

EXPERIENCES OF THE FIRST DUBOIS COUNTY SETTLERS

Notes compiled by Dr. C. W. Ackerman

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And

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“My grandfather, Simon Ackerman, with his parents came to Dubois County from Switzerland in 1835 about thirty years after the first white settler came to Dubois County.

Here is as per my grandfather told me how it was,
the experience of the first settlers.”

First white man

The first white man to come to live in Dubois County was McDonald. He came to live here sometime between 1805 and 1810. Indians were still roaming the woods. About 1810 McDonald and more settlers built a fort to help protect them against the Indians. This said fort was built about ¼ mile east of the Edgar Wening farm on the Portersville Road. (My grandpa said when he arrived in Dubois County there was still an old Indian living in a wigwam just west of the Ed Himsel or Chris Grossman farm.)

The first white man who settled in Daviess County was only about five miles northwest of McDonald’s Fort. It was located on the north side of the White River just west of Sugar Creek Bridge on top of the first hill after crossing Sugar Creek. His name was William Ballow. He had slaves working for him when he settled here.

Also in Daviess County a family by the name of England drove there with horses and covered wagon and found a big hollow tree in the woods. Until a cabin could be built, the family slept inside that large hollow sycamore tree. After the cabin was built, they started clearing land, and he ended up with a large amount of acreage in his lifetime.

Traveling to Dubois County

Some or most of the earliest settlers came by covered wagons from Virginia and the Eastern states. The covered wagons crossed the Ohio at Louisville, then known as “the falls.” After 1835 they came via steamboat to Troy, Indiana, on the Ohio River and then

by wagon freight to Dubois County. There was a stage coach route weekly from Rockport, Indiana, to Washington, Indiana soon after several settlers bought land.

As the Dubois County population grew more roads were built. There was a road from Troy to Jasper and onward to Washington. These early roads had a stage coach inn about every thirty miles where horses were fed in barns and passengers could eat and sleep all night. (One of these original stage coach inns still stands south of Jasper and is the residence of Joe and Judy Rohleder.) Also there was a wagon road from Jasper to Loogootee on to Washington and then St. Louis. There was a road from Jasper to New Albany. It took a full week to make a round trip from Jasper to New Albany, but there was a better market to sell meat and produce at New Albany than at Troy. To this day they call it the New Albany Road. There was also a highway from Vincennes through Washington, Loogootee, and on through to Paoli. From Paoli they called it the Paoli Pike. It became a toll road and travelers had to pay to use it.

Food and cooking

In the dark dim past of the long ago, the era from 1810 to 1840, our ancestors selected a small part of this virgin Government land which was not worth a pewter dime until acre after acre was cleared for the purpose of crop production. They had no flour, bread, or beans until they could clear away timber to make fields and grow corn, wheat, and vegetables. It was not at all unusual in these so far removed from the present way of eating that the earliest settlers had no bread for a couple of years until they could produce corn and wheat. Corn they could crush with a hand stone and make corn bread. There were no stores or neighbors to borrow from.

So what did they have to eat? What eats did the endless forest produce? In April you could find mushrooms; in June there were berries; in July there were blackberries; August provided May apples and elderberries; in October there were hazelnuts, acorns, walnuts, butternuts, bechnuts and hickory nuts. In between there was never a shortage of meat and fish because game was abundant, such as quail and grouse for birds. For animals they had rabbit, squirrels, raccoons, buffalo, bear, and lots of deer. Hunting was done with muzzle loader rifles. There were no cartridge or shotgun shells in Dubois County until about 1890. The deer they killed furnished them with buckskins to make clothes and moccasins and even covers for beds.

After more settlers arrived, those newcomers would borrow from the earlier pioneers who already had established field production of wheat, corn, fruits, and vegetables.

Before there were any stores to buy anything that was needed, here is how some solved the sugar problem. Maple trees produce sap which still is cooked down to syrup in February and March. However, when sugar was desired, they would cook down this syrup still further until it was pure sugar. Some families set a goal to produce 100 pounds of sugar before storing up syrup.

When the first settlers only had fireplaces to cook food, they could produce fried turnover apple pies. They could bake corn bread by using a Dutch oven with a lid on it and ovens with brick. They would heat this by building a hot fire in it. This would heat the bricks. Then pushing the burned out ashes out of it, the heat from the hot bricks would bake the nicest kind of light bread.

Food was prepared and stored for winter. About the only containers available were crocks and jugs. Women would cook pumpkin butter in open big iron kettles and put it in crocks for winter eating. They made apple butter the same way. Sorghum or molasses was cooked out of cane juice and kept in jugs. Cabbage was cut or shredded, put in jars, and made into sauerkraut. Hog meat was salt cured and smoked for summer. Potatoes and apples were put in cellars. Those who had no cellar dug a trench on high ground, lined it with straw, put potatoes or apples in it and then covered it with about two feet of dirt. They would keep all winter.

Before the turn of the century stores had no bread for sale. Everybody baked their own. Neither could anybody buy any canned food or canned fruits or vegetables. About all that stores had was salt, sugar, pepper, spices, coffee, tea, rice, and the only breakfast cereal was oatmeal. The first cereal on the market was Grape Nuts about 1915. Everything in stores was very cheap when you compare it to today's standards. (Ex: shoes, \$1.25; single barrel shotgun, \$2.98; barrel whiskey, \$2.00 per gallon; bottled whiskey, 1 quart, \$1.10.)

Every farmer had lots of apples. In those days spraying was unknown, and insects did not disturb fruit. Putting apples in a cellar would cause some to rot, so people would dry them. Every farmer had lots of apples. The women would have apple peeling parties, and many apples were prepared for sun drying which took about one week. Some farmers built a small log house. It had one room with shelves and trays all around the walls. Those trays were filled with sliced apples and a stove was put in the middle of the room. This extra stove heat would dry apples in half the time it took in the sun. Besides if you hit some rainy cloudy days, the stove was superior. You could sell the surplus of dried apples to local stores. All stores who merchandised in groceries would buy dried apples. Kuebler's Store at Jasper, Indiana, one year during the 1890s bought 50,000 pounds of dried apples and sent them to New York. Apples were also shredded and pressed to squeeze out the cider juice to drink. If left to ferment in a jug, it would turn to vinegar. Farmers had a hand turned machine that was two-fold, since it would shred and press the apples. It was named a cider press or cider mill.

Before 1900 there were no electric fans or coal oil or gas stoves. Even in hot weather, people had to fire wood stoves to cook their meals, and that made the hot summer hours still hotter. Some families built a summer kitchen close to the house. It was a one room affair. Cooking and eating in this summer kitchen kept the house from getting hotter, and therefore made the house a few degrees cooler and provided better sleeping for the night.

In 1816 the weatherman in Indiana went on a rampage, and believe it or not, it frosted every month of the summer that year. There was absolutely no corn raised in

Dubois County. The next year the price of seed corn was \$10.00 per bushel. That would be equal to \$1,000.00 a bushel now.

Johnny Appleseed

During the years from 1840 to 1860, there made the appearance of a traveling man with all the characteristics of a tramp. He always carried a leather pouch about one gallon capacity filled with apple seeds. He was named Johnny Appleseed. He covered a big part of Indiana going from one settlement to another. The first time he came he would prepare the ground and sow apple seeds. Two years later he would come and plant the seedlings into a prepared orchard plot. The third time he would replace dead trees and trim the living trees. All he asked for was sleeping room and something to eat.

Clearing the land

Every acre of Dubois County was covered with large trees when the first white settlers came here in the early 19th century. It was all Government Land and was sold for \$1.25 per acre. Every acre had to be cleared before crops could be raised.

Each year after the harvest was taken care of, the family spent much time cutting down every tree in a planned acreage to be converted into a field, cutting up the logs and branches in short lengths. Then in late February or March all the neighbors would come on an appointed day armed with a hand spike. They named this event "A Log Rolling Day". Enough men came to manage or roll the logs on a pile to be burned on the next dry day. Several of these trees were five or six feet across. There were enough prime good logs burned from 1830 to 1900 to equal the amount sawed up in mills from 1900 to 1980. Big trees and big logs had no more value than small trees. To the early settlers who wanted to raise crops for a livelihood, trees were a liability or pest which needed to be destroyed to make growing edible grain possible.

Tools

Immigrants who moved in all had tools such as axes, drills, drawing knives "used on a Schnitzelbank", adzes which looked like a grubbing hoe but were sharp as an ax and used to carve wood out of a log for a water trough, canoe, or a coffin. Also, they brought broadaxes, saws, and muzzle loader guns. Men would split logs in about two inch boards to build doors and flooring for cabins.

Before sawmills when a person died, there were no boards for a coffin, so the neighbors were notified. They would come and cut down a walnut tree about three feet thick and cut off a log seven feet long. Then with wedges and wooden mauls they would split off the upper third of the log, take an adze and hollow out the solid log big enough to lie in the body. Then they would take a broadax and square up the sides and bottom of the log, so it would look like a box. They used charcoal to make it look black. Then they

would square off the lid or the third of the log they had split off. This third top of the log now became the lid after the body was put in. Then the lid was again replaced just like it was split off. Every splinter fit into every groove. It was a tight fit. There were no nails available in those days, so they drilled 5/8 inch holes and drove in hickory pins. It held real good. (After blacksmith shops opened, all blacksmiths made a few nails, but they were not round. They were square and could be made to any length.)

The first sawmills in Dubois County were water-powered. The first two were located one on the Ruckriegel farm on Mill Creek, and the other one was run by Mr. Reyling, and it was located on the Patoka River near the Conrad "Coon" Seitz Bridge. The first steam sawmill in Dubois County was run starting about 1870 by George Meyer about two miles east of Haysville. Mr. Meyer saw his first steam sawmill during the Civil War in the Eastern states.

About 1905 a big band saw was built just east of Patoka Bridge. (The Mossman-Bayless Mill) Soon the price of white oak started to go up. About 1920 they started paying \$5.00 per hundred for the butt log. I can remember when the first big very best good trees sold for \$100.00. This was about 1925. In 1980 those same big perfect veneer white oaks are worth \$5,000, and those big walnuts would be worth \$10,000 to \$15,000 per tree. The biggest poplar tree ever hauled to the mill at Jasper came from the Joseph Schneider farm. The first or butt log had nearly 1,200 feet of lumber in it, and it was hauled by Henry Fritch.

Varmints

During those early days in Dubois County when the greatest part was in woods and wilderness, varmints were abundant. There was no stock law, so cattle and hogs ran wild. There were hardly any fences. What fences there were, were made of split rails from poplar and oak trees, mostly oak. There was no such thing as a woven wire fence. Apple trees were fenced in by rail fence to keep cattle and hogs out before farmers had enough white oak rails split to fence their entire farm. They all had a surplus rail pile. If they wanted to put out corn in a certain 15 or 20 acre field in March, they would start hauling rails with horses and wagon to fence in a certain field with rails. Then they could start plowing and planting corn. Corn had to be planted by hand with a hoe. Chop a hole and drop in two grains of corn. All corn had to be harvested by shucking it by hand and hauling it home in a horse drawn wagon.

If one would harm or kill an animal on the road, the driver had to pay for it. Then about the turn of the century when about all farms were fenced, a stock law was passed. All animals had to be kept off the roads. If an animal now is responsible for a car wreck, the animal's owner had to pay for damages.

Now as to varmints, in the early days chickens had a hard time. Just about every kind of varmint liked chicken meat. So farmers built a chicken or hen house and for a fence nothing grew as straight as a sassafras pole. Farmers cut sassafras poles about ten feet long. They sharpened them on one end and drove them in the ground. The poles were

so close together that not even a rat could get through. Chickens in those days could not be allowed out of their hen house and chicken lot.

Planting and harvesting

For the early settlers, planting and harvesting were slow and hard tasks, because everything was done by hand. There was absolutely no machinery. The land was cleared by ax and hand saws. Corn was planted with a hoe. Wheat was broadcast on ground by hand. Wheat was cut in swaths by a hand cradle. The second person would gather up the cut wheat until he had a bundle. Then he would twist about a dozen stalks together into a rope-like shape and tie the bundle so it would hold together. Next it would be shocked in the field until it was good and dry. One man could cut from one to three acres per long day. Cutting and binding the bundles was a real back breaking job.

After the wheat in shocks was good and dried out, the process of threshing began. In those days, a very primitive procedure was used to get the grain out of the sheaves. Previously cradled, tied in bundles, and dried in shocks, wheat was hauled home one or at most two loads a day. Every barn had a strong built floor, heavy support logs, and two inch flooring boards. One load at a time, cutting the bundles of wheat loose, it was spread four to six inches thick on the floor. Then horses were made to walk in circles over this loose wheat straw. The impact of the horses' feet on the wheat heads would loosen the grain from the sheaves. In addition to the horses, men had flails made up of two sticks. One was about 3 ½ feet long, and the other was about 18 inches long. These two sticks each had a hole on one end where they were held together by a 1 ½ inch link of rawhide. In the corners where the horses would not tramp on the wheat, the men would hold the flail on the 3 ½ foot end and apply the 18 inch end and pound out the wheat grains. After the horses and flails had loosened the grain from the sheaves, they would carry out the straw which would leave the grain, the chaff, and the dirt on the floor. Now to get the chaff and dust separated from the grain. There were two methods before the advent of hand powered windmills. The farmers would take a bucketful of grain and chaff on a windy day and slowly drop a small stream of grain from the hayloft down into the driveway. As it fell the wind would blow the chaff and dust to one side, and then they would scoop up the clean grain. A second method to separate chaff and get clean grain only was to pick a windy day and then throw a cupful of grain at a time about ten feet into the air current. By the time it hit the ground, the wind had blown the chaff to one side.

Every procedure from cutting to pure clean grain was a slow process. However, farmers did not grow more than about ten acres per year. Before there was a railroad, farmers had to haul their wheat with horses and wagon to Washington, Indiana, a distance of thirty-five miles. Leaving at three or four o'clock in the morning, they would complete the seventy mile journey about midnight. With all of the hardship it required to produce wheat, the price they got for it was only \$3.00 per bushel. After flour mills were

established in this area, farmers would not buy flour and corn meal at the stores. They would take a sack full of wheat or a sack of corn to the mill and trade it for flour and corn meal.

Improvements in harvesting

During the Civil War era a machine was patented to cut wheat and drop it in loose bundles. Several men would follow up these “dropper” bundles and tie each bundle by about a dozen strands or stalks of wheat, twist it in a rope, and tie each bundle, then put about twelve bundles in a shock to let it dry.

About this same era came out a horse-powered round gear about ten feet in diameter. Usually four horses would drive round and round in a small circle. This gear would drive a cylinder which would knock out the wheat grain. The progress of these two patents saved much labor and time.

Then in the 1880s and 1890s came out a binder. This machine would cut the wheat and tie each bundle with binder twine. All the second man had to do was shock it, so it would dry and wait to be threshed.

About this same time came out the threshing machine and steam engine. The threshing machine would pound out the grain with a cylinder. It had screens to separate the grain from the sheaves and a windmill built in which would blow out the dust and chaff. Also it would elevate the wheat grain and count the bushels of wheat before it dropped into a sack. This machine had a blower which by air and blower pipe would blow the straw onto a stack. It took about eighteen men, seven of them with teams of horses and hay frame wagons to haul the dried out shocks to the threshing machine. Farmers would swap help until the whole neighborhood was threshed out. It was hard, hot work, especially in really hot weather.

Today, one man with a combine cuts and threshes the wheat while the combine travels through the wheat field. Also, the machine puts the clean wheat in a bin. This is certainly a great labor saving device.

Clothing

Clothing worn during days before they could shop at stores was, at first, buckskin from deer and bearskins. Then after they had some land cleared for cultivation, they would raise sheep for wool to weave into clothes. The hand spinning wheel was a slow process but they wove it into sheets to make clothing. Also they raised flax. This flax plant had a tough bark. When ripe, these stems would be pounded so the outer layer would split into thread-like shreds. These string shreds would be selected and woven into a cloth, and this cloth would wash out real white. This cloth was named linen, and linen is still being made and used.

The fashion during the first half of the 19th century from 1800 until the Civil War was for women to wear long skirts with a big circumference held in round shape by hoops known as hoopskirts. After hoop skirts were no longer used, dresses were worn long at least down to the ankles or long enough that some would drag on the ground. During this long dress era women would wear what they called a corset. Before and just a little after the turn of the 20th century, the woman that could tighten her waistline down the smallest was the most in style. Some were laced to so small that a man with long fingers could put his thumbs and middle fingers together and then could encircle the waistline. The corsets were shaped like a wasp. They certainly crowded their stomachs. I still can't figure how they could breathe.

Daily life

In those days there were no machines. Everything had to be done by hand. That was a full time job both for men and women. They had big iron kettles to boil their clothes. Soap was made by running water through wood ashes. Also soap was made later on by putting lye in lard or any other kind of oil and grease.

There was no such thing as a wire spring mattress. Women would put corn shucks or straw in a large sack. Some beds had slats, but some had rope criss-crossed back and forth close enough together to uphold the straw sack or corn shuck mattress. This they named a cord bed. For cover they made their own woolen blankets. Deer and bear skins were also used. Most farmers had geese, and they made their own feather pillows and feather beds. Those feather beds were really warm, because I tried them out.

The earliest settlers wore deer moccasins and wooden shoes, but soon every settlement had a shoe shop. Shoe shops would not make shoes, but they all made boots.

Lighting

For a light at night, they made hickory torches to walk outside. Inside the house, they had a tray shaped little pot with a spout on it. They would fill the little pot with hog lard or any kind of wild animal grease. Bear and raccoon grease were excellent. Then they would twist a piece of cloth into a rope-like shape. One end of this rope was in the grease and the other end extended beyond the spout. This extended end is what they would light. It made a small flame equal to a candle, but it had to be lighted with a flint stone as there were no matches. Later on when bees were found or raised, they would make beeswax candles. When the candles ran out, they would resort to the grease lamp. After stores came into operation, they could buy whale oil. It made a cleaner and less smoky flame. Then in the 1880s and 1890s, they began to sell coal oil in stores, and that was a big improvement.

Towns

The earliest town consisted of one harness shop, one gunsmith, one shoe shop for boot making, one cooper shop for barrel making, one blacksmith, one store, and one church.

The first town in Dubois County was Portersville. It is located on the White River about two miles north of Fort McDonald. The first Court House and Jail House were built there. Portersville was the first county seat of Dubois County until it was moved to Jasper in 1830 which is a more central part of the county.

In 1816 the largest town in Indiana was Vincennes, but the second largest town in Indiana at that time was Hindostan Falls. Its population was a little over 1,000 people. Hindostan was located on the falls of the White River about six miles south of Loogootee, Indiana. Everything went smoothly until 1816 when a plague disease struck the town. It was either bubonic plague or cholera. People died like flies. A few people left town. Everybody was scared. All but a very small percent died. Those that survived were afraid to go live in Hindostan again. They thought it was bewitched. Everybody left and just let the town rot down. Now all that remains are holes in the rocks where once mill posts supported a mill building.

Money

Money was hard to come by. School boys worked during summer for 4 cents per hour or 40 cents per day. Men worked for 50 cents and later one dollar a day. The man who squared the trees for my Grandpa's log barn in about 1840 got \$13.00 for the job. I know it took at least six months.

Farmers went to town to sell produce but very few would ever buy any eats or drinks. Farmers had eats at home. Money was too scarce to spend unnecessarily. Those who spent money at taverns every time they went to town usually lost their farms. It seemed like every dime or nickel counted and was needed to pay taxes and interest.

Most settlers were contented just to get by. The main desire was to have eats, clothes, pay taxes, and their mortgages. There was no permanent bank in Jasper until 1885. Very few had a desire to accumulate cash. Of course, some of them had ambitions to buy more land.

During the era of 1850 till the Civil War, local people built flat boats on Eckert's Hill just south of Jasper Patoka Bridge. They loaded these boats with meat and other farm produce. When the Patoka was about $\frac{3}{4}$ full, they would take off down the Patoka, into the Wabash, then the Ohio, and the Mississippi and sell their produce at New Orleans. They would leave their boats there and come home on a steamboat. Abraham Lincoln accompanied them on such a trip before the Civil War.

Conclusion

The sacrifice our ancestors endured was terrific and all hardship, but somehow they succeeded to get by. They laid the groundwork of our nation, and the progress ever since their coming has made it possible for us to enjoy modern comfort and accommodations. Until they had enough land cleared to raise corn, wheat, and vegetables, they ate only nuts and meat. Without the muzzle loader they could never have survived. The gun drove off Indians, killed varmints, and furnished meat. We can never give our forefathers enough thanks for their hardships. Their courage and eagerness together with modern inventions has made it possible for us to exist and enjoy life with less than half the amount of labor hours that our forefathers endured.

Biography of Dr. C. W. Ackerman

Dr. C. W. Ackerman was born March 10, 1899 to Florentine and Catherine (Keusch) Ackerman. He was the oldest of seven children, six boys and one girl. His siblings were Anna, Albert, Fred, John, Bob, and Sylvester.

Although raised on a farm located north of Jasper, Dr. C. W. (Cyril William) was unable to pursue this profession due to a heart condition which developed when he was 14 years old. An old chiropractor, Dr. Hunt, helped him overcome the heart condition. In time, with the chiropractor's help the heart problem disappeared.

Dr. Ackerman received his elementary education in the Ackerman School House, which still stands near the Portersville Road a little north of the Jasper Middle School. He studied under the LaSalle University Extension Program before entering the Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. He began practicing chiropractic in Jasper in 1930.

He married Frankie Mae Cross of Seymour and was the father of two children, Rita Mae Rasche and Father Donald Ackerman.

His hobbies included hunting, fishing, mushroom hunting, and anything to do with the outdoors. He was a founder of the Jasper Rifle and Gun Club. He worked over 45 years on the Ackerman genealogy.

Dr. C. W. Ackerman was a very unselfish man. His first desire was to see that others had a good time. He would get more of a kick out of his hunting buddy killing a trophy deer than if he had done it himself.

His main purpose in life was to help others. He never missed a day of work in over 40 years. If someone would ask him how he was doing, he always said, "as per usual." It was rare for him to ever admit he had a pain, felt sick, or was tired. One of his philosophies in life was to keep busy helping people so you will have no time to think about yourself.

Dr. C. W. Ackerman served two terms as Dubois County Coroner.

In all honesty I can say that Dr. C. W. Ackerman was a wonderful husband, a great father, and a good neighbor to all he ever met.

The good Lord called him home on February 22, 1983, after a very active and fulfilling life.

Rev. Donald K. Ackerman