

The Wabash and Erie Canal in Wabash County

By Mrs. LEOLA HOCKETT

During the session of 1823-24, Congress passed an act authorizing the state of Indiana to "Survey and mark through the public lands of the United States, the route of a canal by which to connect the navigation of the Wabash and Miami rivers and Lake Erie." The act provided that, "ninety feet of land on each side of the canal" should be "reserved for sale on the part of the United States," and that the use thereof should "forever be vested in the state aforesaid, for a canal and for no other purpose whatever."

In 1827, another act was passed granting "to the State of Indiana for the purpose of aiding the said State in opening a canal to unite, at navigable points, the waters of the Wabash river with those of Lake Erie, a quantity of land equal to one half of five sections in width on each side of the canal, and reserving each alternate section to the United States to be selected by the Commissioner of the Land Office, under the direction of the President of the United States, from one side thereof to the other," the said lands to be "subject to the disposal of the Legislature of said state, for the purpose aforesaid and no other. "The work was to be commenced within five years and finished within twenty years.

The action of Congress was approved by the Legislature of Indiana on January 5, 1828. A Board of Commissioners was appointed, composed of Samuel Hanna of Ft. Wayne, David Burr of Jackson county (later one of the founders of the town of Wabash), and Robert John of Franklin county.

To make the appropriation of land available, work must be commenced before March 2, 1832. The committee appointed by Judge Hanna to select the time and place for the first excavations chose a spot on the St. Joseph feeder line at Ft.

Wayne. On the 22nd of February, 1832, friends of the canal repaired to that place for the event. Hugh Hanna (another of the founders of Wabash) was the Marshal of the day.

The proceedings are described by the *Cass County Times* of March 2, 1832:

The procession having been formed agreeably to order, at the John's Hotel, proceeded across the St. Mary's river to the point selected when a circle was formed, in which the commissioners and Orator of the day took their stand. Charles W. Ewing, Esq., then arose, and in his usual happy, eloquent manner, delivered an appropriate address which was received with acclamation. F. Virgus, Esq., one of the canal commissioners, and the only one present, addressed the company, explained the reason why his colleagues were absent, adverted to the difficulties and embarrassments which the friends of the canal had encountered and overcome, noticed the importance of the work and the advantages that would ultimately be realized and then concluded by saying, "I am now about to commence the Wabash and Erie Canal, in the name and by the authority of the state of Indiana." Having thus said, he *struck the long suspended blow*, and broke the ground while the company hailed the event with three cheers.

Judge Hanna and Capt. Murray, two of the able and consistent advocates of the canal in the councils of the state, next approached and excavated the earth and then commenced an indiscriminate cutting and digging.

The procession then marched back to town, as they had marched to the place, in the following order—

Canal Commissioners and Orator,
President and Secretary of the Meeting,
National Flag,
Committee on Arrangements,
Visitors and strangers,
Citizens generally.

Then they dispersed in good order.

The line through the county was surveyed in 1833 under the supervision of Jesse Williams of Ft. Wayne, one of whose assistants was Stearns Fisher of Wabash County. Contracts for the construction of the canal were let at Treaty Grounds, now Wabash, on May 4, 1834, in sections of thirty to sixty chains in length. In the archives of the Wabash County Historical Society are the records, kept by Mr. Fisher, of the work on sections eighty-nine to one hundred twenty-two, inclusive, which comprise that part of the canal from Wabash to Peru. Contracts were let in the western part of Wabash County to Myers & Jones, S. & H. Hanna, P. & J. Burke, Thomas Hayes, James Ferrell, James McAvoy, Adam Young, Turner & Kuntz,

David Cassatt, W. T. Mallack & Co., and William Little & Sons. Work in the eastern part of the county was superintended by David Burr.

Just a month before the contracts were let at Treaty Grounds, Hugh Hanna and David Burr laid out the town of Wabash. This place consisted of nothing except the ten or twelve cabins that had been built for the negotiators of the treaty of 1826 and the few families who occupied them when work on the canal was begun there.

The county was an almost unbroken wilderness and the construction of the canal included the cutting of timber, grubbing out stumps and brush, making roads, building bridges over streams, quarrying stones, and building dams, culverts and feeders. The first date in the records is November 3, 1834. The final settlement with most of the contractors was made on November 18, 1835.

Section eighty-nine, which was 60.49 chains in length, and included the lock at Wabash, was the work of Myers & Jones. The following is the final report on that section:

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| Grubbing and clearing | 60.49 | cubic yds. | @ | \$10.00 | \$ | 604.90 |
| Excavating earth | 25,708 | cubic yds. | @ | .11½ | | 2,956.42 |
| Excavating rock | 1,354 | cubic yds. | @ | .64 | | 866.56 |
| Excavating lock pit | 823 | cubic yds. | @ | .20 | | 184.60 |
| Excavating rock pit | 999 | cubic yds. | @ | .64 | | 639.36 |
| Full embankment | 2,340 | cubic yds. | @ | .13 | | 304.20 |
| Puddle | 371 | cubic yds. | @ | .25 | | 92.75 |
| Timber | 1,179 | cubic yds. | @ | .06 | | 70.74 |
| 2 in. plank | 1,885 | cubic yds. | @ | .06 | | 113.10 |
| Locks, gates and sills | | | | | | 550.00 |
| Cut stone masonry | 1,669 | .27 per. | @ | 9.00 | | 15,023.43 |
| Iron | 600 | lbs. | @ | .14 | | 84.00 |
| Protection | 190 | per. | @ | 1.00 | | 190.00 |
| Upright timbers | | | | | | 48.00 |
| Excavating detached rock | 10 | yds. | @ | .40 | | 4.00 |
| Snubbing posts and fender posts | | | | | | 20.00 |
| Building and removing dam and taking drift | | | | | | |
| Making new quoin post [word illegible] from canal, etc. | | | | | | 53.00 |
| By change of plan | | | | | | 12.00 |
| | | | | | | <hr/> |
| | | | | | | \$22,226.38 |

Contractors were paid eleven, eleven and a half and twelve cents per cubic yard for excavating earth under ordinary conditions, thirteen and fourteen for embankments and sixteen and twenty cents for lock excavations.

The sale of the land granted by Congress furnished the money with which to construct the canal. In the *Wabash Gazette* of August 21, 1850, was this notice: "Hon. John L. Wright, Clerk of the Land Office at Logansport, will be at La-Gro on the 4th of September and at this place on the 5th for the purpose of receiving interest due on canal lands."

From Wabash eastward for fifty miles, the work was done by Irish laborers who came from the East. They were divided into two clans, the "Corkonians" and the "Fardowns". It seems that some sort of a feud had existed between them and that they brought their animosities with them when they came. Each side would beat unmercifully any member of the other side who was caught alone. Each side was so terrorized by the other, that on the least provocation, they would leave their work and take to the woods or march, armed, to any supposed point of danger. David Burr, when reporting the trouble to Governor Noah Noble, said that there were six hundred armed Irishmen and that he was compelled to send to Logansport for the militia. With the help of the militia from that town, Ft. Wayne and Huntington, the sheriffs of Wabash and Huntington counties, two lawyers and a judge, the "Irish Riot" was quelled and eight of the ringleaders convicted and sent to prison. Wabash County had just been organized and was unable to bear expense occasioned by the disorders. The Legislature appropriated the money needed.

The canal was completed through Wabash County in 1836, and waited for ten months for water. The bottom of the canal was almost as level as a floor, and was at times used for a race track until the water was turned in. When the work was finished the town of Wabash was almost depopulated, as it was then composed mostly of canal laborers.

In the spring of 1837, the announcement was made that water would be turned into the canal from the feeder at La-Gro. When the day came a crowd had gathered to witness the operation. There was a great burst of enthusiasm as the water began to pour into the bed of the big ditch and move slowly down the almost imperceptible incline towards Wabash. The crowd followed it in a body until the town was reached. In a short time, the water was deep enough to float a boat but it was nearly three weeks before any were running.

It has been erroneously stated that the *Prairie Hen* and the *Indiana* were the first boats to brave the raging waters of the

Wabash and Erie Canal into the town of Wabash, but to the *Davy Crockett* belongs that distinction. The *Davy Crockett* was manufactured in Wabash from a large maple sap trough owned by David Cassatt. With Col. Hanna, William Steele, and Mr. Cassatt as captain, crew and passengers, this rude boat made the trip to LaGro and return. Mr. Cassatt's old horse, hitched to the craft with a grape vine, furnished the motive power.

The freight boat *Indiana* was scheduled to be the first actual boat to arrive in Wabash. The great event was to take place on July 4, 1837. Somewhere between Wabash and LaGro, an old packet boat, the *Prarie Hen*, of the Ohio Canal, passed the *Indiana* and reached Wabash first. It had on board about a hundred passengers, half of whom were Indians who had availed themselves of the opportunity to take a free ride, and incidentally, to partake of the "fire-water" that was part of the cargo.

The *Indiana*, commanded by Captain Columbia, was newly painted and the wonderful boat must have dazzled the spectators when it reached the landing at Wabash and Canal streets. Here the residents of the little village with Chief Al-lo-lah and his braves from their village across the river had gathered to welcome it. The visitors were saluted with a volley of musketry and no doubt the crowd yelled itself hoarse. On board were a number of the early settlers of Ft. Wayne and Huntington and the German Band of Ft. Wayne. If the recollections of those who attended the big celebration can be relied on, the music made by the Wooden Band was anything but euphonious.

A procession was formed and the company marched to Treaty Grounds where a sumptuous dinner was served, after which came speeches and a general good time. Elijah Hackleman, a Wabash County pioneer was one of the orators of the day. He had written his speech and, on the day preceding the great event, went into the woods to rehearse it. While engaged in this laudable activity, he came upon a nest of rattlesnakes. Nevertheless, he was able to deliver the speech the next day. The festivities closed with a big dance on the second floor of the only brick business house in the village. Early on the morning of July 5, the *Indiana* started on the return trip to Ft. Wayne.

In 1846, a daily line of packet boats was established from Lafayette to Toledo by Doyle & Dickey of Dayton, Ohio. This

is said to have been the first public conveyance established in Wabash County. No account can be found of any regular line of stage coaches.

In 1851, Hull's line of freight boats was in operation, and, in 1852, this notice appeared in the *Wabash Weekly Gazette*: "The proprietorship of the Toledo and Wabash packets has passed into the hands of Messrs Petree & Co., who have had the boats thoroughly refitted and repaired. Captains Mahon, Davis and Dale. Regular daily trips both up and down."

The packet boats were fitted up expressly for passenger service. Sleeping apartments and dining accommodations were provided on board. As the motion of the boat was steady and smooth, making the, then considered, extremely rapid rate of eighty miles in twenty four hours, it was thought by many that perfection in the way of traveling had been reached.

From the following, taken from the *Wabash Gazette* of May 14, 1851, after the editor, John L. Knight, had traveled on the Packet boat *Indiana*, one would infer that a clean boat and courteous treatment by captain and hands was a most unusual thing:

Capt. J. H. Fountain's boat, *Indiana*, is orderly, neat and everything clean. The hands about the boat were quiet, pleasant, and in a great measure free, at least in the hearing of the passengers, from that profaneness in which the hands of many of the boats indulge, to the excessive annoyance of a large portion of the traveling public.

The passengers were so pleased with their treatment that they wrote this commendation, signed by all the passengers, and presented it to the Captain, but we felt that the Captain was entitled to special commendation for his conduct and qualities as the Master of one of our Packets, so we solicited a copy which we give here. "We the undersigned passengers on board the canal Packet *Indiana*, take great pleasure in commending to the traveling public, this boat, as one of the first on the canal for the neatness and order of its table, the respectful bearing of its hands and the gentlemanly and obliging demeanor of its Master, Capt. Fountain, who has won to himself the esteem of all who have been so fortunate as to fall into his care."

Twenty-one names were signed to this testimonial.

About the tenth of November of each year, boats were compelled to "lay up" for the winter. They usually began running again about the first of March. Sometimes when the ice was late in "breaking up", the season began a month later. Mer-

chants ordered enough supplies to last during the winter, and grain was shipped eastward before cold weather.

It was customary for the boat men to winter somewhere along the line. During the winter of 1845-46, at his home four miles west of Wabash, Stearns Fisher cared for two men and more than forty horses and mules. The boat hands were considered a rough set. The value of the service of a mule driver seemed to be determined by his ability to "cuss" and beat the mules that drew the heavy loads over the surface of the canal.

Often a boat, loaded with supplies, wintered in some town along the line. A newspaper of Dec. 10, 1849, contained this notice: "The trading boat Harriet, has a full supply of groceries such as coffee, teas, sugar etc. Now lying at Wabash where she will remain during the closing of the canal. Country merchants can have a full supply on reasonable terms by calling soon. Thomas Gilpin & Co."

In 1852, the following advertisement appeared, which shows that some of the boats were owned by local people: "Canal Boat For Sale. The undersigned wishes to sell his Canal Boat Emperor and the furniture belonging to it. Said boat is now lying at Wabash, is in good repair and is well known on the line as one of the strongest and best made boats on the Wabash trade." This notice was signed by Thomas McKibben. The market value of boats, of course, greatly varied. A news item indicates that the *City of Alton* was sold for \$1,400.

Each boat had a name. Some were: *The Lady Ellen*, *City of Alton*, *Other Three*, *Superior*, *Metropolis*, *Caspian*, *McCarty*, *Australia*, *Jim Britton*, *Bill Ditton*, *Homer*, *Smith Grant*, *Pennsylvania*, *The Red Bird* (painted bright red), and *The Commit*. The spelling of the latter name was the occasion of some rather caustic humor by the *Wabash Gazette*. An editor thus vented his sarcasm concerning one boat: "The Superior is the name of the most inferior looking boat on the canal. It is drawn by two of the most dilapidated, jaded, ruined horses mortal man ever set eyes upon. Given a fair opportunity, they would gladly have drowned themselves."

The construction of the canal caused a complete revolution in the prices of farm products. The people, having had no market for their grain, had been unable to obtain its value in a little obscure village. Wheat was fifty and sixty cents a bu-

shel, potatoes ten and fifteen. When the farmer took merchandise in exchange for his grain, he was allowed a slight advance over these prices. Immediately after the completion of the canal, wheat went to \$1.25 a bushel, and other things advanced in proportion.

Prices paid in Wabash for grain were higher than elsewhere and it was brought there from Delaware, Madison, Howard, Kosciuski, Whitley, Fulton and Blackford counties. It is said that from 500,000 to 1,000,000 bushels were shipped each season from the town of Wabash. There were several pork packing establishments in Wabash and in LaGro and pork was shipped from these towns to New York.

In 1848, there were nine ware-houses in Wabash and it was nothing unusual for wagons, loaded with grain, to line both sides of the road to the river, while the streets, in all directions, would be lined with wagons waiting their turns to unload. Sometimes when the boats were late farmers were compelled to dump their grain by the side of the road until the ware-houses could take care of it.

With the completion of the Toledo and Wabash Railroad in 1856, business on the canal began to decline. Soon the packet boat became a thing of the past. The canal company began building additional ware-houses along the line to better enable the canal boats to compete with the Railroad. Meetings were held in the local Court Houses at which were discussed ways and means for reviving business and measures were introduced in the Legislature that were designed "to insure the permanency of the canal." Stearns Fisher, Robert Cissna and a Mr. Washburn were sent from Wabash as delegates to a convention at Indianapolis. William Sweetzer, William Steele and T. S. Johnson made up a local committee to prepare a "memorial" to be sent to the Legislature. J. D. Conner, who represented Wabash County in the General Assembly was an untiring worker in the interest of the Canal. Besides the competition of the Railroad, floods often interfered with navigation. At one time, traffic was stopped for ninety days as a result of high waters.

The amount of business done by the Wabash and Erie Canal in its better days, must have been enormous. In 1848, there was shipped from Wabash 12,102 bu. corn; 78,410 bu. wheat; and 904 bbls. pork. LaGro shipped 9,445 bu. corn; 83,937 bu. wheat; and 1,461 bbls. pork. In 1860, four boats,

loaded with 10,000 bushels of corn, and one loaded with wheat, left Wabash for Toledo in one week. In the spring of 1870, a raft of logs worth \$10,000 was sent to the East from Wabash. Henry Sayre was the collector at Wabash, with his office in the Woolen Mills on the Canal.

Shipments during the season of 1870 included :

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|---|
| 85,000 bu. wheat |
| 10,080 bu. corn |
| 8,160 bu. oats |
| 240,652 ft. lumber |
| 413 bu. clover seed |
| 979 cu. ft. timber |
| 8,625 per. stone |
| 380 cords wood |
| Total receipts from tolls at Wabash \$7,924 |

During the season of 1871 there was shipped :

| | |
|---------------------|-------------|
| 117,000 bu. wheat | |
| 68,849 bu. corn | |
| 24,100 bu. oats | |
| 675 bu. clover seed | |
| 2,200 bu. flax seed | |
| 447,098 ft. lumber | |
| Local tolls | \$ 213.17 |
| Eastern tolls .. | 13,743.71 |
| Western tolls .. | 352.20 |
| Total | \$14,309.08 |

In 1862 a steam canal boat, built at Lafayette, passed through Wabash County. It had a second boat in tow and both were heavily loaded. It made the trip to Toledo and returned in six days. The venture proved such a boat to be impracticable because the churning of the water damaged the banks of the canal.

There were at least six locks in Wabash County. One was located five miles west of Wabash; one at Wabash; two at LaGro; one a mile and another a mile and a half east of LaGro. Most of the stone work of the west lock is still standing. It is about a hundred feet long and ten or more feet high. Bits of the others can still be seen. The large stones used in the construction of the locks came from quarries along the river in Wabash County. The lime for the mortar used to lay the

stones in the locks between Ft. Wayne and Lafayette was burned in a crude kiln on the farm of David Watkins at LaGro.

Business on the Canal was practically abandoned in the early seventies. In 1875, Henry Stevens of LaGro was buying grain. He was shipping on railway cars as well as on canal boats. Another buyer leased the elevator owned by the Railroad at the town, and the railroad management sought to protect him in his monopoly of the grain trade by a discriminating charge of several cents a bushel for loading cars through the elevator. The charge was also imposed on grain loaded direct from wagons, and as Stevens had nothing except a small warehouse on the Canal, he was virtually put out of business. The Railroad refused to set cars for him unless he paid the charges. He had contracted for the delivery of a considerable amount of grain which was coming in rapidly. David Watkins, an ex-Captain on the Canal, had a boat that was rotting in the Canal a mile west of LaGro. Stevens proposed to Watkins that he raise the boat and haul the grain to Wabash to be shipped on the C. W. & M. R. R. and offered Watkins and two helpers each five dollars a day for the season. In two days the boat was raised, overhauled and at LaGro being loaded with wheat. It made the trip to Wabash once each day carrying two car-loads of grain per trip. When the season was over Capt. Watkins ran his boat back and grounded it again, and so ended transportation on the Wabash and Erie Canal in Wabash County. In March, 1876, the Canal was sold at Terre Haute, that part through Wabash County bringing \$505.

Water in the Canal was used by mills and factories and for years was the only source of supply for fire fighting. In 1877, the people who bought the Canal demanded rent for the water. In Wabash the Lock Mills Company was assessed \$450, the Oil Mill, the Woolen Mills, and the Railway Shops, each \$50. All other mills and factories, each \$25. The owners of the mills and factories became very indignant because of these demands. Whether the Canal owners succeeded in collecting, it has not been possible to learn.

In 1880, the United States Government surveyed a route along the old ditch, for what was expected to be a wonderful ship canal. In 1884, a Hydraulic Co. was organized with the purpose of utilizing the water of the Canal for factories and mills but the venture proved to be a dream only.

In some places through Wabash County, the bed of the canal has been almost entirely effaced. The tracks of the Electric Railway were laid on the tow-path. The stone lock in Wabash has been used as the foundation of a business building. One of the gates of this lock occupies a prominent place in the Wabash County Museum.