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Early Literary Developments in Indiana

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Hoosier pioneers have often been branded as an ignorant and backward race totally lacking in intellectual ambition. When one investigates the truth of the matter, however, one finds that from the earliest days of American settlement there was, contrary to popular belief, genuine intellectual advancement and literary interest within Indiana not only in the passive matter of reading but in the form of original composition by the pioneers themselves. There seems to have been no printer in Indiana Territory in 1802, since the territorial laws had to be printed in Kentucky,¹ but, by 1804, Elihu Stout, a former apprentice of the Bradfords at Frankfort, Kentucky, had set up a press in Vincennes by means of which he published the laws and statutes of the District of Louisiana in October.² The early printers, except for the foreign craftsmen at New Harmony, came mainly from Kentucky and Ohio. Until 1830, the publishing, apart from periodicals, consisted almost wholly of pamphlets and broadsides. The subject matter was militia orders, minutes of church and society meetings, notices of sales and meetings, sermons and political speeches.³ As might be expected, the earliest books published in the state were of the utilitarian order, such as *An Introduction to Farrierry* [sic] by Willis Hughes,⁴ and Cobb's *Explanatory Arithmetic*,⁵ both of which enjoyed great popularity for some years. The cen-

¹ Letter from James Madison to William Henry Harrison, December 21, 1803, quoted in Douglas C. McMurtrie, "The Need of a Printer in Indiana Territory," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March, 1936) XXXII, 34-35.

² Douglas C. McMurtrie, *Indiana Imprints 1804-1894, A Supplement to Mary Alden Walker's "Beginnings of Printing in the State of Indiana, published in 1894*, Indiana Historical Society, *Publications*, XI, No. 5 (1937), 315.

³ *Ibid.*, 315-328.

⁴ Published at Madison, Indiana, in 1829, and at Crawfordsville, Indiana, in 1835.

⁵ Published at Indianapolis in 1826.

ture was half gone before any books of the *belles lettres genre* were published within the state. As early as 1825, there was a publishing office at New Harmony which was noted for its fine work in printing and lithographing. Several books of an advanced nature were published there including an illustrated edition of *American Conchology*, by Thomas Say, in the years 1830-1834.

Until newspapers became business enterprises, editors were important as state builders on account of their influence upon public opinion. Elihu Stout, the first printer, was also the first newspaper editor in Indiana. He started the *Western Sun* at Vincennes on July 4, 1809.⁶ The Madison *Western Eagle*, founded in 1813, was the first local journal to gain a footing outside of the cultural cradle of Vincennes. After that, the birthrate of newspapers increased rapidly. By 1820, fifteen had been inaugurated in ten towns, in the southern part of the state. The next decade saw four started in the New Purchase where most of those of the thirties and forties originated. Before the middle of the century, some two hundred fifty Hoosier newspapers had been founded. That they were often short-lived and poor in quality is less important than the fact that their very presence shows an urge for information and cultural advancement among some, at least, of the pioneers. It was difficult to run a newspaper on the frontier. Subscribers were few and far between, money was scarce, mails were often delayed leaving the editor at a loss for news, and paper was so difficult to obtain that sometimes only a half sheet could be sent out. In 1832, the *Dog-Fennel Gazette* was printed on one side of the page only and the subscribers had to send it back to get the next week's news printed on the reverse side. By 1840, however, the population had increased considerably, money was somewhat more plentiful, the mail service was more regular, and there were three paper-mills in the state so some newspapers were able to assume a more metropolitan air.⁷

Like those of other states in the same period, Indiana newspapers were generally weeklies⁸ and almost wholly political organs. Long articles on political questions, frequently

⁶ Henry S. Cauthorn, *A History of the City of Vincennes, Indiana, from 1706 to 1901* (Terre Haute, 1902), 57.

⁷ George S. Cottman, "The Early Newspapers of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* (September, 1906), II, 108-120.

⁸ In 1840 there were sixty-nine weeklies, four semi-weeklies or tri-weeklies, and three "periodicals." *Ibid.*, 110.

copied from eastern papers, provided most of the copy, for political matters were of major importance to the pioneer. There was always some space given to literary matter, however, both poetry and prose, some of which was indigenous and some of which was reprinted from the English classics. The absence of international copyright laws made it an easy matter for the editor to have whatever he wanted in the way of imported selections. Regional pride would not allow foreign material to usurp the space which might be given to local talent, however, and Hoosier authors could always find some paper which would print whatever they wrote, a fact made clear by the caliber of very many of the "gems" accepted. Local papers were usually reflections of those of the nearest city even if it were in another state.⁹ Nevertheless, some, notably the *New Harmony Gazette*, included cities in many other states and even in Europe on their mailing lists.¹⁰ In addition to the regular newspapers, there were some short-lived attempts at creating literary periodicals even before 1840.¹¹ There was one semi-scientific monthly, the *Philomath Encyclopedia and Circle of the Sciences*, founded by the Universalists in 1833, and an agricultural paper, the *Indiana Farmer*, which started its first volume as a monthly at the inauguration of the Horticultural Society in 1840 after three years of irregular weekly publication.

Just as in the eastern states, almanacs had a wide circulation among the farmers who accepted their contents verbatim. Bibles and religious books were also widely read in rural areas where they were distributed by Methodist circuit riders and eastern Bible societies.¹² Another phase of rural literature was the oral rendition of melancholy ballads and love songs which the earliest settlers had brought with them from the southern mountains—"Sweet William" and "Barbara Allan" being among the most popular.¹³ Judge Finch claimed that even the settlers who went to the New Purchase,

⁹ E. g., those in the eastern counties were much influenced by the Cincinnati newspapers. Robert LaFollette, "Interstate Migration and Indiana Culture," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December, 1929), XVI, 356.

¹⁰ William Pelham, letter to his son, New Harmony, Indiana, November 27, 1825, in Harlow Lindley, ed., *Indiana as Seen by Early Travellers*, Indiana Historical Society, *Collections*, III (Indianapolis, 1916), 395-396.

¹¹ *Western Ladies' Casket*, Connorsville, 1823; *Western Censor*, Indianapolis, 1823-24; *The Family Schoolmaster*, Richmond, 189.

¹² Beverley W. Bond, Jr., *The Civilization of the Old North-West* (New York, 1984), 451, 480-481.

¹³ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1915), I, 336.

then the more retarded part of the state, with him in 1818 carried along the best thoughts of that period in the form of books and pamphlets.¹⁴ Books were generally scarce, it must be admitted, but professional men often owned creditable libraries and others borrowed from them so that a small nucleus of information spread a wide aura of culture.¹⁵ By far the best of the private libraries in the state at this time was that of Bishop Bruté, at Vincennes. Fundamentally a theological library, it included books of all kinds, and European manuscripts dating back to the fourteenth century.¹⁶ In 1840, Samuel Merrill had the largest private library in Indianapolis, his collection of *belles lettres* including a number of English classics and some contemporary American verse. Much more common than private libraries were the subscription libraries and those formed by a club or society; obviously, in an area where incomes were small, this community effort was the most practical. The first subscription library was formed at Vincennes in 1808. At the time of its opening, it contained two hundred ten volumes, most of which were biography, geography, history, and poetry, fiction being regarded with suspicion by the leading citizens. In the same year, the Vincennes Historical and Antiquarian Society was organized, and, in a short time, it too had developed a good library.¹⁷ By 1816, a literary society with a library for its members had been established in Vevay,¹⁸ while in New Albany the Lyceum performed the same cultural service. In some of the larger towns, including the capital, enterprising bookstore proprietors ran rental libraries with considerable success in the eighteen-thirties.¹⁹ Public libraries were started surprisingly early, the outstanding example being the State Library which found its precedent in the Law Library established at Corydon in 1820. Unfortunately, there was

¹⁴ Fabius M. Finch, "Reminiscences of Judge Finch," *Indiana Magazine of History* (December, 1911), VII, 165.

¹⁵ Mrs. Gertrude Garrison, "Mrs. Sarah T. Bolton, Poetess: The First Singer in a New Land," *Indiana Magazine of History* (December, 1912), VIII, 186; John C. Wright, "Living and Religious Customs of Pioneers in Western Indiana," *Society of Indiana Pioneers, Yearbook* (1923-24), 19-20.

¹⁶ Clementine Weisert, "The Old Cathedral Library at Vincennes," *Society of Indiana Pioneers, Yearbook* (1923-24), 19-20.

¹⁷ Bond, *op. cit.*, 432; Jane Kitchell, "The Old 'Vincennes Library,'" *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXVIII (December, 1932).

¹⁸ Perret Dufour, *The Swiss Settlement of Switzerland County, Indiana*, Indiana Historical Collections, XIII (Indianapolis, 1925), 46-47.

¹⁹ Jacob Platt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis; the history, the industries, the institutions, and the people of a city of homes* (Chicago, 1910), I, 510; Herbert Anthony Keller, ed., *Salon Robinson, Pioneer and Agriculturist*, Indiana Historical Society, Collections, XXII (Indianapolis, 1936), I, 50. This volume contains selections from the writings of Robinson.

no regular librarian to manage it until 1841, and it fell into a bad state of disorganization.²⁰ Counties and towns also began to organize public libraries in the 'twenties and 'thirties, some of which put the State Library to shame. Marion county was one of the most progressive in this respect for the act by which the county was created in 1821 provided for the setting aside of the income derived from two per cent of the land sales for the support of a public library.²¹ In the early eighteen-thirties, even so remote a community as La Porte boasted a public library containing such up-to-date fiction as Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*.²²

Contrary to the popular prejudice in favor of the superior cultural influence of New England, the early *literati* of Indiana came from the North and South in fairly even numbers. Connecticut and Pennsylvania were the chief birth states of those from the North, while Virginia and Kentucky furnished most of the southerners. In the thirties, they were joined by settlers from Ohio and some native born Hoosiers.²³ In the first half of the century, literary production was principally confined to the southern part of the state, since it was settled earlier. Baynard Rush Hall's *New Purchase* was the sole distinguished work written in the newer area of southern Indiana.²⁴ Except for newspaper publication, the works of the first Hoosier authors were generally printed outside of the state, since Indiana lacked the facilities of literary periodicals which could be found in Louisville and Cincinnati. The first female writer of the West whose work enjoyed any far-reaching repute, Mrs. Julia L. Dumont, was a Hoosier by adoption although she was actually born in Ohio. Better known today as a teacher who encouraged others in the literary field, as early as 1824, she was herself locally considered a writer of some merit

²⁰ Dunn, *op. cit.*, I, 106-108; "The First Step towards a Public Law Library," *Indiana Magazine of History* (September, 1936), XXXII, 274ff.

²¹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, I, 511.

²² Ella Lonn, "The History of an Unusual Library," *Indiana Magazine of History* (September, 1923), XIX, 209-210.

²³ William T. Coggeshall, Ed., *The Poets and Poetry of the West* (Columbus, Ohio, 1860), *passim*.

²⁴ Baynard R. Hall was a native of Philadelphia, a graduate of Union College and Princeton. He was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and came to the frontier to be professor in, and later, principal of, the Indiana Seminary in 1822. He was disappointed in the life he found there so the narration of his experiences in *The New Purchase* (Philadelphia, 1843), while it is an unrivalled critical study of pioneer life is not entirely just to Hoosiers. Hall was inclined to malign his enemies and make fun of his friends.

and a little later her work was accepted by the great eastern publishers. Probably her best known prose work was *Life Sketches from Common Paths*, a volume of moral short stories of the type popular with the ladies of the period. A number of her sentimental poems, which are by no means inferior to the general standard for female poets of the day, are reprinted in Coggeshall's anthology of western poetry.²⁵ Another poetess whose work belies the theory that early Hoosiers were uncultured was Sarah T. Bolton, whose family moved from Kentucky to be one of the first in Jennings county, Indiana. She wrote for the local papers before she was sixteen, gained recognition in the East, and attained the height of her popularity with the ballad, "Paddle Your Own Canoe."²⁶ Although these women are among the best known, they are by no means the only poets among the pioneers of Indiana. Of the one hundred fifty-nine poets from ten states whose works are included in Coggeshall's *Poets and Poetry of the West*, twenty-one of those born in the first half of the nineteenth century were Hoosiers. As is usually the case with minor writers, their successes were ephemeral. Perhaps one of the chief reasons for this was, that, instead of showing the life they knew and creating a new literature in a new land, they preferred to escape the crude realities of the life around them by imitating the sentimentalism of the second-rate eastern and European writers. John Finley's poem, "The Hoosier's Nest," and Hall's *The New Purchase* are isolated exceptions to this rule, otherwise it was almost the end of the nineteenth century before Edward Eggleston and James Whitcomb Riley appeared to prove that Indiana provided not only readers and writers, but also a literary material worthy of note. The early poetry generally took the form of melancholy ballads which often had death as their main theme after the fashion of the folk songs of the southern mountains, although there was also some political verse and occasional scholarly translations from the classics or ambitious original poems in Latin to show that education had come to Hoosiers.²⁷ Since fiction was generally frowned

²⁵ An informative article, "Julia L. Dumont of Vevay," by Lucille Detraz Skelcher and Jane Lucille Skelcher, appeared in the *Indiana Magazine of History* (September, 1938), XXXIV, 298-306.

²⁶ Coggeshall, *op. cit.*, 367.

²⁷ A good example of the political verse is Morris's eulogy to his rival for the position of county clerk in the first election held at Indianapolis in 1822 (Dunn, *op. cit.*, I, 504; Dufour, *op. cit.*, 70).

upon by the more scrupulous, its production was limited to moral tales modeled on those of N. P. Willis, while other prose writings consisted mainly of labored newspaper essays and the more utilitarian treatises on medicine, law, and theology. One cannot avoid admitting, however, that, as soon as Indiana pioneers had any leisure at all, they became interested in the intellectual stimulation of reading and writing to a degree which was highly praiseworthy considering their remoteness from all centers of literary development. Far from being an ignorant and backward race, they showed a literary and cultural advancement at least equal, and in some ways superior, to that of other states during the territorial period and the early years of statehood.