

"Tidbits of Starke County" No. 29 --- **The Blue Sea**

Most of my stories in these tidbits have been about Starke County, and this one ties in very closely with the area around southwestern Starke County. A few weeks ago, I mentioned an article by Al Spiers as he talked to Bill Shearin about the islands and swamps of 100+ years ago. Those islands and swamps were over much of Starke County, but were most prevalent in the western 2/3 of the County and along the Kankakee Valley. Another very large area of islands and swamps was just south of North Judson and San Pierre. This area included much of Rich Grove Township in Pulaski County, and the southern area of Wayne and Railroad Townships in Starke County. It was (and still is) called the **Blue Sea**.

Marvin Allen gave me the newspaper clipping (attached) about the Blue Sea. It was written a few years ago by Jim Carr and Alan McPherson for the *Pulaski County Independent*. It is a fascinating article which tells the history of this area and community. It mentions the towns of Gundrum (now called Denham), English Lake and Lakeside. It tells of the Metamonong, or the "Big Swift Runner", a stream as named by the Pottawatomie Indians. This ditch is now called the Monon. The Monon Ditch drains areas of four counties, including a large portion of Starke County. The article also tells of the Bogus Run Ditch east of North Judson. The legend say it was named for the counterfeiters who were arrested for making "bogus money" at their hideout near the ditch around North Judson.

The attached article gives more details. I hope you enjoy it.

Jim Shilling
Starke County Historical Society

<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.)

Pulaski County A-Z - Second in a series The Blue Sea - Gone but not forgotten



Rich Grove Township contained an area of watery marshland and swamps so extensive that early settlers named it "The Blue Sea." Fifty years later Indiana's Swamp Land Act provided funding to straighten and deepen the Metamonong River in western Pulaski County, beginning a network of open ditches that turned it into farmland.

by Jim Carr and Alan McPherson
"Blue Sea?" answered the young lady behind the Medaryville restaurant counter. "I've never heard of it. I've lived around here all my life, and I've never heard of it."

"Yeah, I've heard of it," said the second lady in the kitchen. "That's north of here somewhere." Her directions were accurate, but the sign that once stood along U.S. 421, giving directions to the Blue Sea Community Center is now gone - just like the huge area of marshland that early settlers termed "The Blue Sea" because of the miles of water that

stood year around in northern Pulaski County, making the area nearly impenetrable, attractive only to trappers, hunters and the few Indians wishing to avoid the forced removal to West of the Mississippi.

Today's farming industry in that area, extending through most of what is now known as Rich Grove Township in Pulaski County and on into Railroad Township in Starke County, can trace the beginnings of its end to 1885. That's when Indiana's State Legislature passed The Swamp Lands Act, providing

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funding to local governments to drain unfarmable marshland. So, armed with spades, shovels, slip scoops and teams of horses and oxen, the prodigious project of ridding several sections of swamps filled with muskrat lodges, fish, flocks of passenger pigeons, wolves and herds of as many as 100 deer, began.

Officially, Pulaski County had been a recognized entity for only about a year when hardy families, many of whom were of Irish descent via Kentucky, with names like McCarty, Quinn, Boyle, McAuliff, O'Connor, Falvey, McLaughlin and McCay, began to settle on the sandy island oasis in The Blue Sea.

High well-drained sandy ridges and wide marshes below were created by the advance and retreat of the Wisconsin Glacier, which covered northern Indiana as far south as Terre Haute with ice as thick as 500 to 600 feet. Such was the case with The Blue Sea. On those sandy ridges, many types of oak trees, white, black, red, jack and pin, grew, like most of Indiana's forested land, to tremendous heights. Early stories tell of giant forests with trees which four men were hard pressed to reach around by joining hands covering the ground with a canopy so thick that no underbrush grew. Even during midday, the forest floor was said to be a dim twilight.

In the middle of the formidable Blue Sea grew such a forest, covering nearly 160 acres, according to historical writings. Early settlers called that sandy forest Rich's Grove. In 1854, when Rich Grove Township was formed, the apostrophe and s were dropped. Before 1854 the area of Rich's Grove was part of Tippecanoe Township. When Pulaski County's Board of Commissioners designated the area as its township, they appointed three trustees: George Huff, Perry Campbell and Daniel Goble. The next year an election was held, and Mr. Huff was elected as the sole governmental official.

That first election in Rich Grove Township, which is bordered by Cass Township on the west, Franklin Township on the east, Jefferson Township on the south and Starke County on the north, took place in the grove under a large white oak, known as the "Old Oak Election Tree." The next year a Justice of the Peace, William Kyle, was elected. Land records show that the township continued to grow in population.

Farms of a sort were carved out of the swamps and marshes, houses and outbuildings constructed from the ample supply of logs. Cattle and hogs were allowed to graze throughout the Rich Grove area. Cattle did well on the tall grasses, while hogs became healthy, fattened specimens gorging on the acorns covering the forest floor. One of the most important tools for the early cowboys and herdsmen were the ropes carried on saddles to pull foundering livestock from the sloughs, which often trapped animals that wandered too far into the swamps.

Besides hunting and trapping many early settlers took advantage of the expansive areas of cranberries and huckleberries. One newspaper report credits Dan Goble, one of the first schoolteachers in Rich Grove, as having made \$175 in one season picking and selling cranberries to folks in Winamac.

Of course, as settlements grew there was a need for lumber, and where trees were so plentiful and large, a sawmill is a natural industry. A Mr. Huff started one in Huff's Grove. That industry hit its peak in the late 1850s when the railroad came to Pulaski County. Lumber for bridges, ties and cord wood ate up trees at such a rate, that within the next decade, residents saw the need to stop cutting the forests, forcing the railroads to look elsewhere for a supply of wood products as sawmills closed down.

But the railroad also created other industries - along with commercial settlements which sprang up along the right of way. One of those centers of commerce was Gundrum, which is now called Denham. One report says that, during one peak season, some 100,000 tons of "wild hay," the area's largest cash crop, along with large amounts of eggs and meat, was sent out of Gundrum's railroad station on their way to the voracious markets in Chicago, only a few hours away by train.

Gundrum was named in honor of Paul Gundrum. Zachariah Heath established the first store there. When the post office, located in the store, was established in 1868, the name was changed to Denham. Denham's only business today is the local elevator, the store and the post office having closed in the 1980's.

Denham's Lutheran Church, originally called the German Lutheran Church when it was built in 1875, also still remains. The township's population of farmers of German descent continued to grow with the coming of the railroad. But farming was difficult in The Blue Sea. Farmers tired of farming in and around the acres of standing water. A clamor to "reclaim" the land got the attention of legislators, and the reclamation was only a few years away.

After the 1885 Swamp Lands Act, Pulaski County Commissioners held a public hearing in December of 1890 with their counterparts from White and Jasper counties in Winamac to hear remonstrances on the new project which would straighten and deepen a natural waterway in the western half of the county.

Pottawattomi Indians had named the small, shallow stream that flowed south from near the northern Kankakee River to the Tippecanoe River "Metamonong." Meaning Big Swift Runner, that river is shown on the earliest maps of the Indiana territory as the largest tributary of the Tippecanoe. It seemed to the commissioners that this stream would make the best natural drainage path. The Big Monon, runs for some 50 miles and, as the Monon Ditch, drains thousands of acres of land in four counties, emptying into the Tippecanoe at an area known as "The Maples" just north of Monticello at Stone's Bridge.

Early smaller "State Ditches" were dug by hand, but the Industrial Revolution came to Pulaski County when steam dredges began the work of straightening out the Big Monon in 1892. A company known as Wright and Wallace was contracted as excavators, but problems weren't far away. South of Francesville, they ran into limestone formations that all but stopped progress. Even blasting near a site known as Cooper's Mill had little effect. The project was stymied until 1900, when a second company was commissioned. A second attempt to "blast a deeper channel" also was unsuccessful. Around 1910, a third company, Sternburn and Son, found an alternate way around the limestone. Using two large dredges, they started digging at both ends of the Monon. This time it was a success, opening the Big Monon and leading to the further ditch arm construction. Today a network of nearly 1,000 miles of open ditches keep Pulaski County's marshes and swamps from overflowing.

About the same time as the Monon workers were trying to blast through to the Tippecanoe, Starke County was starting the Kankakee Reclamation Project. One of the natural waterways they were to deepen and straighten was the Bogus Run. Bogus Run, which starts in Pulaski County east of Denham, flows east of North Judson and enters the Kankakee near a once flooded area known as English Lake. Bogus Run, was named for the counterfeiters who were arrested for making "bogus money" at their hideout near the stream around North Judson.

Dredging of the Bogus Run also began in the early 1900's, draining the eastern portion of the wet and wild areas of Rich Grove Township. Between the years of 1890 and 1917, hundreds of miles of ditches slowly turned the former swampy wilderness into rich farmland. Farmers began to grow corn, oats, potatoes, mint and onions.

Committed to memoirs are the stories of coal deposits found as close as eight feet below ground while digging wells. Gone are the flocks of now extinct passenger pigeons, dozens of which could be felled with a single shotgun blast into a tree at twilight. Only stories exist of large numbers of fish being pulled from a pool with a single cast of the net. Names like English Lake and Lakeside baffle post-dredging visitors areas when no water exists in those areas. Hardly anything remains that would lead a modern traveler to believe that huge areas of shallow water once

covered much of Rich Grove Township. But one piece of evidence does still stand today. In 1914, work on one of the arms of the Big Monon ditching project turned up one of the few remaining artifacts left from histories of the area's once impassable marshes.

While running a dredge through The Blue Sea marsh that summer, contractor Frank W. Williams of Winamac unearthed the skeleton of an ancient mastodon. A call to the National Museum at Washington, D.C., brought archeologists who worked diligently to remove and reconstruct the skeleton. That skeleton is still on display at that museum. A plaque tells visitors about, not only the history of the mastodon, but about an area that lives only in vague memories - Pulaski County's Blue Sea.



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"State ditches," ditches funded by the state and created with state labor were most often dug by hand. The Monon Ditch was one of the first to use steam dredges. It took three tries and several years to widen and straighten the Metamonong River and dig the tributaries that drained the area in the county known as The Blue Sea.



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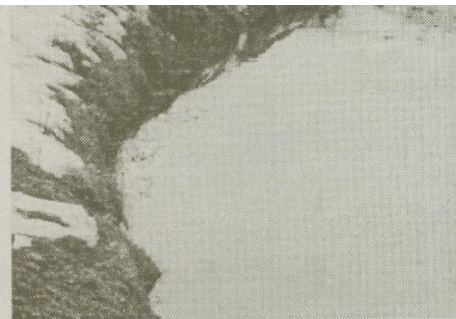


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