

Editor's Pages

INDIANA SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

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Going back three quarters of a century, we find ourselves viewing Indiana at the close of the Civil War. In the twenty-five years between 1840 and the return of the veterans to their homes in 1865, the second state to be carved out of the Old Northwest passed through a very great transformation. In 1840 the greater part of the young state was in a raw frontier condition. By 1865, every county had at last received its first contingent of colonists and had achieved a degree of civilization. It is true that there were yet extensive forested areas and many scattered districts were swampy. These wet lands which were so difficult to drain were located on the flat divides of the northern and north central parts of the state. In the aggregate, they constituted a rather vast acreage, the largest continuous stretch of such wet lands being in the northwestern counties.

The census of 1860 showed Indiana to have a population of 1,350,428, with only five states ahead. These were New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Virginia, in the order named. Indiana's growth in population had greatly enhanced her political importance, and, in the 'fifties and 'sixties, the state sent eleven members to the national House of Representatives and chose thirteen presidential electors. The mighty movement of colonists to Illinois during the fifties had placed that state ahead of Indiana by 1860 for the first time, but the Hoosier commonwealth had caught up with and surpassed Kentucky, Massachusetts and Tennessee between 1840 and 1860.

In 1865, Indiana could list only a few good roads, the best of which were nothing to boast of. The railroad situation had greatly improved from 1850 to 1865, the several railway lines of the state being extensively used during the war years. Business rapidly increased in all lines after military expenditures really began to speed up and money inflation came with the issuance of paper money on a large scale.

The Civil War produced a new wealthy class of a sort not known before, much the same as in other northern states with comparable conditions. Paper money prices, at the

highest nearly three times gold prices, stimulated business and production. People not in debt, who spent their income as it came in neither gained nor lost much. Those who purchased lands, buildings or businesses partly on credit, suffered most when the crash came in 1873. Another class, including many business men and farmers of ordinary means, who accumulated property of any kind during the war without going into debt, or who merely saved money, were fortunate. When paper money came to par with gold in 1879 and the difference between paper and gold valuations of property disappeared, the families belonging to this favored class occupied a secure economic position. A survey of fine old Indiana homes, both in country and city, that were built in the 'seventies and 'eighties would disclose that many of them were built by dwellers in cities, towns and rural areas who had been able to accumulate property or save money between 1861 and 1873.

After long and ardent efforts, a small number of determined men had established some higher institutions of learning in Indiana before 1861, but the number of students in the colleges was very small. Academies and elementary schools had developed to a rather surprising degree considering the obstacles to be overcome; nevertheless, the system of free public schools, as we have known it in the twentieth century had yet to be created in 1865. Between that date and 1890, the people of Indiana, as did the people of other states, performed one of the educational miracles of history. Without any intention to disparage what had been accomplished before 1865, one can say, with no fear of contradiction, that, starting with almost nothing at the close of the Civil War, Indiana created the extensive and hitherto undreamed of system of elementary and high school education in the short space of little more than a quarter century.

During the summer of 1865, Indiana's veterans of the Civil War, returned to their homes. This soldier element constituted a really noticeable part of the population of every county in the state for many years. For the most part, these veterans, then in the prime of life, were readily absorbed by their home communities. They became active farmers or found opportunities to engage in business or to work in the towns and cities. Many of them were, however, drawn away to the frontier areas beyond the Mississippi. Indeed, so many men who had served in the armies of the North and the South

migrated to the West after 1865 to engage in agriculture that they increased the effects of the naturally large westward movement. They, therefore, helped to create the discontent and unrest in older agricultural areas which was partly due to the competition of the products of the new country so recently brought under cultivation.

Until 1850, colonists flowed to the virgin lands of Indiana from the upper South, from older northern states, and from foreign countries. Even before that date, however, considerable numbers of Hoosiers were migrating to newer states and territories. From 1850 to 1860, there was an increase in the volume of the incoming stream of colonists but an even greater increase in the numbers of native born Hoosiers who were leaving to go to areas with cheaper lands and more elbow room. In 1850, the total number of men, women and children of Indiana birth who lived elsewhere in the United States was 93,038; in 1860, this number had increased to 215,541. After the Civil War, since Indiana did not become highly industrialized, the state continued to send large numbers of its people away, but received a decreasing number from the outside. There were signs in 1865 that this would come about, but the period of rapid growth and accompanying changes which was just closing was so overpowering in its influence that few could be found capable of foretelling the future.

There was much confusion in Indiana at the close of the sectional conflict. Some years were required for people to reach a proper balance again, as was true elsewhere in the country. It is not too much to say, however, that Indiana recovered her equilibrium about as early as did any state in the Union, and Hoosiers were soon ready to enter on a period of solid achievement—to become politically strong, to accomplish wonders in education, to advance in general culture, to enlarge production and create much wealth. Nevertheless, the state was to drift too complacently with the general currents and to become too conservative to effectively challenge certain powerful economic forces that were to foster injustice and social unrest.

As one looks back, it is easy to understand why it was so readily believed that it was good to be a citizen of Indiana in 1865. Opportunities lay all about, and there were few who could invent reasonable excuses for failure. Insofar as it

was every fellow for himself, even, it was hard for the Devil to catch the hindmost. It is not to be wondered at that Hoosiers could then expect the conditions that favored them to last forever, as generations with more experience have done since in periods that have ended with panics and depressions. In the midst of forces that they did not understand nor try to control, it is to the credit of the people who made up the Indiana of 1865 that they were willing to work according to their lights and attempt to do so much of lasting value.

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