## **Starke County 22**

"Tidbits of Starke County History".....

When I was in history class in school, I didn't remember the dates very well, but I would enjoy the stories. That is what is interesting about history -- the **stories**. Here is one from a little over 50 years ago. An article by Al Spiers. We know of the various islands in the Starke County area - Coon Ridge, Wood Island, Jackson Island - many are mentioned in the history books. But we don't know where many of these islands are located. If you know of a name of an island in your area, let us know. **Attached** is an aerial map of White Woman Island. The map also shows other islands. Other forgotten names in Starke County can be found on our website - <a href="http://www.scpl.lib.in.us/historical/scpl\_files/Page470.htm">http://www.scpl.lib.in.us/historical/scpl\_files/Page470.htm</a> - then click on "Long Lost & Forgotten Places"

## **Hoosier at Large** by Al Spiers

Rambling along a dusty gravel road northwest of Walkerton, I spied this curious sign on a neat white barn: "White Woman Island".

"Hey!" heckled my nosy curiosity. "This is high dry farm country. What's with that sign?"

So I knocked at a door and thus met Bill Shearin, a lean, spry man of 67 with reddish hair, bluish eyes and waggish good humor.

"The sign?" "Just what it says," replied Bill, a grin wrinkling his nose and twinkling his eyes. "This White Woman Island. Right here, where we're standing."

Then he led me into the yard and aimed a finger at a distant clump of woods. "That," he said, "is East Grape Island." The finger shifted "And that's West Grape Island, and beyond it are Eagle Island, Turnip Island, Headache Island......"

I shook a puzzled head. Bill's inlands rose out of a sea of golden grain and lush green corn, not water. He finally took pity on me. "Son...you're in the old Kankakee swamp country. Those really were islands once. Some of us old-timers still call 'em by name. Sorta brings back memories....."

Bill Shearin's memories of the old swamp are rich and colorful. His own island got its name, he said, from a curious legend. "A wandering band of Maumee Indians camped here," he said. "With them was a white woman. No one knew who she was or why she lived....and left!....with the red men. It caused a lot of talk among the settlers, and gave the island its name."

Bill was 14 when his father brought the family by wagon from Ottawa, Ill., to 320 acres two miles south of White Woman Island in 1905. "This was real swamp country then," he recalled. "Kinda damp and forbidding....but promising, too. The ditchers and dredgers were already beginning to reclaim the rich land we have today...."

Bill's most vivid remembrance of the old days concerned a great fire that swept a vast area in 1908. "We'd had a bone dry fall," he said, "Water was low and the marsh hay was like tinder." "Then one breezy day, sparks from a Pennsylvania locomotive touched things off near Log Island. Fanned by a brisk wind, the fire spread like fury, leaping ditches, roads and other barriers. In no time, we had a roaring rectangle, four miles long and two miles wide."

"Hundreds of farmers and railroad gandy dancers battled the big blaze. They managed to save most of the area's buildings. But all crops were burned. Dad's 240 acres of corn, hay and grain," Bill remembers. "But the Pennsy was fair about it. They had a claim agent here for months settling damages."

Bill still chuckles over one ludicrous incident. "Some of the boys got excited and tried to save the flooring of a wooden bridge in the fire's path," he chuckled. "They took up all the planks and piled 'em nearby. When the fire arrived, poof went the pile!"

For three days and nights, Bill helped fight the fire, grabbing brief catnaps between tricks at the pump and bucket line. After 72 hours, the region's buildings were no longer in danger...but in many places peat and muck continued to smolder and burn for months.

In the years that followed, Bill Shearin saw the great swamp transformed by dredging to the rich farm region it is today.

Except for a brief Army hitch on the Mexican border in 1916, he's farmed this land all his life....first with his father, later on his own 80 acres on White Woman's Island, purchased after his marriage in 1921 to Blanche Frazier.

"I've seen a lot of changes," he mused. "But I think they were all to the good."

This is Bill's last year of active farming. In 1957, he plans to rent his acreages and retire on social security. "After 50 years of hard work, I guess a man's entitled to take things easy." he chuckled.

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http://www.starkehistory.com http://www.scpl.lib.in.us/historical/

(If you do not wish to receive "Tidbits of Starke County History" in the future, please let me know.)

