

# The Wabash County Pioneer Society<sup>1</sup>

By LEOLA HOCKETT

Success in any enterprise depends largely upon a proper beginning, and a proper beginning is the result of wisdom and forethought. It was the forethought, the courage, the determination, the energy and the sacrifices of the pioneers that laid the foundation for the wonderful progress made by Wabash County in the past ninety-six years.

To be a pioneer in the settling of Wabash county meant leaving relatives and friends and traveling with an ox team through dense forests to the spot selected for a new home. It meant cutting roads as the colonists went along; sleeping (until a cabin was ready) on beds made on forked sticks driven into the ground, with stakes at the corners around which a blanket was fastened to keep away mosquitoes; cutting timber, preparing the logs and building a cabin with a stick and clay chimney, dirt floor, greased paper for window panes and blankets hung over the doorway; it meant clearing the land, burning the logs and pulling stumps before the crops on which the settlers and their live stock must live could be planted. It often meant hunger for both the pioneers and their stock and sometimes starvation for the latter. It meant homes on which the sun never shone except at midday with the nearest neighbors miles away and the trail between cabins marked by blazed trees; swamps with malaria and ague and no physician within reach; spinning and weaving of the cloth from which clothing and bedding were made; threshing grain with a flail; carrying corn and wheat on horseback to the nearest grist mill, sometimes ten, fifteen or even forty miles away; log school houses with backless seats; teachers whose fitness for teaching was too often determined by their proficiency in the use of the rod; weeks between letters from the folks back home, and the howl of wolves from sunset until dawn.

Long since the swamps and frog ponds have been eliminated by networks of ditches; the plank and corduroy roads are buried far beneath paved highways; the tallow candles have melted away in the glare of electric lights; the flail and treadmill have vanished to the hum of the threshing machine; the music of the spinning wheels has been changed to the whir

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the third annual meeting of the Old Settlers' Association of Wabash County on Sept. 5, 1927.

of machinery; the rattle of the linchpin wagon with its swinging tar bucket, and the steady beat of hoofs can not be compared with the noiseless turning of wheels and the purr of motors; the canal with its once familiar boats and towpath was long ago overwhelmed by steam and electricity; the slow, patient oxen have been lost to sight in the speed of the tractor; the primeval forests have fallen and disappeared to give place to the fertile fields of today; the tinkle of the cow-bell has been replaced by the jingle of the dairyman's bottles; the blazed trail to the neighbors has been changed by magic to a telephone wire that brings those neighbors within speaking distance.

Most of the colonists<sup>2</sup> who reached Wabash county by 1835 were poor in this world's goods, and the obstacles that beset them on all sides would be appalling to us. We owe a debt of gratitude to them that can best be paid by perpetuating in the minds of the people of the County of their choice the memory of their courage, perseverance and sacrifices.

With this thought in view a number of the residents of the county, forty-two years after the coming of the first settler, met at the office of Sivey & Mackey on August 30, 1870, to discuss the holding of an annual get-together of the pioneers. A resolution defining and classifying old settlers was adopted.

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<sup>2</sup> In the records of the old Pioneer Society of Wabash County are found the following names of persons with the year in which they came, who were settlers of the County at the time of its organization in 1835: Ephriam Kellar, 1828; Harriet Stewart 1830; Nelson M. Quick, 1831; Nathaniel Chites, Daniel Sayre, James Curry and Parmelia Peabody, 1832; John Russell, Elizabeth Graves, Daniel Fowler, Philip Martin, Samuel Abbott, Benedict Lowry, William Pearson, Allen W. Smith, Catherine Stitt, Newton Fowler, Lodema Robinson and Eliza Ann Abbott, 1834; Enos Thomas, Adam Graves, Henry Garner, John V. Reed and Hugh Hanna, 1835.

Since the Pioneer Society was not organized until 1870, a great many of the early settlers had died, while some had left the County. The above names constitute but a partial list of the settlers in the County at the time of organization. The records of the first meeting of the County Commissioners which was held in June, 1835, contain the names of the three commissioners, the grand and petit jurors who were appointed at the meeting, and the names of those affixed to road, grocery, tavern and ferry petitions for licenses. These citizens were very probably all voters and freeholders. The names arranged by townships are listed below:

Noble Township: Abraham Rensinger, Lemuel Willy, William H. Coomley, James W. Wilson, William Dickerson, P. S. Myers, Jonathan Kellar, William McClelland, Simon S. Edsall, S. M. Simons, John Burton, James H. Kellar, William Iliff, Isaac Finley, James Hopkins, William Steel, Sr., P. D. Duffey, Isaac Thomas, Ira Burr, David Cassatt, Samuel Leach, D. W. Beeson, J. G. Jones, James A. Kelley, Lucas Morgan, John Stuard, Peter Mills, A. H. Kellar, David Burr, Ezekial Cox, Sylvan McLane, Madison Sweetzer, John Koogle, William Johnston, Patrick Brady, A. Murphy, Bradley Burr, Hugh Hanna, William Salmon, John Schnider, Michael Duffey, William Sewell, Archibald Stitt, Elmore Cox, Joseph McClure, William Steele, Jr.

Lagro Township: B. F. Lowery, L. E. Stover, Jonas Gallahan, A. Brenneman, William Caldwell, Michael Shappell, Nathaniel Fitch, Thomas Forrest, P. Laftis, Jacob Shappell, Thomas Hamilton, David Shappell, Jesse Seeley, Jirah Barlow, E. B. Homer, Dennis Cohan, Bingham Enmore, John Driscoll, James Edward, John Picca, Vincent Hooten, L. B. Woodward, George Weller, John Russell, F. Gridley, M. Halstead, Perkins Guinan, Charles Fadden, Bryant Finnan, James Driscoll, Jonathan Reed, James Ballenger.

Liberty Township: Ezra Hoover, Peter Mellinger, Jeremiah Garrison, John Manning, John Summers, J. G. Thompson, Henry Stevens, William Bennet and Asa Brown.

All who came to the County prior to January 1, 1836, were to make up the first class and to be designated by red badges; those who came between January 1, 1836, and January 1, 1841, were placed in a second class and assigned white badges; all who came between January 1, 1841, and January 1, 1846, were to make up the third class and were to wear blue badges. A second meeting was held at the old court house on September 10, 1870, at which time committees were appointed and arrangements made for a "Grand Basket Picnic" to be held at the Fair Grounds on September 29. Posters advertising the meeting were scattered over the County. All persons attending, "both old settlers and citizens," were asked to bring baskets of "provisions for an old fashioned picnic dinner". People having relics such as books, manuscripts or other old articles were urged to bring them to the meeting for exhibition. The various musical organizations of the city were invited and each township was asked to come *en masse* under the direction of a township leader.

The meeting was scheduled to last all day with an intermission for dinner. The program consisted of "speeches (no speech to be longer than ten minutes without consent of the meeting), addresses, reminiscences of early settlements, exhibition of relics", etc., interspersed with music. The committee on arrangements was composed of the following from the townships mentioned: Allen W. Smith, J. D. Conner, Stearns Fisher, B. F. Williams, J. C. Sivey and Elijah Hackleman of Noble; John Comstock and Joshua Farley of Chester; William Hale and Mahlon Pearson of Liberty; B. W. Lowery and John Watkins of LaGro; Jacob Rantz and L. C. Groninger of Pleasant; and Nathan Weesner and Tobias Miller of Waltz.

As had been planned, a "procession" which formed at the public square, was led by William T. Ross, marshal and chairman, to the Fair Grounds marching in the following order: Reds (first class), Whites (second class), Blues (third class), other Citizens. Some were on foot and some in wagons and carriages, while those on horseback were at the rear. About two hundred people were included in that first parade.

A roll call of the first jurors of the County was answered by B. W. Lowery and Mahlon Pearson. Each gave some of his experiences in the first court held in the county, which was back in August, 1835. Stearns Fisher, the only survivor of the first commissioner's court informed his hearers that there

were but twelve families in the entire county at the time of his arrival. Other talks were given by George Abbot, Daniel Sayre, Henry Strickler, Allen W. Smith, Robert Miller and Dr. James Ford. There is no doubt, whatever, that much county history was lost because no record was kept of that meeting.

A second meeting was held at the same place in 1871. The committee arranged for another parade but visitors coming in wagons drove directly to the Fair Grounds. That being the usual mode of transportation for those coming from a distance, there were few left to form a "procession". At that meeting, there were three hundred who wore the red, white and blue badges. In reporting this meeting the *Wabash Republican* wisely suggested that the old settlers form an organization to record their memorials, preserve their relics and add more system to their jubilees.

The tradition is that meetings were held each year, but the next meeting for which any record has been found was that of 1879. On September 5 of that year, at the call of a few citizens, a meeting was held at the court house at "one and a half o'clock P.M." for the purpose of forming an organization. Benjamin McClure was appointed temporary chairman and E. S. Rose secretary. A committee, composed of J. C. Sivey and A. P. Ferry of Noble, Stephen Lewis of Liberty, James Anderson of Waltz, Henry Strickler of Chester, Daniel Schuler of Pleasant, Robert Ambers of Paw Paw and Reason Badger of LaGro townships, drafted a constitution which was adopted at the meeting.

The first article gave the organization the name *The Wabash County Indiana Pioneer Society*. The second gave as its object "Co-operation with the township old settlers organizations in collecting, preserving and sometimes publishing biographical sketches of the early settlers of the county and other interesting matter in reference to the early settlements of the county". The fifth article confined membership in the society to "all citizens over fifty years of age who had resided in the county thirty years; to all citizens born in the county who had reached the age of thirty-five and their wives and daughters, by signing the constitution". Three years later the first requirement was changed to "all citizens over thirty years of age."

Officers of the organization were: a president, seven vice presidents (one from each township), a secretary, a treasurer

and an executive committee of nine members. The constitution was amended later, after which there was to be but one vice president. The first officers were: Allen W. Smith, president; B. W. Lowery, Jonathan Scott, Henry Strickler, Samuel Gamble, Daniel Schuler, James Anderson and John U. Pettit, vice presidents; B. E. Davis, secretary; and E. F. Thomas, treasurer.

By order of the executive committee a meeting was held at the Fair Grounds on September 11 [1879] "for the purpose of receiving signatures of old settlers who wished to become members". A newspaper of Sept. 3, 1880, records that, "An old settlers meeting at one P.M. was a feature of the county fair". It was decided to hold an Old Settler's Picnic on Thursday, Oct. 31. For some reason the meeting was postponed until the first Thursday of the following June, when, "for lack of proper notice" it was again postponed until June 24. On that day, eleven years after the first meeting and two years after the organization of the Pioneer Society, the annual reunions were really begun.<sup>8</sup>

Elijah Hackleman kept the records of the Society from 1887 until his death in 1901. The *Wabash Tribune* of Oct. 3, 1895, contained the following:

The Tribune reporter was permitted to look over the books of the association which have been kept so many years with such painstaking care by the Hon. Elijah Hackleman. The names of the old settlers, the history of each meeting, the records of all deaths within the organization are all there. Besides all this, newspaper reports referring to the organization have been neatly pasted into the book in connection with the secretary's careful reports. The book is valuable as being an accurate history of the county and probably contains historical dates not to be found elsewhere.

All except two of the meetings were held in the old Fair Grounds. On August 25, 1886, the old settlers were the guests

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<sup>8</sup> Presidents of the Pioneer Society, each of whom served one year unless otherwise indicated, were: Allen W. Smith, J. D. Connor (six years), Elijah Hackleman (four years), B. F. Williams (five years), J. S. Carpther, S. L. Gamble, Henry Froninger, Nathaniel Bannister, Port Noftzger, Warren Sayre (four years), Thomas McNamee, Clark Weesner (seven years), Fred J. King, Joe Davis, Alvah Taylor. The last name was chosen in 1917, for a year, but no successor was elected, so he may be said to have remained president of the Society till the organization of the new Old Settlers' Association in 1924. Secretaries of the Society were: B. E. Davis, Elijah Hackleman, B. F. Williams, George A. Wellman, Charles S. Rose, C. H. Lasalle, James Showalter, M. D. F. Crume, Andrew Urshell, and James P. Ross. One of these, Elijah Hackleman, served for a long period, keeping the records faithfully from 1887 to his death in 1901. Treasurers of the Society were: E. F. Thomas, Asa Ross, John Latchem, J. D. Conner, H. B. Lassalle, Thomas McNamee, S. J. Payne, O. L. Talmadge, Henry Sayre, and Alexander Hess. A committee of three was always appointed early each year to nominate the officers for the following year.

of the James H. Emmet Post, G.A.R., at the Art Loan Exhibition that was being held by them in the city. They were entertained at the exhibition in the morning and at the city hall in the afternoon. They probably re-lived old times more thoroughly at that meeting than at any other ever held by the Society. The fireplace of antique construction, the primitive cooking utensils, the corn-pone and the dodger on the hearth, the candles and lard lamps, the well-sweep, the cradle in which many a pioneer infant had been lulled to sleep, the indispensable catnip hanging near, old ladies spinning flax, the dummy, patiently displaying female finery of former days, and the rude farming implements on exhibition were most conducive to the reminiscent mood in which the visitors found themselves when they assembled at the new city hall where they were addressed by Judge Horace P. Biddle of Logansport.

A feature of the morning program was the appearance on the stage of George Myers with the fiddle which he had used when playing for the celebration on July 4, 1837. This was when the first boat ploughed its way into the city of Wabash through the "raging billows" of the Wabash and Erie Canal. Mr. Myers with his fiddle appeared on the programs at other meetings.

The meeting of 1888 was held in the new Fair Grounds where the Pioneers had the use of the amphitheater and the judges' stand. Next year the meeting went back to the old Fair Grounds which had become a city park. In 1896 "Because of the political unrest that prevailed throughout the country it was next to impossible to collect together the old settlers in such numbers as to be enjoyable and profitable in the sense contemplated by the society", so no reunion was held that year. Meetings occurred each year after that until 1917. The officers and directors met in the summer of that year and appointed committees to raise funds with which to meet the expenses of the coming reunion, but on August 31, it was agreed that since the day for the meeting was the same as that set for the "departure of the first boys for the World War training camps it would be impracticable to hold it on that day." It was accordingly postponed until the regular day in 1918. When that time came no meeting was held "because of the conditions brought about by the war". And so ended the original Wabash County Pioneer Society. In 1924 an associa-

tion was formed, since known as the Old Settlers' Association of Wabash County.

Meetings of the old Pioneer Society were held under the trees with a temporary platform for the speakers. Men would come to the grove before the day of the meeting and arrange seats for the comfort of the visitors. After the band-stand was built, the programs were given from that place. In 1911, for the first time in the history of the organization, the Pioneers met under cover, a big Chautauqua tent having been rented for that purpose. Once again the tent was used, then the pavillion in the city park was built, after which time the Pioneers and later the "Old Settlers" have been able to laugh at the weather and enjoy their sessions in comfort.

A few relics appeared at the first meeting, then the number was increased as interest in the annual reunions developed. In 1888 Dr. Ford suggested that the society ask the county for a room, preferably in the court house, in which to keep the collection. However, nothing seems to have been done towards securing a safe place in which to store the treasures of the Society until twenty years later when plans were begun for the erection of a log cabin of the pioneer type in which to keep the accumulated relics near the place of the meeting.

Through the untiring efforts of Clarke Weesner, president of the Society, the cabin became a reality in 1909. It was dedicated on the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln and is known as the "Lincoln Cabin". That year was also the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the city of Wabash and both events were fittingly commemorated with a two-day celebration. The number of visitors on the first day was estimated at five thousand, the "Cabin" with its contents being the center of attraction.

An opportunity was always given to the older people to participate in the programs. They told of their early experiences contrasting pioneer days with modern days, and all agreed, with one exception, that the new ways were a decided improvement over the old. One man, the only pessimist contributing to the records of the Society, expressed the opinion that the human race in this section of the country was degenerating; that the inventions and discoveries of the new age were of very little benefit to humanity; that children were compelled to attend school to the detriment of their physical development, and that he "feared for the final outcome".

Many prominent men appeared upon the programs as the years passed, among them being: Demarcus Brown, State Librarian, Gov. James A. Mount, Judge Lemuel Royce of Warsaw, Judge Horace P. Biddle of Logansport, Lou Beauchamp, the humorist, and Thomas St. John of Marion. At one meeting, immediately after Judge Royce began his address, "a thunder storm came up and suddenly the audience adjourned, sans ceremony". The Judge was given another opportunity and finished his speech a year later.

Until 1894, it seems, the men were the only old settlers who ever made any remarks regarded as worthy of being recorded. Then the pioneer women were asked to relate some of their experiences, and since that time they have asserted their right to be heard as well as to be seen. Twice, since 1894, the Board of Directors has been composed entirely of women, and each meeting conducted solely by the ladies was reported as having been the most successful ever held to the time.

Every musical organization in the county—each band, orchestra and quartette—entertained the crowds with music at one time or another. Occasionally songs by a volunteer chorus added much to the program. At the meeting in 1888, a choir, dressed in costumes of half a century earlier, sang old time songs. Again the old fiddle in the hands of Sanford Honeywell, recalled old times with such tunes as the "Arkansaw Traveler" and "Money Musk".

The year 1898 saw a departure from the programs of former days, with the inauguration of games, athletic and other contests and prizes at the morning session. Bicycle races were the order on the day of the first contests. In one race the contestants rode old style high bicycles wearing "stiff hats, long frock coats, knee breeches and stockings." Another race was the "Married Man's Handicap" in which each man was given ten yards for each child he might have, while bachelors of thirty years and over were required to "start from scratch." This was a source of much merriment. The last bicycle race, for "scorchers with monkey stoop", was followed by a ten minute grand parade of all cyclists in costume.

Prizes were given for horse back riding, jumping, and shot-put, as well as to the oldest married couple and the couple having lived longest in the county. One year a prize of five dollars was offered to the mother having reared the largest family. The five dollars had to be divided among Mrs. Philip Hipkind,



Mrs. John Schlemmer, Mrs. Christian Clupper and Mrs. Richard Elward, each having twelve living children. The entrance into the contests of 1901 of the horseless carriage indicated that the old pioneer order of things was indeed but a memory. Two prizes were given for the automobile events, one for speed and one for management.

One year the prizes were given by the merchants of the city of Wabash and included the following articles: a gold watch and chain, a banquet lamp, a bicycle lamp, eleven boxes of cigars, a razor, a campaign hat, a bottle of dandruff cure, an umbrella, a pipe, a package of fancy writing paper, a pair of slippers, a pipe and case, a fine shirt, a pocket knife, a pair of leggings, a pocket-book, a pair of gold cuff buttons, a Windsor necktie, a ball, \$1.50 in livery hire, open cab and driver for two hours, seven pounds of "wiener wursts" and a box of toilet soap.

Often a parade was a big feature of the day, when all sorts of ancient conveyances were used. Also the young pioneer family on horseback appeared, the husband on the old family horse with his good wife seated behind, her arm encircling his portly form, each dressed in costumes of bygone days. One old man came in a military suit that he had worn sixty years before. He wore a cockade hat, white trousers, blue cloth coat with shining brass buttons and carried an old flintlock gun which made him the observed of all observers. Another old man of eighty years walked ten miles to the meeting carrying a bundle of old books.

The expenses of the reunions were met by voluntary contributions. The speakers must be paid and sometimes as much as \$30 was paid to one musical organization besides the cost of entertainment. One year the erection of a stand alone cost \$115. Water must be hauled to the fair grounds and tin cups rented, organs rented and draymen paid for taking them to and from the grounds. There was always the expense of printing notices and hand bills. Some years there would not be sufficient funds in the treasury to meet all expenses and at other times there would be a neat little sum left.

In 1888 the practice of reading the names of the members who had passed away since the preceding meeting was inaugurated. In looking over the lists one finds that Wabash county is a land of long-lived people. The records show two *who passed the century mark, one within a few days of one*

hundred years, three more who were ninety-nine, fifty-six between ninety and one hundred and three hundred seventy-five who were between eighty and ninety—certainly an unusual number, each of whom reached a ripe old age.

Those were truly grand reunions of brave men and women, to whose strong arms and self sacrificing lives we owe much that we enjoy today. They met and recalled the hardships and pleasures, the disappointments and triumphs of days long passed. They came, with silvered hair, with quavering voices and faltering steps, but their hearts grew young again as they lived once more, in memory, through the days of cabin raisin's, log rollin's, huskin' bees, quiltin's and maple sugar makin'. So realistically did they picture the old days that listeners caught the pioneer spirit and fancied themselves going forth with hearts full of courage and desire for adventures to conquer an unsettled wilderness.

In greetings sent to the Society in 1908, William Jennings Bryan said: "We should never lose sight of the debt we owe to those who took the lead in the opening up and settlement of our country. Many of the comforts and privileges we enjoy today are due to the hardships and sufferings experienced by those who preceded us".