

Jennings County in the Frontier Period

By ALICE BUNDY

The early settlers in Jennings County were a part of a moving stream of emigrants that followed the westward trending trails that joined to form the Wilderness Road. Trekking along this road, they passed through Cumberland Gap, a natural pass in the Cumberlands.¹ Following branch roads and trails, they found their way across Kentucky and reached either the frontier in Clark County, by crossing the Ohio River at Louisville, or, by crossing the Ohio River at Madison, then a flourishing town of sixty or seventy small newly-erected houses and a Farmers' and Mechanics' Bank.² The New, Vawter, Deputy, and other families reached Madison by descending the Kentucky-Ohio River in either flatboats or pirogues. Passing through Clark County or Jefferson County, these pioneers made settlements along the streams, advancing the frontier into the territory now included in Jennings County. "The bulges of the outline of settlements or of the frontier have almost always been along the courses of rivers".³

The first of these daring, vigorous pioneers to enter the territory now included in Jennings County was Solomon Deputy, who, in 1810, came to live in a blockhouse on the west side of Coffee Creek in what was then Clark County. This station, or blockhouse, was guarded by a group of light-horse cavalymen, who included in their territory Abbott's Blockhouse, on the Ohio River a few miles above the mouth of Fourteen-Mile Creek, and the Lewis Station on Neil's River south of the present site of Paris. In the blockhouse on Coffee Creek, Josiah Deputy was born. He is said to have been the first white child born in the territory now included in Jennings County, a tradition that is strengthened by an inscription on his gravestone. In 1814 John Latten came into the territory, chose a goodly site for a settlement and built a cabin on Graham Creek four miles north of the present site of the town Paris. The next year, Col. John Vawter and William McClure purchased a tract of land at the junction of the North Fork and the South Fork of the Muscatatuck Creek where they built cabins and laid out the town of Vernon. The

¹ Ellen Churchill Semple, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* (New York, 1908), 67.

² *The Western Gazetteer, or Emigrant's Directory* (Auburn, N.Y., 1817), 61-62.

³ Semple, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, 151.

families of Akilles Vawter, John Branham, Henry St. Clair, James Williams and Col. Vawter formed the first group of settlers occupying some of the first lots sold in Vernon. In the spring of 1816, Samuel Campbell, William Prather, Joseph Pool and Miles Bundy built cabins on the South Fork of the Muscatatuck. William Pagett, Morris Baker, Alexander Lewis and George Stribbling selected a favorable spot for a settlement on the North Fork of the Muscatatuck Creek from one to two miles east of Vernon. A settlement was formed along Sand Creek (1816-1817) by James Shields, Adam Keller, Chauncy Butler, Leonard Cutler, Justin Rich, the Vankirkwells, Allan Cheever, William Clapp, and Nicholas Amick. On the Muscatatuck, five or six miles southwest of Vernon, Basil Meek found, in 1817, a promising location for a settlement and was joined by James Kellam, Noah Sullivan, Jacob McMurry, John Boner, Thomas Richey, R. Marvin, and James Green. In 1816-1817 Praly Baker, Johnathan Davis and Dr. Eastman built homes on the banks of Six-Mile Creek, six miles west of Vernon. The Elliotts (Robert, David, John and Joseph), William Patterson, Nathaniel and Thomas Davis, Ephriam Glasco, George Stribbling and Jacob Brown "raised" cabins in the eastern part of the county on the Muscatatuck. James Needam chose a desirable location for his cabin near the confluence of Little Graham and Big Graham. James Hughes and William Calicott built their cabins near Graham Creek a few miles below the junction of the two forks of that stream.

There was a steady influx of these adventurous and sturdy pioneers but in some years they came in greater numbers. In one year (1816-1817), a hundred families were domiciled in groups of cabins located at favorable sites on the banks of the streams of the county exemplifying the fact that "Streams present the lines of least resistance to the incoming colonist, and afterward lend themselves to his economic need".⁴ These early pioneers established the early farms and homes and by 1840 the County was rapidly being filled by land-hungry families. A group of New Englanders joined the settlements in the vicinity of Hayden in 1830. About the same time a congregation of Roman Catholics established a settlement at what is now known as St. Ann's. During the early fifties, canvas-

⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

covered wagons loaded with household goods journeyed westward from southwestern Ohio into the County. This group of Quakers purchased small improved farms for permanent homes in the vicinity of the present site of Butlerville. A considerable number of Germans came directly to the southwestern part of the county from the Fatherland in the late forties or early fifties. When the slavery question was warmly agitated in certain sections of the South, a few "refuges" sought homes among the people of the County.

When the Federal Census was taken in 1820 under the direction of John Vawter, marshall of the district of Indiana, the population of Jennings County was said to be 2,000.⁵ During the next decade, the increase was 122 per cent, the greatest in the history of the County.⁶ By 1850, 12,095 persons were living in the County. There were thirteen grist-mills located at water-sites and operated by water-power. Twenty-nine saw-mills, seven of which were "steam mills," were owned and "run" by farmer-lumbermen. Eighteen stores supplied the inhabitants with general merchandise. Two drugstores bought roots and sold Smith's Ague Tonic, quinine, other drugs, madder and indigo. Three warehouses had been built. Five lawyers had each put out his "shingle" and twelve physicians had selected this county as a place in which to practice their profession.⁷

What factors influenced this streaming tide of population to seek homes in the virgin forest of Jennings County? Why did these pioneers migrate from a settled section, and travel hundreds of miles into the wilderness where there was only an occasional settlement, to dwell in the Redman's land where great hardships must be endured and threatening dangers must be faced?

For the most part, the human stream that advanced into the County was of the non-slaveholding democratic element from North Carolina and Virginia. Cotton planting and slave holding had advanced from the region of the tidewater into the interior counties of North Carolina where the forested lands were waiting to be cleared. This forced the small farmers who were engaged in raising livestock and grain, either to begin a more specialized type of farming and become cot-

⁵ United States Census of 1820.

⁶ Census of 1850.

⁷ *Gazetteer of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1850), 275.

ton-growers and slaveholders, or to sell their farms and seek another location. This they were tempted to do because of good prices. Many of these farmers were Quakers or Baptists, who did not believe in slavery, and their success in general farming encouraged them to continue that type of farming. Many upland farmers realized that they had not accumulated sufficient capital to compete with the large-scale cotton or tobacco growers from the tidewater region, and that the legislative power was in the hands of the planter class.⁸ Many of the early pioneers of Jennings County belonged to that exodus which passed westward from the uplands of North Carolina.

At the time of the opening of the lands beyond the Alleghanies, chronic land hunger prevailed among men of older areas. Land hunger stimulated men of pioneer days to ride on packhorses or trudge for several hundred miles through forests in which there was danger of Indian attacks; to journey through all kinds of weather without any assurance of shelter for the night or from storms; to cross swollen streams at fords which might never have been traversed before; to penetrate the wilderness many miles from established homes, villages, physicians, or supplies, with no protection except the rifle; meager quantities of gunpowder, a limited number of handmade bullets, and a few axes.

The Federal government had made various treaties with the Indians which insured the pioneer that the Redmen would soon vacate the forests of southern Indiana and seek homes in the vast unsettled West. Governor William Henry Harrison met the Indian chiefs of the tribes occupying the southern part of Indiana Territory at Grouseland, his estate at Vincennes. A treaty (1804) was made in which the Indians ceded to the Federal government a tract of land known as the "Grouseland Purchase".⁹ In October, 1818, the Delaware and Miami tribes met Jonathan Jennings, Lewis Cass, and Benjamin Parks, who represented the national government, at St. Mary's, Ohio. A treaty was made according to which the Federal Government acquired a tract of land, known as the "New Purchase," lying north of the "Grouseland Purchase" and the tribes agreed to give possession in 1821.¹⁰ The Jennings Coun-

⁸ Frederick J. Turner *The Rise of the New West* (vol. XIV of *The American Nation*, edited by A. B. Hart, New York, 1906), 54.

⁹ Homer J. Webster, *William Henry Harrison's Administration of Indiana Territory* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, IV, No. 3, Indianapolis, 1907), 258.

¹⁰ Jacob P. Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, 1910), I, 4.

ty pioneer's assurance of safety from attacks by the Indians was increased, for the tribes had given up all claim to the lands lying in the area of the New Purchase. The defeat of the Indians at the Battle of Tippecanoe on November 7, 1811, by the valiant backwoodsmen under the command of General Harrison, was followed by the War of 1812 during which the men on the frontier were assured that the power of the Indians in the Old Northwest was broken and that the moving of the tribes to the lands lying to the west was inevitable.

Geographic conditions made the land more promising to the moving throng and, in truth, was a potent and controlling factor in the formation of the settlements. The Muscatatuck and its tributaries pointed out the course of the moving throng northward from the Ohio River, and promised a possible means of shipping. The main parallel streams directed the course of the colonist northward while the lateral streams, whose head waters mingled, offered easy pathways across the narrow sections between the main streams. The natural resources and agreeable climate attracted the home seekers. The new land was fertile, with good natural drainage and heavy forests. An abundance of limestone could be obtained in the vicinity. Clay for brick abounded, and springs of cool pure water bubbled up at the base of the slopes. Along these streams many mill-sites awaited development.

Land was offered by the federal government on such easy terms that a man with a small capital could purchase and equip a farm. It is estimated that a farm containing eighty acres, two horses, two or three cows, a few hogs and sheep, and farm tools of that time, would cost the purchaser about four hundred dollars.¹¹ Furthermore, Congress had established a land office for the disposal of public lands at Jeffersonville, only two day's journey through the pioneer settlements for the investors in the public lands of Jennings County. Literature, advertising cheap lands and advising young men to seek their fortunes in the West, was distributed to some extent. The *Western Gazetteer, or Emigrant's Directory*, published in 1817, states that "farms containing a log house and fifteen or twenty acres of cleared land would sell as high as eight or ten dollars an acre. In some instances necessities or the rambling disposition of the inhabitants induced them to dispose of

¹¹ Turner, *New West*, 87.

their plantations [farms] at a trifling advance upon the original price".¹²

The article of the Ordinance of 1787 which provided that "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the territory, otherwise than in punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted," helped to determine that the Northwest Territory should be free. The State Constitution, framed at Corydon, June 10-19, 1816, prohibited the establishment of slavery in Indiana. Jennings County, lying in free territory, attracted the non-slaveholding element of the westward-streaming tide of emigrants. Among these families were the Calicotts, Shorts, Edwardses, Hicklins, Jacksons and Andersons.

Clark's men received warrants for land in the Clark Grant and were building homes there when the first colonists came to the area now Jennings County. Many soldiers west of the Appalachian Highlands rendered service in the War of 1812 in the unsettled west. No doubt, these brave men and daring adventurers reported to relatives and friends that southern Indiana was a good region for settlement and their advice probably exercised a potent influence in advancing the frontier into Jennings County. Among these frontiersmen were the Pool brothers. Benjamin Pool was one of the soldiers directed to scatter the campfires at the Battle of Tippecanoe. When the Indians' bullets began to rain on the figures around the fire, he with others sought shelter in the darkness. Thomas Pool migrated to Clark's Grant in 1811, and enlisted at Charleston, Clark County, where he served in the Indiana Militia during the War of 1812. Thomas Storey enlisted at Georgetown, Kentucky, and served as a private in the Kentucky militia. He was in the battle of Ft. Meigs and in the engagement known as "Dudley's Defeat." Reverend William T. Scott enlisted in Franklin County, Kentucky, and served as a private in the War of 1812 for three months and five days.¹³ Lewis Wagner and William Johnson, who gave their services in the War of 1812, became pioneers in Jennings County.

The development of navigation on the Ohio-Mississippi gave an outlet to markets. In 1817 about twenty barges, each with a capacity of one hundred tons, were transporting all the merchandise from New Orleans to Louisville and Cincinnati.

¹² *Western Gazetteer, or Emigrant's Directory*, 68.

¹³ Information received from Veterans Administration, Washington, D.C., in response to a letter written by the author of this article.

These barges made the round trip in one year. By January, 1836, over one hundred barges were transporting goods on this route.¹⁴ Successful trips of steamboats on the Ohio River promised speedier and safer means of transportation for the outgoing products and for the meager imports of those living in the lower tiers of counties near the Ohio River. The *New Orleans*, built by Nicholas J. Roosevelt, made its maiden voyage from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in 1811. Five years later, the *Washington*, built by Captain Henry Shreve, made the voyage from New Orleans to Pittsburg, demonstrating that navigation of the steamboat against the current of the Ohio-Mississippi would be a success. During the next few years, points on the Ohio, favored by their location on a navigable river flowing westward, an abundance of timber and proximity to mines to supply the iron necessary, began building steamboats. During the year 1818, fourteen boats were built for use on the Ohio-Mississippi—five at Pittsburg, one at Wheeling, four at Louisville, and four at Cincinnati. The next year, twenty-three were added to the number for service on this great waterway.¹⁵ Then, too, plans were being made to remove the difficulties of getting steamboats over the rapids at Louisville, for we read in the *Western Gazetteer*, published in 1817, that “an improvement of the navigation is about to be attempted by a canal around the rapids. The legislature has incorporated a company with a capital of \$1,000,000.”¹⁶

Steps taken by the vanguard to organize Jennings County made the wilderness more promising. When the first settlers arrived, the present Jennings County was included within the territorial limits of Jackson and Jefferson Counties. The Legislature in session at Corydon passed an act organizing and naming the county in honor of Jonathan Jennings, a young lawyer, who was elected Delegate to Congress from the Territory for three successive terms. He was supported by the anti-slavery element¹⁷ and by those who wished to shift the capital eastward, among others. He was elected first Governor of Indiana. On December 27, 1816, the Legislature passed an act forming Ripley County out of parts of Jennings and Dearborn Counties. In 1820 the General Assembly formed some counties from the area known as the “New Purchase.” A por-

¹⁴ J. M. Peck, *New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (Boston, 1837), 56.

¹⁵ Semple, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, 258.

¹⁶ *Western Gazetteer, or Emigrant's Directory*, 77.

¹⁷ Robert J. Aley, *Indiana and Its People* (Chicago, 1912), 112.

tion of this tract was added to Jennings County.¹⁸ The County was again slightly enlarged by an act of the General Assembly of 1829-1830, according to which Jefferson County gave up a portion of a quarter section of land which included that part of Paris lying south of the boundary of Jennings County. The Legislature later passed an act according to which Jefferson County gave the remainder of the same quarter section to Jennings County.¹⁹

It was in 1817 that the organization of the new County was completed and Vernon was selected as the County Seat. John Vawter and William McClure offered a tract of land at the present site of Vernon on the condition that the County Seat be located on this tract, stipulating that: the eastern part of the town be forever open and common to the citizens of said county and town; that no part of the donation considered as public ground should ever be disposed of in any manner other than for public purposes and sites for the erecting of public buildings. Two acres were to be given as a burial ground and three lots of one acre each for public worship and school houses. Another party offered a site about one half mile southwest of the present site of Vernon, and Paris eleven miles south of Vernon was also mentioned as a favorable location for the County's capital. Two of the commissioners favored the present site of Vernon, and the third gave his consent. The town had been platted and surveyed, and some of the lots sold by September, 1815.

The voters, at their first election, chose James Stott, county clerk; Morris Baker, sheriff; Samuel Graham to serve as commissioner for three years; Samuel Campbell to fill the office of commissioner for two years; and James Shepherd to serve the one year term. When the votes were counted for commissioners, it was found that a Mr. Baker and Mr. Shepherd had received a tie vote. The judges of the election board proposed to settle the question by lot. The name of each candidate was written on a separate slip of paper and placed in a hat. Smith Vawter, a seven year old lad, was tested as to his ability to read writing. Evidently he showed in the test that he could not read the writing for he was instructed to draw a slip from the hat. Previously it had been agreed that the first name drawn was to be commissioner. Mr. Shepherd's

¹⁸ George Pence and Nellie Armstrong, *Indiana Boundaries, Territory, State and County* (*Indiana Historical Collections*, XIX, Indianapolis, 1933), 134.

name was drawn. Zenas Kemberlin was sent as representative to the state Legislature and John Sering served as the district's first state senator.

In March the Board of Commissioners held their first meeting and "each produced the sheriff's certificate" of having been duly elected, with an endorsement on the back thereof by Alexander Lewis, Esq. indicating that they had severally "taken the oaths prescribed by the Constitution of the State." At this meeting the county was divided into townships, and an election was held in each. Montgomery Township included all that part of the county south of the line dividing congressional townships five and six north. The election in that township was to have been held at the cabin of John Chambers. The remainder of the county was to have been known as Franklin Township. The election was held at the cabin of John Wooley. When Dr. Pabody, who had been appointed "Lister" of Jennings County and who had furnished the bond of \$1500 which was required, made his report of the valuation of the taxable property in the county, the commissioners made a tax levy. Town lots were to be taxed at fifty cents on each hundred dollars of valuation, silver watches were taxed at the rate of twenty-five cents. These frontiersmen must have felt it a strict duty to meet their tax obligations, for the delinquent taxes for the year 1818 amounted to six dollars and ninety-nine cents.

In July, 1817, the circuit court convened at Vernon with William Prather and Chapman Denton serving as associate judges. The sheriff and clerk were both absent. Frederick Bannon, county coroner, performed the duties of sheriff. One of the first acts of the court was the adoption of the county seal. The seal adopted was an eagle standing in the center on a plow while over its head were nineteen stars and at its feet the number 1817 in Roman numerals.¹⁹

Why were most of the early settlers content to remain in Jennings County? Why did they not sell as some of their neighbors who entered land to speculate? Why did they not join the stream of pioneers that shifted the frontier northward into the "New Purchase" along with Ransom Perry, James and William Hobbs, Zackariah Tannehil, Williamson Terrill, John Carney, Randolph and Hezekiah Griffith, James

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Ferill, John V. Storey, or others who settled in Bartholomew County,²⁰ or with John and William McConnell who followed the frontier as it shifted into Shelby County, or join the human stream that pushed northward to the central part of the State? Or join in successive migrations as did Phineas and Ephriam Bundy, and Fielden Brown who formed a part of the moving throng that reached Hamilton County in 1851 and in 1855 were on the frontier in southern Wisconsin? John Vawter seemed to have loved the frontier for he, too, joined the northward moving families and settled in Morgan County. Many of the early colonists, however, remained in Jennings County for several reasons. In a few years they had been able to build substantial homes, and, by the cultivation of the new land, the sale of lumber from the hardwood forests of yellow-poplar and other timber, the sale of limestone and farm products, they not only gained a livelihood, but were able to accumulate some property. Furthermore, some with friends among those who left Jennings County that encountered swampy lands or epidemics like the "milk-sickness," were content to let good enough alone and refuse to experiment in new regions where they might fare worse.

²⁰ *Historical Atlas of the State of Indiana* (Chicago, 1876), 301. For a brief treatment of Jennings County, see pages 301-302.

²¹ Pence and Armstrong, *Indiana Boundaries*, 510.

²² *Ibid.*, 298, 578, 754.

²³ George Pence, "What Jennings County Did for Bartholomew." Type-written article in the Indiana State Library.