History of Starke County

CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTION AND GENERAL DEVELOPMENT

Starke County was organized in the year 1850, and lies in the northwestern part of the state. It is bounded on the northwest by the Kankakee River, on the south by Pulaski County, on the east by Marshall County and lies largely within the Kankakee Valley.

The surface is composed principally of wet marsh, some dry sand ridges and some fairly dry prairie with small groves of timber. In fact the greater part of it was a low wet marsh and the first settlers that located in the county sought the high sand ridges and the uplands upon which to build their small huts and log cabins.

The wet and overflowed marshes looked at that time as though they never would become farm land, in fact no one ever guessed or thought of seeing those wet marshes reclaimed and made tillable lands.

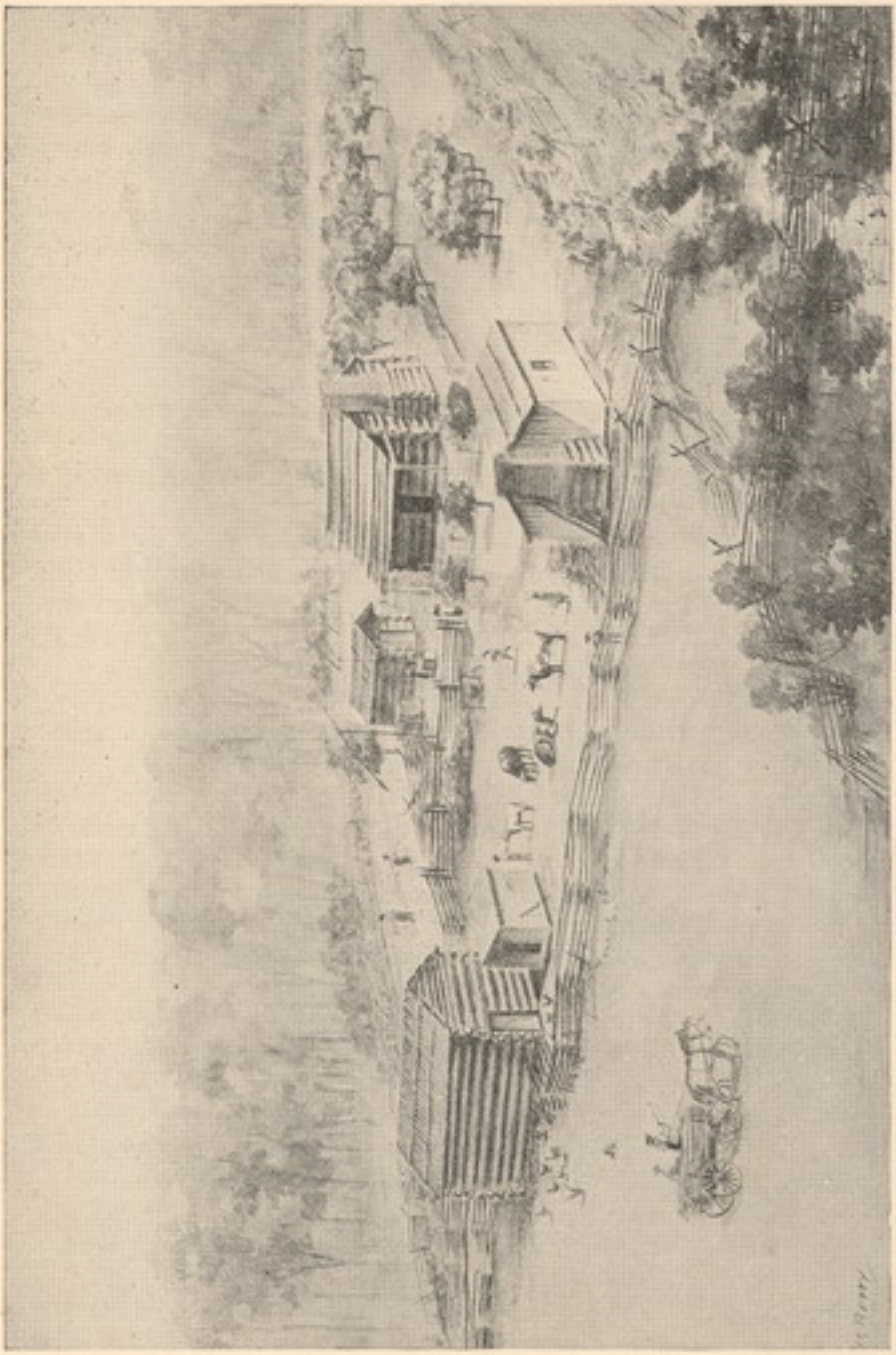
It was a somewhat discouraging thing for the first settlers to even think of pitching their tents in so uninviting a location as the county appeared to be when so new.

The marshes were dotted all over with musk-rat houses which abounded so plentifully in an early day, and many newcomers would become expert "trappers," catching musk-rats in traps set for that purpose and dressing the skins and selling them for the fur.

The hunters could run boats all over the marshes, so wet were they in an early day, some almost like lakes the greater part of the year. This saved much traveling on foot.

Settled down among the rat houses there and so lonesome, with no roads, no farms, no orchards, no railroads, no schools nor churches, by heroic efforts the pioneers set about to build, to fence and to improve the land they had sought to rear their families on and live in peace and plenty the rest of their days. But they had to encounter many hardships ere they arrived at the stage of comfort and plenty.

One great disadvantage they encountered was the lack of mills to grind their grain, and the markets being so far away and no roads to aid them in hauling the grain made it a very difficult task. It was slow progress they made in travel with no other means of conveyance than



FARM HOUSE OF THE LONG AGO

by ox teams—for to see a horse at that time was as much of a curiosity as an air-ship would be to us today.

The principal crops were corn and potatoes. One good old farmer said afterwards that he lived here several years before he knew that he could raise wheat. Of course the time soon came when the pioneers began to sow wheat as well as to raise corn and potatoes.

The meat consisted principally of venison as in those days the deer was very plentiful, in fact it was no uncommon sight to see fifty or even a hundred deer roving over the prairies at one time, and when they would become frightened the noise they made resembled a stampede of cattle and low distant thunder.

Other wild animals and fowls were common in pioneer days. Wolves were a common sight and the way they would howl after night would be a fearful thing to hear now. Wild prairie chickens and quail and snipe were in abundance and the early settlers had great pleasure in capturing them in traps made for that purpose, sometimes incidentally catching a nice fat wild turkey for a big meal, which we would now save up for a Thanksgiving dinner.

One industry taken up in early days was the raising of cattle and hogs which were at liberty to run and roam over the wild marshes and woodlands and feed upon nature's crops undisturbed—a condition that lasted for years.

It was no uncommon thing to see a farmer have a good number of fine steers to sell each fall and the hogs would fatten from the acorns that fell from the oak trees. None of the timber lands and groves were fenced against stock running at large even before and for several years after the great Civil war.

Indians

In the '30s at the time the Government surveyors were surveying this part of the state into townships and sectionizing each township, the Indians were very numerous and it was a curiosity for those Indians to see and watch the surveyors with their instruments laying out the land and establishing the lines and corners and frequently they would make signs and endeavor to get the meaning of what our surveyors were doing.

When the pioneers first located here the Indians inhabited this part of the state, several Indian villages being within the boundaries of Starke County.

When Uncle John Davis first located in this county in the year of 1846 near where Davis Station is now on the east bank of the Kankakee River there was an Indian Village of several tents and wigwams where the Maksawba Clubhouse now stands, but the Indians soon disappeared and gave way to the white man, going in search of new and more profitable hunting grounds.

In "Leading Facts of American History," on page 216, speaking of the great battle fought against the Indians by General Harrison in the

year 1811 at the Tippecanoe Battlegrounds in Northwestern Indiana, a map shows the territory embraced in Starke County to be included in the area infested with the Indians who having remained in Indiana were no doubt the same tribe that was living in the Kankakee Valley at the time of the first settlement of Starke County, hunting and fishing being their chief occupation.

In my little red canoe
I can glide the country over;
Ducks and geese is all I see
But am now looking for more.
Then upon the barren land
I tie my canoe to a stump
And sit and wait as best I can
For the bird they call the "Thunder pump."

It was a common thing for the first settlers to meet an Indian or run across some Indian wigwam while hunting or fishing along the creeks and rivers and passing by with no thought of offence toward each other. It was no trouble to get along with the red man, who soon became discouraged at the approach of the whites upon their domain. They soon abandoned the Kankakee Valley and went to seek other hunting grounds farther west.

Mingling their cries and their war whoops with each other while packing up their effects they soon started on their march, leaving the old Kankakee Valley that they had possessed for so many years, perhaps never to return to it again, and leaving the old camp ground behind them, giving it all up to the white man to hold universal sway and full possession for all time to come.

Many land marks were left by them to tell the world that they had long since held possession of "the old Kankakee Valley."

While some of us perhaps can recollect seeing the camps and wigwams within the boundaries of Starke County, yet our children have not seen what some of us have seen or heard in regard to the red man, and it is only the last of the race that comes within the memories of the oldest inhabitants now living, as the Indians mostly all left during the '40s. We have a few naturalized Indians within the counties that border upon the shores of Lake Michiagn but they are a very peaceable and quiet people. Those may seem to make their home here but the wild tribes have long since "moved along" until there are no more war-whoops to be heard in our land.

The tall grass now grows and the meadow lark builds her nest
Where the Indian with his arrow and bow
Has long since gone,
Gone, gone to his final rest.

Surveys and Pioneering

The territory embraced in Starke County was surveyed by the Government in the years of 1833, 1834, and 1835, and it was a very difficult task for those surveyors who in making up their records of the survey made mention of impassable swamps and pucker-brush thickets which in running their lines they had to "off set" and go around in order to make the survey, but now those swamps mentioned by the surveyors have become some of the most fertile lands in the county, producing great fields of wheat and corn.

The population increasing from 150 in 1840 to 10,650 in 1910 shows that while the increase has not been rapid it has been nevertheless permanent and healthy.

The people are composed of German, English, Dutch, Irish, Scotch, Swedes, Norwegians as well as Italians and Jews, also Bohemians, but all live as one family in harmony with each other.

So we see that from the first settlement of the county to the present time each nationality has endeavored to live the life of a law-abiding citizen.

In an early day our pioneer citizens who sought to find cheaper homes than they could purchase in the eastern states began to travel towards the setting sun and after much hardship and slow progress, fording streams and wallowing through muck and mire and sand they arrived at their objective point (Starke County). After unyoking their cattle and turning them loose to feed upon the never-ending crop of wild grass they began to make preparation for a hut or tent to house their good wives and babies from the inclement weather of the cold autumn months then coming on.

After they had provided a place or home for their families the next thing was to fence and plow or "dig up" a patch to plant their next crops and while the family would cultivate the soil the man of the "farm" would shoulder his gun and go in quest of a deer or some wild game which constituted a great share of their living. After they had raised a sufficient amount of grain they would load up an ox wagon or cart and drive miles and miles to some mill to have it ground, taking one or two days in going and the same in returning, camping out at night while making the trip. The family at home, if they should run out of meal before he returned, would grate or grind some meal from the ears of corn on an improvised grater or a piece of tin punched full of holes, over which they would rub the corn to make meal for bread or mush. This the writer has done many times himself. Thus it was that the pioneers lived and overcame the many perplexing things that make up the life of the pioneer citizen.

Another thing that kept back the progress of the county was the raging forest fires that would run continuously and almost uninterrupted for miles, devastating everything before it, for at that time we had no roads or ditches to check the progress of the flames and where there was timber lands these fires burned over the land making barren waste of

hundreds of acres which has of recent years now grown up into fine wooded groves of second-growth timber.

Those fires, however, did considerable damage to the muck land, for in the fall of the year, in what we call the dry season of the year, the fires would become started perhaps by hunters and burn the sod off the marsh land taking years to replace the portion burned. Then when a storm or hurricane arose the whole air would become as night, so thick was the dust from those burned marshes. Having the very appearance of ginger or gold dust, caused by the burning off, the marshes became known as iron ore marshes.

So thick would this dust be during a storm that you could not see your own barn from the house. While it would be a novel and interesting sight, yet it would cause the oldest persons grave apprehensions until they convinced themselves of the cause of this wonderful phenomena. It has, however, been several years since we have witnessed such a sight as the one just related.

Timber Lands

There was no demand for timber in those days as there were no mills to saw up the timber and make it into merchantable lumber, neither was any price offered for wood. Thus those clearing up the high lands for farms burned the timber, making it into large heaps and setting them on fire.

The high and timbered land was the only land that was cleared up for farming purposes at that time, as the marshes were too wet to be tilled.

With the building of our first railroads in the county, there began a demand for the timber, wood and railroad ties being required for use by the railroads, and as we built more railroads in the county the more became the demand for ties and cord wood, the locomotives burning wood in those days instead of coal as at the present time. Then the ravages of our timber began in earnest and continued until our people began to see that we would soon be facing a timber famine in a few years unless there was a stop put to the wholesale destruction of our timber. Then the farmers began to turn their attention to farming instead of cutting down and manufacturing the only remaining bit of timber that was left into cord-wood and railroad ties.

Hence our uplands and sand ridges were converted into farms ere the prairie lands and wet marshes were drained and put into a condition to be cultivated, concerning which we have made mention elsewhere in this volume.

The timber found here in this county was principally white oak, red oak, black oak, jack oak, pin oak and in some parts of the county burr oak is quite plentiful.

The county is interspersed with hickory, walnut, ash, elm, birch, gum, maple and aspen and sycamore. Sassafras springs up in great thickets in old abandoned fields but does not grow to any great size.

The black locust is characteristic of the sassafras in that it too is found mostly in old and abandoned fields, but there seems to be no great demand for the two last mentioned timbers. Beech and sugar maple are a very scarce article in this county, although some beech was found in what we call the Upper Yellow River Bottoms. It, too, like our fine black walnut and red oak, has mostly all been cut down and converted into lumber several years ago, but where this timber grew is now some of the finest farms to be found anywhere in the county and as good as is found anywhere in the state.

The timber lands are or were called islands when the county was first settled on account of the fact that the water a great part of the year surrounded these groves of timber, but of later years they are called groves of timber instead of islands, the water having disappeared. Those groves have largely grown up since the great forest fires have ceased to burn the county over.

The farmers in their first settlement in the county fenced their land with rails. These they would split and make out of the timber that would be the easiest to manufacture into rails. But it is a very uncommon thing to see a rail fence nowadays as the modern fencing is about all done with barbed wire and wire netting.

Another thing that has been conducive to the saving of our timber in the county is the concrete that is so extensively used in the construction of our buildings. This material has largely taken the place of wood for almost all purposes. In the building of houses, barns, bridges, sidewalks, streets, public buildings, factories, depots, hotels and many other uses, cement and brick are used in place of timber, and this has had a tendency to lessen the demand for wood. This was an item not dreamed of by the first and early settlers in the county. But we have been advancing in all pursuits of life and this is one of the things that marks the way onward to greater things yet to come.

Homes and Living Conditions

The houses or huts built in the pioneer days of the county have long since given way to fine large commodious buildings, which shows the progress that has been made in this line as well as all other forms of progress since the organization of Starke County.

Hence we see that those sturdy pioneers were awake to the situation, and lost no time in making for themselves and their families a comfortable home, changing the almost unbroken forest and wild prairie lands into fertile fields and making them "blossom as the rose."

The marsh lands, where the tall bluejoint grew and so many thousands of tons of hay would be burned up every year by great fires that were so common all over the county in the early pioneer days, have now become fields of golden grain and other crops that say to the untiring efforts of man, "we have come to stay with you."

For many years our county was trodden down, tramped upon, water knee-deep, and often merely looked upon by the unconcerned and

familiar "trapper" and "hunter," who never for one moment stopped to think of what might become of those wide and seemingly worthless acres spread out before him, but only gathering in a harvest, not of "sheaves" but of musk-rat hides, satisfied with his day's work as he would express it—"well done, I now retire to my berth, there to rest and arise the next morning to renew my hunt once more."

Then is it any wonder that the county made such slow progress in its development since the first settlers arrived here until within the last few years, especially after the drainage problem was taken up and pushed to its successful conclusion?

There are those yet here who can well recollect when it was no uncommon thing to see men shoulder their gun and bowie knife and repair to some grove or thicket or back of some little corn field which the

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good wife would cultivate, and there await the coming of a wild deer to be slaughtered by this hunter and carried to his litle hut to be skinned and dressed for venison to satisfy the hunger after his long waiting and watching.

Those were the natural conditions of things and I suppose we should not be too severe in our opinions on those men, as the surroundings at that time made all these things an absolute necessity for their lives and the lives of their families.

It often occurred that when the hunters went beyond the confines of their own little cottages into the depths of the forest or across the wild prairies and wet marshes, they would blaze the timber or set up stakes by which they might retrace their steps toward their own fireside. This was necessary, as there was nothing to distinguish their course or distance, especially of a cloudy day. It was well that they thought of doing this to lead them "home once more."

We have or did have what the Government surveyors called Indian

trails, that extended across the groves of timber from one island to another, reaching in some instances across the whole county. Those were the only "highways" known of between the Kankakee River and the Second Principal Meridian, which lies along the eastern boundary of Starke County.

The Government surveyors marked those trails on their plats and field books at the time of their survey, which is of record today in the courthouse in Knox.

Carrying the mail in the early days was done in a way very much different from what it is today. The mail was carried from Plymouth or some other town by horseback and even by ox-cart and to get mail once a week was considered the ideal of regularity. The good farmers would go to the nearest postoffice once a week to get their mail. Now the mail is carried on swift-moving trains, on fast running automobiles and under our late provided and established free rural mail service the mail is delivered every day to the farmers, who place mail boxes in front of their houses to receive it.

What changes, what conveniences, what great advantages the people have today over those that first settled on the barren wastes of a cold and helpless country! But it was given to man to mould and improve the opportunities placed before him until we now enjoy them.

The locomotive whistle taking the place of the Indian war-whoop,
And the honk of the automobile way down in your bosom so deep,
Has now outdone the howling of the wolf as he prowls from door to door;
Points the way to many new inventions that are coming more and more.

Pipe lines through the county have been laid along the Erie Railroad and other routes for the purpose of conveying gas and oil from the great fields of Eastern Indiana and Ohio to Chicago and other western cities.

Several attempts have been made here to drill for gas and oil in Knox and vicinity but without success, the promoters going to other fields to try their luck.