

A Quaker Pioneer in Indiana: James Milton Finley

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When Indiana was young there came into her unbroken wilderness large numbers of hardy homeseekers from eastern and southern States. Among these immigrants were numerous families of well-to-do Quakers, or Friends as they preferred to be called. They were indeed a peace-loving and industrious class of people. One large Quaker family was that of George Finley,¹ a soldier of the Revolutionary War. He died in 1833, and his widow came with her ten sons and daughters over the mountains from Guilford Court House, North Carolina, to the free country north of the Ohio River.

It was while I was experiencing a four-months illness in the hospital, the first in seventy-four years, that my mind ran back over the three score and ten years to the days of my early childhood. I could hear again the very pleasant greetings of Grandmother Finley, and enjoy once more in retrospect her quaint but fine expressions—"thee", "thou" and "thine".

The Finley family lived for a few years near the eastern line of Indiana. Several of the children were married there, and settled with their families near Richmond, Liberty, and Muncie. The mother and two sons decided to move again and take up public lands in the heavily timbered country of western Indiana. Their choice fell on what is now the western border of Putnam County, with Walnut Creek to the east of their location. The older of these two sons soon went on to that part of Illinois lying just south of East St. Louis, leaving my father, James Milton Finley, the youngest of the family, to care for the aging mother, and at the same time to make a home in the wilderness. He cleared small hillside fields for cultivation, cutting and burning giant oak, walnut and yellow poplar trees, the level land, which could not then be drained, being too swampy.

In 1846, my father married a particularly fine type of

¹James Milton Finley, my father, was the son of George Finley. The latter was born in 1757 in Queen Anne County, Maryland, and died at Guilford Court House, North Carolina, in 1833. At the age of nineteen, he became a soldier in the War of Independence, serving as a private, a sergeant and a captain.

pioneer girl, who had come on horseback from Kentucky with her people. My mother's maiden name was Sarah Ann Belk, and she was born in Russell County, Kentucky, in 1824. At the time of his marriage, my father was twenty-six years of age, having been born at Guilford Court House, North Carolina, on August 29, 1820. The home to which this pioneer Friend brought his bride was built of great logs, plastered with clay. It had a great, wide-open fireplace for winter comfort and cooking. This home was visited by all the pioneer families who lived for miles around in that wooded country.

The sturdy young Quaker proved himself a most valuable help to his neighbors, not only at their log-rollings and house-raisings, but as a leader in improved farming as well. He taught them by example to save much of the fine growing timber on their land, and to coöperate in the draining of swampy lands for grain fields and meadows. He led in the matter of introducing and caring for the best stock—cattle, sheep and horses. At the age of fourteen he had served as an apprentice to a pork packer, and he knew how to cure and preserve the year's supply of meat from the late fall or early winter butchering. His neighbors profited by this knowledge.

Wild game was abundant, and since he and his neighbors were skilled riflemen, they could have venison, wild turkey, and smaller game in season. The Quaker woodsman was a friend to all animal life as well as to humanity, and he practiced and taught the killing of only such animals as were needed for food or pelts, or such as were dangerous to the settlers or their stock. The pelts were tanned and made into shoes, boots and harness. The furs were used for various articles of winter clothing.

Oxen were the chief beasts of burden and were used for plowing, and for hauling great logs and heavy loads of lumber through the thick woods and over the uneven trails. It was a number of years before roads were opened making it possible to use teams of horses to advantage. The oxen were driven in one or two-yoke teams, plows or sleds being attached by heavy log-chains to the yokes.

It was in 1843, that my father, then twenty-three, rode one-hundred miles to Vincennes to the United States Land Office, and made entry, for himself, to a quarter section of virgin timber land near the eastern edge of what is now Clay County.

This was just about a mile from his mother's farm. Erecting a good hewn-log house and a barn on his own land, he was still close enough to his mother's home to look carefully after her until her death in 1865, at the age of eighty-five.²

The heavy timber on the new land was chiefly oak, walnut, yellow poplar and sugar-maple. From the trees of the last named variety in the late winter and early spring, my father made all the maple syrup and brown sugar that his and the neighboring families could use.³ The white oak was fine and abundant. What had to be cut for the clearing of fields was made into staves for cooperage. Many hundreds of pork and flour barrells were made from these and hauled by ox-teams to Terre Haute over the National Road as soon as that highway was partially opened.

My father's first crop of wheat from the new-ground fields was cut with reap-hooks and threshed by flail and by oxen driven round and round over the straw which was spread on the barn floor. This virgin crop yielded 100 bushels of winnowed grain which was hauled seventy-five miles to Lafayette, then the best market since the Wabash and Erie Canal had just been opened that far. The wheat sold for fifty cents per bushel, which was thought to be an extra good price. Its value was exchanged for salt at \$3 per barrel and for other necessary household supplies at many times their present cost. By 1851, the Terre Haute and Richmond Railroad was completed across Indiana, after which markets were near at hand. Yet as eggs sold at five cents a dozen and butter at twelve and one-half cents a pound, while coffee was about seventy-five cents a pound with sugar in proportion, it was well that pioneer families were able to live largely on the products of their own farms.

Hogs sold at \$1.50 per hundred-weight, and many large droves were taken to Terre Haute packers from Clay County. They were slowly driven to market by farmers and their sons, a great contrast to transportation by trucks as we have it today. It is true that the fattening of stock was not so costly then, since wild mast (acorns, beechnuts and hickorynuts) furnished all the food needed except a little corn for finishing the process. Corn grew very rank in the new-ground fields and

²My grandmother was born at Guilford C. H., North Carolina, in 1780. Her maiden name was Mary Bishop. She died in Putnam County, Indiana in 1865.

³He was also successful in bee culture and produced much honey.

their was an abundance for the winter feeding of all stock. My Quaker father not only introduced the first improved stock of hogs, cattle and sheep into the community, but he was the first to grow clover for their sustenance.

Clothing for all the family was chiefly homespun, made from wool or flax (or a mixture) and the cloth was very durable for service. Its coloring was derived from the inner bark of native trees and from the hulls of black walnuts.

When conducting the necessary work of forest and field, this pioneer Friend furnished employment for a large number of men. So popular and successful was he as an employer that the men seemed to prefer to work for him rather than on their own initiative. During twenty-five years he and his good helpmeet gave home and schooling to more than twenty orphaned boys and girls in addition to caring for their own children. These orphaned children habitually called their benefactors "Uncle Jim" and "Aunt Sarah." A majority of them remained in the home until grown up, or until they married and established homes of their own. Hospitality was always extended to travelers, and especially to ministers of that early period who served the various country churches. This home often entertained many of the most noted of the pioneer preachers.

In 1856, my father decided to visit his brother who had settled in Illinois. As soon as harvest was over, he started with his family in the covered wagon for a two weeks' trip overland on the National Road. Ten days spent going and returning left only four days for the real visit. On the day following the departure, a fierce fire broke out in the woods, spread across the clearing, and quickly destroyed all the farm buildings. A young nephew left in charge was able to rescue only a few household articles. There was no ready or rapid means of sending any news of their great loss to the family. On the return journey, when they were within three miles of home, they learned that their buildings had all burned to the ground. Neighbor McKinley insisted that they stay at his home over-night, and that the mother and children be left to stay longer. Hastening to the site of his home on the next morning, my father found that his good neighbors had already cut and hewn timbers and erected a new house, much like the old one, and were then putting on a good clap-board roof. In

another week the new home was finished and the family was again happily installed therein.

At about this time the nearby railroad was using great quantities of four-foot wood, known as cord-wood, as fuel under the boilers of the locomotives. Indiana coal had not yet come into use. My father was given a contract to furnish three thousand cords of such wood which was to be delivered at Eaglesfield Station a mile and a half from his farm. This required all the hardwood trees from an unbroken tract of eighty acres, except the oaks which were made into railroad ties, and the yellow poplars which were used for shingles and fine lumber. With the aid of several neighbors with their teams (about twelve teams in all), he delivered the three thousand cords of wood on the railroad sidings in the course of one fall and winter. Wagons and bob-sleds were used. After delivery, the wood was cut into shorter lengths by portable sawmills for use in the locomotive fire boxes.

A rather remarkable trait of this Quaker farmer was his good influence in his daily association with them over the conduct of men and boys whom he employed. He seems to have had no strict, established rules of conduct, nor severe penalties. He only appealed to those who worked for him through manly and good natured precept and example. If rude profanity was begun, he quietly shamed the offender out of countenance by appealing to a sense of self-respect and true manhood, thus showing the folly of using the name of the Deity in vain. If any were inclined to bring in obscene stories, he would subdue that evil by showing it to be disrespectful to one's own mother and contrary to all healthy thought of true manhood.

During the exciting times preceding and during the Civil War, although known as a firm supporter of the Lincoln policies, my Quaker father was held in highest regard by friends and foes of the national Administration. While he would never permit himself to be made a candidate for political office, he was always chosen as arbitrator in all questions at issue among neighbors far and near. When the War was precipitated by the attack on Ft. Sumpter, this Friend, although strictly a man of peace, promptly offered to enlist in defense of the Union. Being past the age for active military service, he could not be accepted, but was advised to serve in

the home guard. Thus he helped organize the first effective company for home defense in western Indiana. Heavy duties fell on him and his family in protecting and caring for soldiers' widows and children, many of whom were quite destitute.

Quakers were well known to be opposed to the use of intoxicating liquor, and my father was no exception to this rule of conscience. At log-rollings and in harvest work, whiskey was usually provided for the men. He joined heartily as a leading helper in all these coöperative gatherings, but he would not join in the drinking. This would have made him unpopular had it not been for the fact that he proved himself to excell all the drinkers at whatever heavy work was to be done. He could outlift, outrun, and outdo any of them at every kind of sport or hard work. At his own log-rollings and barn-raising, he refused to furnish any liquor, but served an abundance of good food for refreshment, and the best workers soon approved the plan, because they saw they could do more and better work and all dangerous accidents were avoided.

In the summer of 1863, there occurred an incident showing the terrible community damage from intemperance and disloyalty. Along Eel River and extending up Walnut Creek in Putnam County, there was a settlement of low, lazy, rough people who were opposed to law and order. A saloon at a bridge site called "Plug City" was the headquarters of the rowdies for loafing and carousing. A sick soldier, being sent home on a furlough, had to cross this bridge to reach his home. Saloonkeeper Mills had boasted that no "dog" in a blue uniform could cross there, so when this sick man in a blue coat came limping along the road, Mills ran out and shot him. The soldier died in the road. The County sheriff would not even arrest the murderer declaring that there was no good witness, and that public sentiment in that lawless community would not support him.

Soon after this, another wounded soldier came home to visit his sick family, and on the night of his arrival was seized by ruffians and taken to this saloon, where his captors boasted that, after a day of punishment, they would have a hanging party at night. The helpless wife and children could do nothing to save him. Word was sent across the county line asking

assistance from the Home Guards, and from all loyal people who were not too much afraid to help. The call reached the Quaker patriot very late in the evening as he was returning from a heavy day's work. He decided at once to go to the rescue without waiting for his comrades of the Home Guards. Taking a loaded musket with bayonet fixed, he saddled two good horses and rode six miles to "Plug City". Hiding the horses near by, he marched into the crowded groggery, and demanded that the rowdies surrender their prisoner to him. He forced them to unchain the soldier, and place him on one of the horses. Taken to safety, the soldier and his frightened family were provided for. As soon as he recovered from his wounds, the young soldier returned to his regiment where he served until the close of the war.

Many other instances of patriotic home services are fondly remembered by elderly people of Clay County, but among the most notable was what was called the bloodless battle of Brazil. At the time of Morgan's raid into southern Indiana, it was planned by the bolder element of the Knights of the Golden Circle to coöperate with him. Members of three companies of disloyal Knights assembled during the night in a grove adjoining Brazil with the purpose of taking and holding the town pending Morgan's arrival. Word was telegraphed to Governor Morton, and Colonel Streight was sent down from Indianapolis. Croy's Creek Home Guards were called out at midnight, my father among them, and were marched to the field of expected conflict. At dawn, while the Knights were taking their hasty breakfast, Col. Streight rode out to their camp to parley with them. He told them that as he was unarmed they could shoot him off his horse, as they had threatened to do, and take the town and have their way for a few hours, but warned them that a brave company of Home Guards would arrive for defense in half an hour, and that regular troops would be wired for as soon as any Knight should fire the first gun. The Home Guard in full force arrived just then, and the Knights forthwith stepped out of ranks and scattered rapidly to distant homes without a shot.

The father of James Milton Finley having been a soldier in the American Revolution for eight years, taking an active part under Generals Green and Washington in the fighting at Guilford Court House and Yorktown, it might follow that the son had inherited some fighting quality. But he was distinct-

ly a man of peace, never seeking a quarrel and always granting charity to the opinions of others. Yet when a question of defending the honor of humanity or of the nation came up, he was ready to fight with all fortitude. Being a devoted admirer of President Lincoln, he was as deeply affected by his assassination, as he would have been by the tragic death of a near relative. He said sorrowfully: "The North has lost its savior, the South its best friend, and the whole country its greatest servant." He journeyed with his family to the nearest railway station, where we stood with bowed heads as the funeral train passed on its way to Springfield, Illinois. I was then a lad of twelve years.

After many years of patient and continuous work, as age was coming upon them, my father and mother were preparing to retire from active labor to enjoy in later life a little more leisure. They had not accumulated wealth, but they possessed a well improved farm, with good live stock, and a reserve of fine growing timber in which they took a just pride. About this time the good nature of my Quaker father was imposed upon by persons who were working what would now be called a confidence game. He was persuaded by a business friend to sign his name as an accomodation to paper for a bank loan. After a time it was found that the principal had been defaulted. All of the other sureties had taken the benefit of the bankruptcy law for exemption. The Quaker farmer scorned to take advantage of the technicalities of the law, saying that any pledge of his must be fulfilled at any sacrifice. Thus were all the frugal savings of a busy lifetime swept away to pay another man's debts.

"Uncle Jim" and "Aunt Sarah" Finley, as they were popularly known, were at once provided with home comforts for their declining years by their sons and daughter, who were married and had established homes of their own. In peace and with clear conscience did they spend their last days.⁴ Before they were promoted to a higher life, a part of the old homestead was redeemed at a great sacrifice on the part of

⁴James Milton Finley was born at Guilford C. H., North Carolina, August 29, 1820. He died at Harmony, Indiana, December 29, 1907. Sarah Ann Belk Finley was born in Russell County, Kentucky, in 1824. She died at Brazil, Indiana, in 1910.

their sons. This project could not be carried through until several years after the loss of the farm, but it brought great satisfaction to the aged parents.⁵

⁵My father was a conservationist, and his greatest grief over his enforced bankruptcy was that the fine timber which he had reserved was ruthlessly sacrificed. After fifty years, I have set aside a corner of the high, once wooded reserve, the redemption of which is mentioned above, and I am trying to reforest it in memory of my father. During the last five years, I have planted some twenty thousand hardwood and pine seedlings on the overgrazed and eroded ridges and hillsides under the supervision of the State Forestry and Conservation Department.