

## Elements of Culture in the Old Northwest

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This study of the elements of culture may not be orthodox, nor may it apply to the whole Northwest in the Glorious Fifties, but it is offered for what it is worth. It is based entirely on the southern half of Indiana but it is believed to be equally applicable to southern Ohio and Illinois.

In the southwest corner of Indiana in that particular county which contained the mythical Hooppole township<sup>1</sup> was New Harmony. It is not pretended that this community was kin to the neighbors around. It shone like the morning star in the Milky Way in comparison but it set us our first lessons and some profited. One hundred years ago Richard

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This informal paper was obviously prepared by Logan Esarey for reading to fellow historians, and was doubtless to be read within a maximum of twenty to twenty-five minutes. In preparing it for publication the editors have completed certain names and made minor grammatical changes. These changes, however, have carefully followed the original text, which has otherwise been faithfully reproduced. All footnotes have been added by the editors. Professor Esarey himself recognized that this paper was merely a beginning for his chosen topic. In the margin toward the end of his paper he wrote, "Imagine 100 pages inserted here," and in a letter to Miss Esther McNitt of the Indiana State Library he indicated that about five hundred pages should be added before it would be ready for publication.

Former students of Professor Esarey will recognize in this paper various concepts which he expounded in his classes and even more delightfully set forth in his private conversation. Born in Perry County in 1873, Esarey grew up among the hills of southern Indiana when many of the pioneers were still alive. He was a member of the Indiana University history department from 1913 until his death in 1942. From 1913 until 1927 he was editor of the *Indiana Magazine of History*. Though plagued by ill health for many years, he was active in establishing Indiana history, history of the American Middle West, and history of the American Far West as basic courses at the University.

For ideas similar to those expressed in this paper see Logan Esarey, "The Pioneer Aristocracy," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XIII (1917), 270-287; see also the collection of certain of his papers in *The Indiana Home*, edited by R. Carlyle Buley, first published by R. E. Banta (Crawfordsville, 1943), and later by the Indiana University Press (Bloomington, 1953).

<sup>1</sup> Various frontier localities made hooppoles for packaging pioneer produce in barrels, kegs, and the like, in sufficient number to be given such appellations in local traditions.

Owen was a musician, an elegant dancer, a scientist in a college faculty, a soldier in two wars, dainty enough for any parlor, a sparkle of light in a somber Presbyterian world; Robert Dale Owen battled faithfully for thirty years for toleration in all walks of social life; David Dale Owen, aside from his social influence, was the greatest of our geologists. The schools of New Harmony attracted children from leading families throughout the state and a grateful people after a century of growth are beginning to appreciate the culture of the Owenites.

Thirty miles to the north David Robb was laying the foundation for another center of culture.<sup>2</sup> An Irishman by birth, a Hoosier after 1800, he left his descendants an inheritance both of wealth and enthusiasm which carried his children and grandchildren to the first rank of state citizenship. Elisha Embree, a Kentuckian and Robb's son-in-law, was refused a Whig nomination for the governorship, was ten years on the circuit bench, in Congress with his old neighbor Lincoln, and one of the outstanding leaders of a community which even today is represented by the federal judge of the Indiana circuit and by a professor of law at the state university.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty miles southeast of New Harmony was an English settlement somewhat older than that of the Owens.<sup>4</sup> Joseph Wheeler, John Ingle, Robert Parrett, and Levi Iglehart were the leaders. A similar settlement by George Flower was made at Albion, Illinois. It would take more than the space of this paper to identify Congressmen James Lockhart, William Fletcher Parrett, and John Hopkins Foster, the Fellows sisters, the Iglehart lawyers and preachers, the Wheeler educators. Perhaps the most widely known of this group was John Watson Foster, the diplomat.

Passing by the community on the east which gave us Lincoln and also the next counties for other reasons the student of the fifties would come upon modest little Corydon. After the capital of the state was removed in 1825 Corydon apparently passed out of the picture. However, one cannot lightly pass over a community that was producing in this period such men as Henry S. Lane and Walter Q. Gresham.

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<sup>2</sup> Gibson County, of which Princeton is the county seat.

<sup>3</sup> Judge Robert C. Baltzell and Professor James J. Robinson.

<sup>4</sup> Evansville.

The former was the most distinguished friend of Lincoln during the latter's exile in Washington and, although the most popular politician in Indiana, he never manifested any interest in politics after Lincoln's death. Gresham's career led through a long federal judgeship to a place in the President's cabinet.

Associated with them in the nearby town of New Albany was another cluster of interesting men: Randall Crawford, a leader of the state bar; the DePauws, typical of the leading business men of the new society; John Norman, one of the four or five leading editors of the state and the only one of his class who stood by the Democratic party in its day of trouble. New Albany was the leading city of the state during the decade. At its wharf might have been seen the finest steamboats that ever navigated the Ohio, Mississippi, or any other river. The pilots, more admired and envied than governors, always brought Norman and others the latest copies of the New Orleans *Picayune*. The young scions of Indiana met the Bluegrass aristocracy of Kentucky in the cabins of these steamers and received their finishing training in elegant manners, dancing, singing, poker, and other basic elements of culture. The steamer "Eclipse" which ran from New Albany to New Orleans carried a full orchestra; its cabin deck was covered by a one-piece carpet made to order in Brussels; its table dishes, crested in gold, were made to order by the Havilands of Limoges; the diners always wore full evening dress; and after the eight-course dinner dancing followed from nine to twelve and poker after that as long as the Kentuckians could afford it. From this community came the LaFollettes of Wisconsin.

Madison, some twenty miles up the Ohio, was the business rival of New Albany. It offered an attractive list of respectables as its contribution. James F. D. Lanier, the banker, William Hendricks, governor and senator, and John Paul, the business man, were perhaps best known of its founders, but in the period under review were Joseph G. Marshall, Jesse Bright, the Egglestons, some of them judges and some novelists, Judge Jeremiah Sullivan, and Michael C. Garber, the editor. Of all these the best known is the novelist, Edward Eggleston. He was born and reared in the French settlement of Vevay nearby, and how much he was

indebted to the French emigrants, the Dufours, Dumonts, LeClercs, etc., is problematical.

Farther up the river in the southeast corner of the state still a different brand of civilization was appearing. This was built on no less firm a foundation than the old Continental Line.<sup>5</sup> Far into the nineteenth century one might have found the Cincinnatians wearing powdered wigs, ruffled shirts, knee breeches, and silver buckles. One of Cincinnati's promising characters so far forgot himself in his enthusiasm for railroads that he declared in a public address around the beginning of this period that persons were then living who would see trains whirling across the state at the rate of thirty miles per hour. He was promptly disowned and sent to the rear. A distinguished representative of this group was James Henry Lane, Indiana's best known soldier of the Mexican War, a representative in Congress and finally senator from Kansas.

These examples from the riverboard might lead one to conclude that the comparatively immense activity on the Ohio was directly responsible for the development, but the inland communities were keeping full step.

North of Madison, centering around Vernon, are a dozen homes of a dozen families illustrating the general progress. Chief of these are the English, New, and Vawter families. The English family culminated in a candidacy for the vice presidency.<sup>6</sup> John C. New as a publisher and political organizer attained nationwide fame, and Harry S. New has served in the Cabinet and in the United States Senate and is now the federal agent of the Chicago fair.

In an adjoining county on the west was yet another group, characterized especially by their interest in education and religion. Among the founders of the Salem society were Christopher Harrison, a college man from Baltimore, Judge Benjamin Parke, John Farnham, a graduate of Harvard, John I. Morrison, and Jonathan Lindley, a speculator in county seats. In the twenties and thirties Salem was a political capital of the state. An educator from this training

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<sup>5</sup> Doubtless a reference to the fact that many of the early settlers of Cincinnati had had experiences in the Continental Army, at times referred to as the Continental Line.

<sup>6</sup> William H. English was nominated on the Democratic ticket as the running mate of General Winfield S. Hancock in 1880 when James A. Garfield was elected President.

ground is president of Kansas University,<sup>7</sup> another was recently a president of the National Educational Association, before he retired to Columbia University,<sup>8</sup> another was president of the National University of China.<sup>9</sup> John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, was a native.

To the north of Washington County only twenty to forty miles and we are in the heart of the Jacksonian country. It came to flower in the fifties in such men as John W. Davis, once Speaker of the House of Representatives, George Whitfield Carr, president of the Constitutional Convention of 1850, and above all George Grundy Dunn, Whig congressman. Colonel Richard W. Thompson received most of his training in this school. Politics was a profession here. Colonel Thompson was an artist on the stump in the thirties and I have listened to him in the nineties. Dunn, a cousin of Felix Grundy of Tennessee, was, I think, the finest of Indiana's political orators. He had a thorough classical education and was equally familiar with English literature. In power he was equal to Patrick Henry and in purity and elegance lost little in comparison with Burke. These men were no ordinary stump speakers. Oratory with them was a fine art and weeks of labor and study went into their orations. Few of them were office seekers but they took to politics like a hound pup to a fox trail.

In Terre Haute there was society. Riley McKeen, Chauncey Rose, Elisha M. Huntington, Demas Deming, and Colonel Richard W. Thompson were what we would now call big business men. Horace Greeley, John Gough, and Henry Ward Beecher were not too good for their lecture course. This was also the home in late life of Daniel W. Voorhees, the Bryan of that day. Though not so graceful, classic, and literary as Dunn he was irresistible before the multitude and his eloquence is a tradition on the Wabash.

Over at Asbury College, now DePauw, militant Methodism had entrenched itself. Like the Knights Templar of old the Methodists made truceless war on iniquity. Like others of this day they expressed themselves in the spoken word. Bishop Matthew Simpson no doubt was their greatest orator.

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Hiram Lindley. The context seems to indicate that Esarey meant that Salem was a "political capital" because it provided many political leaders.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse H. Newlon.

<sup>9</sup> William A. P. Martin.

Whether before the pioneers of the distant Willamette in Oregon; in the swamps of northern Indiana; before his own student body; in Cooper Institute, New York; Tremont Temple in Boston; or a convocation of the Episcopal bishops in London—the result was the same. When the body of the gentle Lincoln was laid to rest in our neighboring city it was Simpson who pronounced the funeral oration, a touching benediction to a sorrowing nation.

North of the National Road with centers in the adjoining counties of Fountain, Parke, and Montgomery was the most outstanding group of men in the state. Four governors, David Wallace, a graduate of West Point, James Whitcomb, Joseph A. Wright, and Henry S. Lane, indicate the spirit of their culture. All were college men and each actively engaged in rebuilding the state school system. Actively associated with them were James R. M. Bryant and Caleb Mills, college teachers. More widely known was Dr. John Evans of Fountain County, author in large part of the state benevolent institutions, known in Illinois as founder of Evanston and Northwestern University, and in Colorado as a governor and founder of a state university. Amory Kinney stumped the state for the proposed new school system and then went west to help organize another new state. Wright, who was governor during most of the Glorious Fifties organized the State Board of Agriculture and devoted most of his energies to the betterment of agriculture. His orations before the huge farmers' meetings are only excelled in humor by those of Horace Greeley and Henry Ward Beecher before the same audiences.<sup>10</sup> Wright pleaded, prayed, and threatened to interest the state university but his alma mater would have nothing to do with such vulgar work as teaching agriculture, and the governor turned sadly to the establishment of Purdue.

The state capital was furnishing some assistance although principally then as since it was considered a meeting

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<sup>10</sup> In between the lines at this point Esarey had added: "Wheat, oats, rye (Hydraulic ram)." Governor Wright, though not a dirt farmer, spoke frequently before farmers, showing much interest in better varieties of seeds and better breeds of stock. The story is that on one occasion he was asked what he thought of the new hydraulic rams. Not being acquainted with this mechanical device, the governor responded that he thought farmers should experiment with these rams in their efforts to improve their stock of sheep! Doubtless Esarey improved on this story in his speech.

place for the people of the state. Its two leading newspapers were even then recognized as the organs of the two parties. The *Journal* under John D. Defrees was really growing metropolitan. It had a telegraphic column, market reports, and a traveling correspondent, Berry R. Sulgrove. The *Sentinel* reached its peak of power and glory under its ablest editor, Jacob Page Chapman. It spoke authoritatively for the triumphant Democracy until the Free Soil wrangle sent both its publisher, George Chapman, and its militant editor into the ranks of the new Republican party. Even the churches of the capital were hotbeds of politics. Beecher became a knight-errant of Free Soilism and the governor withdrew his card from the Methodist church because the preacher was too enthusiastic in his denunciation of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.<sup>11</sup>

This brief analysis of social conditions in southern Indiana must suffice for this paper. It is believed it is representative of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and even southern Michigan. It will be noticed that it was a political-minded people. Everything was discussed in the political forum because society had no other way than by political action to settle any question. A new school system was being established by the state; a system of railroads was being built, each road requiring a charter by the state; a State Board of Agriculture created by the state was attempting to place agriculture on a scientific basis; a state system of benevolence and charity was being established under state control and support. Thus it was not accidental that every citizen was a politician. During the fifties a prohibition law was placed on the statute books, though there was serious objection to the state's entering the field of morals.

Individually and personally society was just passing from the pioneer stage. It was an agricultural age and life was hard. Men worked from sun to sun and women worked harder and longer.

Sixty per cent of the manufacturing was still done in the home and the remainder in the little crossroads shops. Log houses were slowly giving way to the old red bricks with some pines or cedars in front. The more prosperous drove to town or church in carriages behind matched spans of driv-

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<sup>11</sup> Governor Joseph A. Wright. See Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana* (4 vols., Dayton, Ohio, 1924), II, 612.

ing horses, but the great majority still did their local traveling horseback or on foot. Travel by rail was just beginning and men and women spent their leisure time describing sights seen in Cincinnati or Louisville or occasionally in New York or New Orleans. Perhaps one kitchen in three had a cook stove and one house in twenty had some of the beautiful furniture made by itinerant cabinet makers. Singing schools, lyceums, and the various workings furnished local entertainment while camp meetings, barbecues, fairs, and circuses drew crowds from a greater distance. Dress varied from the coonskin cap to the two-story beaver, from homespun to glistening broadcloth, while women in silks and satins mingled on easy terms with those in linsey-woolsey. Henry Clay found himself as well entertained in Indianapolis as in Lexington, while James D. Williams found it very popular in 1876 to make his campaign for the governorship in home-made blue jeans.