver lake on a big hunt. They started at Kick-a-poo and followed a well-defined Indian path. When they got out into the big prairies of Benton county, the "blue-stem grass grew so high that one of the party rode out a few feet into the blue-stem from the party in the Indian trail, and the rest of the party passed without seeing him."⁴ Now the only Indian trail extending across Benton county in the general direction of Beaver lake, of which there is any tradition, is the one that passed through Parish's Grove. John Pugh, an old and reliable pioneer of Warren county, now dead, related that when he was a boy of fourteen, that he traveled with his father over what he denominated as "The Chicago Trail," to Chicago, passing through Parish's Grove, and thence on by way of Bunkum and Momence, Ill. This shows that the very earliest settlers, who knew the Potawatomi well, always spoke of a "trail" instead of a road.

An old map of Indiana, published by Colton in 1838⁵, shows a road extending northwest from Kick-a-poo to Rainsville, and then on to Parish's Grove. There is no record that a State road was ever located over this route, although there is an act of the State legislature for the year 1829, establishing

⁴ *Sketches of the Wabash Valley*; J. W. Whicker, p. 108.

⁵ *Map of Indiana*, J. H. Colton, 1838, State Library.

a State road north from Williamsport to Parish's Grove and the State line. The trace from Kick-a-poo to Parish's Grove on the Colton map is undoubtedly the line of the old Indian trail.

The exact location of the main trail as it passed through the groves and plains of eastern Illinois, was probably never definitely fixed. As before shown, the line of these trails was sometimes dimly marked. The history of Kankakee county, Illinois, fixes the establishment of an Indian trading post at Bunkum, on the Iroquois, as early as 1822, kept by Gurdon S. Hubbard and Noel Le Vasseur, and the establishment of what was known as "Hubbard's Trail" to and from Fort Dearborn, which in a general way "ran almost parallel with the Indian trails."⁶ This way led by Donovan, Momence and Blue Island. Le Vasseur and Hubbard were in the employ of the great fur companies, and it is not likely that any of those who bartered whiskey and beads for furs and peltries would be found anywhere else than on the lines of Indian communication. Hubbard in his autobiography speaks of Sugar Grove and tells of camping with some Kick-a-poos on Big Pine creek. He says that he accused the Kick-a-poos of deceiving General Harrison, at the Battle of Tippecanoe, by pointing out an unfavorable location for a camping ground. He says that the Kick-a-poos laughed at this and told him that the old general had selected the best site in the locality for a ground of defense, and Hubbard to verify this statement made a trip to the battleground and said he was convinced that the Kick-a-poo statement was true. He mentions Burnett's creek on the west side of the battleground.

The reason for the existence of this great trail is at once apparent. The Potawatomi control extended from Lake Michigan to the north bank of the Wabash, reaching down that stream as far as the outlet of Big Pine creek. Mr. Beckwith, once president of the Illinois Historical Society, is authority for the statement that the groves in the prairies west of Lafayette contained mixed villages of Kick-a-poos and Potawatomi.⁷ Parish's Grove had an Indian burying ground on the west side of it, which was visited by bands of Potawatomi as late as the "40's." All the groves and prairies of

⁶ *History of Kankakee County, Illinois*, 1906, II, p. 634.

⁷ *Fergus Historical Series*, IV, No. 27, p. 174.

Indiana and Illinois and along the line of this Potawatomi trail have Indian traditions connected with them. Topenebee, the great chief of the Potawatomi, was well acquainted with all this ground; he was, by the treaty of 1832, made with the United States government, granted a section of land bordering on Sugar Grove in Benton county, and known as "The Indian Float."⁸ It was an ideal tract, with timber on the west side of it, and watered by Sugar creek. Topenebee probably selected the location himself. Now this great trail, running the whole length of the Potawatomi domain from Lake Michigan to the Wabash, served to unite all the Indian villages in these groves, led directly to the great fishing grounds of the Iroquois and the trapping and hunting grounds of Beaver lake and the Kankakee, and connected the different bands of this tribe with the trading post under the guns of Fort Dearborn at the north, and with the ancient post of Ouiatenon, the French traders on the Wabash, and the post of Vincennes on the south. In General Harrison's day, and later, it was no uncommon sight to see drunken Potawatomi and Kick-a-poos in the streets of Vincennes. Samuel R. Brown, who visited Vincennes about 1817, says: "There was several Indian traders—great numbers of Indians resort hither to sell their peltries. The tribes who frequent this place and reside on the Wabash, are the Kick-a-poos, Miamis, Potawatomies, Shawanese, Weaws, and Delawares."⁹ Morris Birbeck, another learned traveler, says: "The Indians are encamped in considerable numbers round the town, and are continually riding in to the stores and the whiskey shops."¹⁰

Be it said to General Harrison's credit, that he frequently sought to check the rapacity and lawlessness of the whiskey venders of Vincennes, and the unscrupulous traders that swarmed along the upper Wabash in trading boats and procured the most valuable furs by the exchange of worthless trinkets and jugs of cheap whiskey. On the convening of all the important Indian councils he forbade the sale or barter of whiskey within certain limits, but his decrees were little heeded by lawless gangs of traders who cared for nothing except the profit they might reap from drunken and besotted savages.

⁸ *Indiana Magazine of History*, March, 1918, p. 3.

⁹ Indiana as seen by Early Travelers, Lindley, 415.

¹⁰ Indiana as seen by Early Travelers, Lindley, 181.

The early accounts of the Iroquois, the Kankakee and Beaver lake, all agree that at one time they constituted the great hunting and trapping grounds of the Potawatomi in northern Indiana. Beaver lake and its contiguous swamps abounded at one time with fur-bearing animals, such as the muskrat, the mink and the beaver. "It was located almost wholly within the limits of McClellan township, in Newton county, Indiana," and, "as shown by the meander lines of the government survey, and as the lake existed before being materially reduced by drainage, it was the largest body of water in the State of Indiana. Its greatest width from north to south was about four and one-half miles, and its greatest length from east to west was about seven and one-fourth miles. It covered an area of about twenty-five square miles, or about sixteen thousand acres of land. In earlier times the water of the main body of the lake was perhaps six to ten feet deep, and abounded in fish of all varieties usually found in streams and lakes in this locality, and was especially remarkable for the number of buffalo fish that abounded in its waters."¹¹ The party of land hunters, heretofore mentioned, who accompanied the Potawatomi to this lake in 1824, described it as "a beautiful body of water, very clear and rather shallow, a delightful place for the Indians to hunt, fish and bathe. It was one of the principal camping grounds of the Potawatomi Indians, and with the exception of the visit with their friends along the Wabash, the white men who were with the party, enjoyed the stay at Beaver lake better than all the rest of the trip."¹²

Is it any wonder, then, that we find a main line of travel, extending from the groves of the prairies, and from the trading posts, to and from these rivers and lakes where the savage went to supply his wants, and to secure those valuable furs which he found so useful in exchange. It is plain to be seen that Le Vasseur and Hubbard exercised some degree of intelligence in establishing the early post of Bunkum on one of the main trails leading to these ideal trapping grounds.

The travel over the southern part of this great trail, to and from the ancient village of Ouiatenon, must have been extensive. No doubt a large part of the traffic from Beaver

¹¹ *History of Jasper and Newton Counties, Indiana*, I, pp. 242-243.

¹² *Sketches of the Wabash Valley*; Whicker, p. 109.

lake went this way, keeping to the prairie route, where fewer obstacles would be encountered in the journey and taking advantage of the frequent groves and Indian villages along the way. Fort Ouiatenon was one of the earliest French trading posts in the West. It was established, as Logan Esarey says, for the protection of the fur trade. "It is possible," observed *Sieur de Vincennes*, "to send out from this post every year about thirty thousand skins."¹³ At this point also existed for several years an unscrupulous band of half-breed French traders with whiskey, beads and trinkets, who took every advantage possible of the ignorant savages. But the Potawatomi were always favorable to these French traders, who seemed to understand them better, were less brusque with them, and frequently intermarried with members of the tribe.

This great Indian pathway is not without its historical interest. It played a conspicuous part in the shaping of the history of the Northwest. Over it probably passed the renowned *Shaubena*, chief of the *Prairie Potawatomi*, to form a league with *Tecumseh* and the *Prophet*. This was in the spring of 1807, and was *Shaubena's* first meeting with that famous chieftain. The friendship thus formed was afterwards cemented by frequent intercourse. *Shaubena* was with *Tecumseh* at the great council with General *Harrison*, in 1810. In the fall of that same year, *Tecumseh* started out on his great mission of uniting the Indian tribes against the further progress of the white man. He rode hundreds of miles across the forest and prairie, accompanied by three principal chiefs, and all were mounted on spirited black ponies. Their nearest route to *Shaubena's* village would be by the side trail leading from the site of the present city of *Lafayette*, west across the prairies to *Parish's Grove*. There was a persistent tradition among the early settlers of *Benton county* that *Tecumseh* had at one time camped there. This was probably the occasion. *Shaubena* afterwards related that *Tecumseh* arrived at his village on the *Illinois river* on a warm day in the early part of Indian summer. The trip across the vast expanse of prairie at this delightful season must have been entrancing. The arrival of so distinguished a person as *Tecumseh* was no common event. "On the following day a favorite dog was killed, a feast made for the distinguished visitors, and the

¹³ *History of Indiana*; Logan Esarey, pp. 20-21.

night spent with songs and dances."¹⁴ Shaubena accompanied Tecumseh on this occasion, on his visit to the Winnebago of Wisconsin, and the success of that venture was afterwards shown by the presence of so many renowned Winnebago warriors at the Battle of Tippecanoe, dressed in their gorgeous head-dress of eagle feathers, and mentioned by General Harrison as displaying the most conspicuous bravery

Along this famous trail undoubtedly passed many of those Potawatomi who took part in the terrible massacre of the garrison of Fort Dearborn, on August 15, 1812. Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, in her vivid account of this affair, speaks of a party of Indians arriving from the Wabash. "These were," her narrative continues, "the most hostile and implacable of all the tribes of the Potawatimies."¹⁵

Says Copley, "they brained innocent children, clinging to their mothers' knees, and then struck down the mothers, and with hands reeking with blood, tore their scalps from their heads even before death had put an end to their sufferings."¹⁶ Such was the horrible fate that innocents often met, at the hands of these cruel and relentless savages.

THE OLD CHICAGO ROAD

Over the trail of the savage passes the foot of the white man and civilization dawns. A road is an artery along which flows the new blood that imparts life and vigor to a new country. It was the building of roads that enabled Rome to extend her laws and establish her empire in the old world; it was by way of the National Road of the early days of the Republic that the West was finally conquered and permanently settled.

The Battle of Tippecanoe over, the English influence over the Indian tribes of the Northwest forever removed, the settlement and development of the great West went on apace. Soon the "prairie schooner" appeared, drawn by oxen, and bearing families and all their possessions over the roads of the wilderness. From the time of the opening of the United States land office at Crawfordsville, in 1828, the development of the country in the northern part of Indiana was exceedingly rapid.

¹⁴ *Memories of Shaubena*; N. Watson, Chicago, 1878, pp. 19-21.

¹⁵ Mrs. J. H. Kinzie, *Wau-Bun, The Early Day in the Northwest*, p. 235.

¹⁶ *Michigan Pioneers and History*, XIV, p. 267.

"Crawfordsville," says Logan Esary, "became the converging point for all settlers northwest of the capital. The first settlers of Lafayette and Delphi, and what was then called the Upper Wabash country, made their way from the Upper Whitewater valley across by way of Andersonstown, thence down White river to Strawtown, near Noblesville. There they took the wilderness road, by Thorntown, to Crawfordsville. From White river to Crawfordsville there was not a white man's house along the trace in 1825."¹⁷

With the rough pioneer roads extending to Crawfordsville, and later on to Lafayette, there came a demand for the opening up of highways north of the Wabash river. General Harrison's soldiers, on their historic march to the battlefield of Tippecanoe, had discovered bluegrass in the prairies of Vermillion and Warren counties, and they had been wonderfully impressed with the vast areas of open plain containing rich and productive soil. General Tipton had recorded in his rather rough and illiterate diary, that the troops of Harrison, on the morning after the battle of Tippecanoe, had discovered a "grait Deal of corn" at Prophet's Town; that, after loading six wagons with corn, the troops had destroyed the balance, estimated at two thousand bushels. These facts became generally known with the return of the troops to southern Indiana and Kentucky. Great reports had been made of a virgin land, filled with pleasant groves. Deer were known to abound, and all kinds of wild game. Discerning men, even at that day, saw great possibilities ahead for the grazing of herds. Some of the prairie groves contained springs; others were located on the banks of running streams. Here was water and fuel, and refuge from the storms of the prairie. With the development of markets, their greater accessibility, all things were possible. Long before the "40's" had arrived, men were predicting the coming greatness of the Old Post of Chicago. There was the old line of the Potawatomi trail from Kick-a-poo to Post Chicago, and another ill-defined trail leading into this from the vicinity of Lafayette, but no roads.

Accordingly, we find the General Assembly of 1829 appropriating the sum of seven hundred and fifty dollars "to extend the location of the State Road from Indianapolis to Crawfordsville, so that it shall run to Williamsport, in the county of

¹⁷ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana*, p. 273-274.

Warren, from thence to the State line, in a direction to Chicago."¹⁸ This was the establishment of what has since that time been known as "The Chicago Road." From Williamsport it passed in a general northwesterly direction past the site of the present town of Boswell, to Parish's Grove, which it entered at the southeast corner; from thence it passed over the prairies for a distance of eight miles to Sugar Grove; from thence it passed northwest to the State line, near Raub. An extension of this road into the State of Illinois passed on to Bunkum, on the Iroquois river, intersecting at that point what was called "Hubbard's Trail" to Chicago. To the settlers who later hauled produce and drove cattle from Crawfordsville and Williamsport to Chicago, the whole road from Crawfordsville to Chicago was known as "The Chicago Road." From Parish's Grove on into Chicago, the line of the old "Chicago Trail" of the Potawatomi, and the line of "The Chicago Road," were practically identical. Men who traveled it in the later days had scarcely heard of such a thing as a trail. Not so with John Pugh and some of the earlier pioneers.

If you will examine the Colton map of 1838, printed with this article, you will plainly see the line of three roads, all entering Parish's Grove. The one farthest to the left is the old State Road from Williamsport and Crawfordsville; the one in the center, passing through Rainsville, is the old Potawatomi Trail, extending from Kick-a-poo to Parish's Grove, over which Berry Whicker and his companions traveled in 1824; the one to the right is the Lafayette Road; running from Lafayette to Parish's Grove, and crossing Big Pine creek. This Lafayette road followed the line of the old trail extending south and east from Parish's Grove to Ouiatenon and the Wabash. By consulting the map, the markings of the trail as it runs northwest from Parish's Grove, may be plainly seen, and also the point of intersection with Hubbard's Trail, which is the first trail west of the State line. The point of intersection, however, should be at the Iroquois river, instead of farther south, for Hubbard's Trail was first established from Bunkum, on the Iroquois, north to Chicago. The extension of the trail south from Bunkum occurred in later years.

Over these roads and trails from the south and east came a large portion of the early settlers that settled Warren and

¹⁸ *Acts of Indiana*, 1829, p. 122.



COLTON'S MAP, 1838

Benton counties, and many passed on into Newton, Lake and Porter. More than that, from the early 40's, a steady stream of emigrant wagons from the south began to roll over the prairies toward Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin. There were whole months when at any time on any day, a "prairie schooner" might be seen traveling across the plains from Parish's Grove to the northwest. The old trail suddenly assumed a national importance. From Ohio, Kentucky and all Indiana south of Wabash, a tide rolled on that ultimately filled all the groves and prairies north of the Wabash, and overflowed into other and newer territories to the north and west.

The amount of travel along this old trail in the 40's, and later, was greatly augmented by the constantly increasing number of wagons coming from Tippecanoe, Warren, Fountain, Montgomery and other counties, laden with produce for the growing market of Chicago, which had an outlet to the east by way of the Great Lakes. A prominent citizen of the early days of Chicago speaks of the "Hoosiers" supplying a large share of the food supply consumed and shipped from that point, such as hogs, cattle, wheat, rye, flax and other articles of consumption. "The Chicago Road" became a great feeder to this growing lake port. Says John Ade:

Prior to the year 1853, at which time the railroad between Indianapolis and Lafayette was completed, and the Illinois Central began to run trains between Chicago and Kankakee, there would be in the fall of each year an immense amount of travel on the roads between Lafayette and Chicago, most farmers' teams hauling wheat to Chicago, or coming back loaded with salt and groceries of all kinds, either for their own use or for the merchants who had purchased stocks of goods east and shipped the same to Chicago by way of the lakes. To accommodate this travel, camping places, and in several instances, "taverns," as they were called, had been established a few miles apart, all the way between Lafayette and Chicago.¹⁹

To this must be added a large volume of travel coming from points farther south along the Wabash and from Warren, Fountain and even Montgomery counties.

The list of "taverns" and camping places along this route for the accommodation of travelers is thus most interestingly told by Mr. Ade:

¹⁹ *History of Jasper and Newton Counties Indiana*, p. 205.

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After leaving Lafayette, the first would be Oxford, at that time the county seat of Benton county. Parish Grove was the next point; then Sumner's (Sugar) Grove, between Mud Pine and Sugar Creek; then Bunkum, at which point there were two taverns, one on each side of the Iroquois river. The next was the Buck Horn tavern, located near where the present town of Donovan, Illinois, stands. . . . The next tavern was at the crossing of Beaver creek, and the next was known as the Big Spring, about half way between Beaver creek and Momence. Then on to Momence, at the crossing of the Kankakee river. The next general stopping place was called Yellow Head Point, said to be named after an Indian, who lived there, by the name of Yellow Head. The next point on the road was Blue Island, and then came Chicago, a distance of about one hundred and thirty miles from Lafayette, and taking six to eight days to make the trip.²⁰

It might be added that this Indian whom Mr. Ade speaks of as being named Yellow Head, was a drunken and quarrelsome savage who once caused Mr. Gurdon S. Hubbard a great deal of trouble at Bunkum after imbibing a little too much fire-water.

John Pugh, a late respected citizen of Warren county, when a boy fourteen years of age, made a trip over this road, which he persisted in calling "The Chicago Trail," in the year 1841. The party consisted of several men, horses and wagons. Peter Schoonover, grandfather of Judge Schoonover, present judge of the Fountain circuit court, accompanied the party and drove two yoke of oxen. It was the custom of those days to make the trip to Chicago in companies, in order to guard against the hazards of the journey, and to provide means of "pulling out" the other fellow in case he "got stuck" in the mud. To the eager boy of fourteen, this pilgrimage of ten or twelve days through the wilderness, crossing plains and rivers, sleeping at frontier taverns, and at last reaching the great lake and the post of Chicago, was an experience that he remembered as long as he lived.

The way was long and the journey difficult, as the ground was extremely soft and wet, and this made hard pulling for the teams. The elder Pugh had a load of about twenty-five bushels of grain, consisting of wheat and flax, the latter grain being much grown in the early days to subdue and rot the sod of the prairies. The market price of wheat in Chicago at that time was thirty-seven and one-half cents per bushel, and flax was seventy-five cents per bushel.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Coming out of Warren county, the wagon struck the main trail in the vicinity of where the town of Boswell now stands, and the boy remembered of seeing a man come across the prairies in a wagon. The hoofs of a deer were sticking up above the top of the box. Deer were then very abundant. The first camping ground was on the northwest slope of Parish's Grove, near the renowned tavern of Robert Alexander. The horses and oxen were watered at the fine spring of pure water, at the foot of the slope, which had made this a favorite camping ground of the Indians.

Morning on the prairie was glorious. An early start was made, and the party arrived at Bunkum on the second evening and at Beaver Lake creek on the third. At Beaver Lake creek the wagons mired in the bog and were pulled out by Schoonover's oxen. On the arrival of the company at Chicago, which was then a small place, Pugh remembered of watering the horses at the lake front. The waves were very high, and at one moment the horses were splashing knee deep, and at the next they would be standing on the naked sands.

After disposal of their loads and doing some trading, the party returned over the same route. Pugh recalled the bartering of seventy-five coon skins, the product of many a good night's hunt, and of his father buying a stove, which was then a curiosity, and some articles of wearing apparel. The whole party of travelers, however, were clad in homespun, the product of the pioneer looms of those days.

The whole country from Warren county to the lake was then in a state of nature. Bogs and marshes were frequent, but in places the level prairie extended in unbroken grandeur for many a league. Wild game was extremely abundant in the fall of the year. In the night time, when the wagons rolled along, the great flocks of geese and brants, aroused by the approaching teams, and arising from the ponds and low places, made a great noise and clamor.