

A Pioneer Engineer—Lazarus B. Wilson

By ALMA WINSTON WILSON, Indianapolis

As so much is being written regarding the highways and good roads throughout the country, it may be of interest to some to read of the difficulties and trials endured by civil engineers engaged in the Internal Improvement System of 1836-37-38 in Indiana, when my father (Lazarus B. Wilson), who not only marched through the wilderness of Indiana to Ft. Dearborn as one of the "Bloody Three Hundred" to fight Black Hawk, but was surveyor on the first railroad that connected the Ohio river with Lake Michigan. He was a resident engineer of the central part of the Wabash and Erie Canal, also for the Jeffersonville and Crawfordsville road, New Albany and Vincennes road, also the road from La Fountain creek to Georgetown. Not many surveyors in this twentieth century walk 19 miles a day.

The following, addressed to My Dear Wife, are extracts from some of his letters, and also, from some state records:

NEW ALBANY, April 25, 1838.

I promised to write on every Sabbath day, but can not wait for their arrival. I left Indianapolis on Thursday about 3 P. M. and reached Bloomington on Friday evening, when I had an interview with Dr. D. H. Maxwell, and I also met with the young doctor who visited us at Logansport. I put up with Mr. Orchard. Bloomington is a beautiful town, or rather it is handsomely situated in a country of rich land. Many of the town lots are well improved with fruit and ornamental trees, and from all appearances I should suppose that fruit will be abundant there this year.

I left it on Saturday morning and reached Salem on Sunday morning by breakfast time. Salem is not as handsome as Bloomington, but it is nevertheless a pretty place, and has many well improved residences made beautiful by pine and cedar trees which decorate some very indifferent dwelling houses. We remained there about three hours and a half and intended to go to meeting, but it happened to be Mr. Rawson's day for preaching in the country and there was no one to supply his place. They have a fine brick Presbyterian Church.

We reached this place on Monday morning to breakfast, and commenced work yesterday. Tomorrow, we shall move into camp, and I shall not be in again before Sunday or Saturday evening when I expect to receive a letter from you. You must not fail to write to me every

four or five days, for the *distance is so great* that a letter is a long time on the way. I see nothing here to admire except the Ohio River and some good buildings, and expect to locate in Salem.

Dr. Maxwell came in this evening and has been telling me some tales about himself and your father.

I have not yet called at the postoffice, for I have no doubt that a letter must be at least five days on the road from Logansport, but will call this morning.

NEW ALBANY, May 5, 1838.

I rode with Mr. [Jesse] Williams about thirty-five miles on Tuesday, most of the time in the rain. I rode again Wednesday, about twenty-five miles, also on Thursday about twelve miles and then walked until I had to go to camp to dry myself. Was out all day yesterday and today until the rain compelled us about two o'clock to go in to dry. And after five o'clock rode eight miles into town; and now after nine o'clock, am writing to her from whom, with her children, I expect to derive all the happiness which the world has in store for me. I believe I mentioned in my last, of having heard Mr. Anderson address a temperance meeting. He is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in this place, and with his family, boards at the house I stop at. I heard him preach Sunday last, twice, and am much pleased with him. He is a very sensible man, and reasons very logically. He and Mr. McKennon are fellow students, or have been such. He expects to be in Indianapolis in about a month.

I wish I could fix upon the day, when I could see you all in health at Logansport, but can not now. The country I have to locate the road through is very much broken with ravines and requires a great many examinations. I hope, however, that I shall be able to do so in eight or ten days, for if the coming week should prove favorable I shall be able to do so. I shall probably be twenty miles from this place on next Sunday. You will therefore direct your next letter to Salem.

PROVIDENCE, CLARK COUNTY, IND., May 13, 1836.

It will be four weeks tomorrow since I last saw you with all the inmates of the home in good health. How soon I may again enjoy that pleasure I can not with any degree of certainty speak, but I confidently expect to start from New Albany on my return on Tuesday, the 29th, and expect to be at home on the first Saturday in June.

This little village is situated on a stream called the muddy fork of Silver Creek. I don't know whether it has an existence on the map or not, but by reference to it you will discover the township, and ranges, numbered upon it, and this is the southwest corner of Clarke County in township one S. of the base line (the line dividing the township N. and S. and range S. E.). When you receive this letter, write and direct to New Albany, at which place I must be on the 28th, and on the following day I expect to turn my good steed toward the north, but before that period arrives you may expect to hear again.

CAMP ON BLUE RIVER, May 20, 1838

My last was written at Providence a week since but as I found it necessary to send to New Albany next day for medicine, it was mailed at the latter place. I expected the evening after writing to you to have a shake of the ague and therefore sent on Monday for a dose of calomel and jalap which had so good an effect that I was enabled to be with the party every day except Tuesday and by sending to New Albany I was enabled to get your letter which like the preceding one, had no date, but was no doubt written at Logansport about the 7th instant.

(I will take them home and you can date them at your leisure.)

But good news requires no date, and comes as welcome on the gale, as on the soft breathing of the Aeolian harp, time and place can alone soften each note and add to the joy imparted by pleasing intelligence.

I sent to Salem yesterday expecting to get a letter but was disappointed. We are now in camp within four miles of the town, but have about ten miles to run before we shall be able to reach it. Still I think we shall get there, by Saturday evening. On Monday I must be in New Albany, and Tuesday I anticipate starting home and before starting on my return to this country, I expect to have the road from Crawfordsville to Lafayette, to locate, which will require about one month. I shall send this to Providence by the mail carrier, to mail at that place this morning. I am still writing in camp on Blue River.

CAMP, MARTIN COUNTY, Sept. 20, 1838.

When I left you on Monday I found upon going to the Tavern a Mr. Bird from the Madison Road who was on his way to Paoli. And for the sake of company I waited almost an hour for him, and in consequence did not reach Paoli until after 7 o'clock. I reached Camp about 10 o'clock next day and that evening had a view of the great eclipse of the Sun from Sam's Creek Hill, near Lost River.

The following are from the state records:

On July 4, 1835, the opening of the Wabash and Erie Canal from Ft. Wayne to Huntington, Indiana, was celebrated. Boats went to Huntington for the guests, and returned to Ft. Wayne where there were great festivities, and before a great crowd. The Declaration of Independence was read by Lazarus B. Wilson, and an oration delivered by Hon. Hugh McCullough.

Also July 4, 1843, witnessed the completion of the Wabash and Erie Canal from Toledo, Ohio, to Lafayette, Indiana. The event was celebrated by an immense procession in which the veterans of Wars participated. Gen. Lewis Cass delivered the oration. (And among the soldiers of 1812 whose names are given, is that of Lazarus B. Wilson.)

SALEM, INDIANA, April 30, 1848

I have been running lines in the vicinity of Salem for several days past to gratify some of its citizens who are not pleased with the best

routes heretofore run, and have not completed the location further than Pekin about ten miles from this place. I expect Mr. James Brooks up on Tuesday when I hope the company will determine the point of entrance to this great Salem, so as to enable me to complete the location within the next week. So soon as the location shall be made and I can leave the line, I shall make a survey commencing at Salem and run in the direction of Bedford some twenty or twenty-five miles.

SALEM, IND., June 18, 1848

I left New Albany on Monday about ten o'clock and walked up to Providence nineteen miles, stopping on the way to dine and lay off work for contractors. On Tuesday evening I found a Mulberry tree with an abundance of delicious fruit on it, of which I ate so heartily as to become quite sick on Wednesday and Thursday and was lying around when James came. Of that, however, I have recovered by living on bacon and beans and cherry tarts.

In the summer of 1848 Mr. Wilson accompanied Mr. James Brooks [of Bedford] to Boston, Mass., in the interest of the Internal Improvement System [Monon Railroad].

PHILADELPHIA, PA., August 17, 1848

MY DEAR WIFE:

I wrote you from Wheeling and Clear Spring but two days ago. I left Clear Spring yesterday morning after an early breakfast and crossed the Cove Mountains to Hancock and the Potomac River, by stage to the depot for that place before the cars got down from Cumberland at 10:30 A. M. We dined at Harpers Ferry and about seven miles below that place we passed the upward train in which I saw Dick Thompson but recognized no other person. We reached Baltimore at 6 P. M. and by 8 were off in the cars again for this place which we reached at 3 A. M. this morning, traveling 220 miles by cars, 16 by stage and $1\frac{1}{2}$ in a restaurant, crossing the Susquehanna River about 11 o'clock last night traveling through parts of Maryland, Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania in one day or rather all the distance in 23 hours.

I am sorry that I did not take daylight to come from Baltimore to this place, between the former place and Havre De Grace. The road crossed the arms of the Chesapeake Bay, the first about 7 miles from Baltimore is called the Back River and is from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile wide. The second is the Gunpowder $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles wide and the last is Buck Creek about 1 mile wide. The last two have draw bridges in them to let the boats pass. The road is about 5 or 6 feet above the water laid upon trestles, placed about 6 ft. apart. At Havre De Grace the baggage car was run from the railroad to the top of a steam boat and the passengers got out and walked into the steamboat which was well lighted up, and looked like a large saloon in which all kinds of refreshments were set out, so that all who desired could eat and drink for their cash, anything

they desired. In about fifteen minutes we were on the opposite side of the Susquehanna River where we again took the cars, and between 12 and 1 o'clock passed through Wilmington, Delaware.

We had a beautiful moon-light night which enabled us to see the small craft sailing on the Bay and in the river, and the two light-houses in the distance. The night air was also pleasant, for although I had on my summer coat we had all the car windows open and it was not too cool.

We crossed the Schuylkill River on a viaduct at the edge of the city.

Philadelphia is a beautiful city. We stopped at the American Hotel in Chestnut Street which runs from the Delaware about 2 miles south of the Schuylkill. The old U. S. Bank—Congress Hall, and the old State House, in which the glorious Declaration of Independence was signed are on Chestnut Street, directly opposite the American Hotel. The whole two miles is built up, and some of the houses must have cost fifty thousand dollars.

On Saturday morning we expect to go to New York and on Sunday cross to Brooklyn to hear Mr. Beecher. On Monday I will go to Boston leaving Mr. Brooks to do what business he may have to attend to, in New York. He will probably meet me on Thursday, and Friday we will start home and if we shall be as fortunate as some travelers I shall reach home on Saturday two weeks.

NEW YORK, Aug. 23rd, 1848

When I wrote to you from the City of Brotherly Love I expected long ere this to have been treading the land of steady habits, but circumstances regulated my movements otherwise. We left Philadelphia as I told you we intended, at 9 A. M. on Saturday the 19th, in steam boat. 9 miles to Tacona on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware, thence by railroad, crossing the Delaware at Trenton, then through Brunswick where we crossed at Rariton, then to Elizabethtown and Newark where we crossed the Passaic, we also, before reaching Brunswick passed through Princeton and Kingston. We reached Newark about 1 P. M. where we stopped until 5, and got to that city, about 6, crossing the Hudson in a steam boat where the river is about 1 mile wide, and took lodgings at Judson's Hotel on Broadway.

On Sunday morning Mr. Brooks discovered that his trunk had been robbed and as he had business in the bank here on Monday which could not be transacted by deputy, I started back at 4:30 P. M. Sunday and reached the city by 9 (96 miles), in hopes of securing the depreddator, but having conjecture only to act upon. After consulting the Mayor and police officials, it was considered by them most advisable to rely upon future developments. Yesterday afternoon Mr. Collins and lady, Mr. Brooks and daughter, and I went up about 11 miles to the aqueduct which passes the Croton River over the Harlem River, to supply the city with water. The aqueduct is about 140 high and has 15 arches most of them 90 feet cord, it is between 1500 and 1600 feet long, and I walked over it on the coping of the sidewalks. The water passes over

it, in two cylinders, 3 or 4 feet in diameter. We had from it, a good view of the upper part of the city. This trip of about 22 miles, cost 31 cents to each, 6 miles by railroad and the residue by omnibus. There are a great many places where a man could pass an hour very agreeably, but I am very tired of looking at such masses of brick and mortar, and would infinitely prefer even Salem as a residence. This evening at 5 P. M. (it is now 3) we leave in a steamboat for Norwich, Conn., and expect by 5 A. M. to-morrow to be in Boston where I shall of course hear from you. It is a very long while since I left home, and I can hardly realize the truth, although it is true, that I left home on the 7th (16 days ago) while heretofore I have been on a survey for four weeks, it has not appeared half so long; but here, I have been idle, aye, there lies the key to an explanation.

The New Jersey towns are decidedly superior to anything I have seen, and Philadelphia city, very greatly superior as a city, to all others. Many streets here in New York are not wider than the alley by our stable, and yet have four and five story blocks of buildings on them.

I hope I shall see you all on Saturday next week, well and happy. As Mr. Brooks has got through with all, or nearly all, the business he had to do, we shall stop only when we want to examine some road or other work, which may be profitable.

My love to all the children, Oliver, Henry, Mary and Grace and believe me, my dear wife, that I want more anxiously to see you than I ever did.

Affectionately your husband,

L. B. WILSON

(There are thirty-four living descendants of the four children Mr. Wilson names, and it is his *tenth child* who gives the above information to the public.)

Sulgrove's *History of Indianapolis and Marion County* (1884) on page 50 referring to a part of the National Road, is the statement:

The survey of this road, was made by the late Lazarus B. Wilson, Engineer of the Louisville, New Albany and Chicago Rail Road. He also planned the wooden arch bridges on the line, which have been in constant use, with little repair, except replacing the soft slate of the first stone work of the river bridge, with durable limestone, since 1833.