

BESANCON, INDIANA CHRONICLES

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The "Black Swamp"

by Gladys Lomont

This is a publication of the St. Louis Historical Society. The St. Louis Historical Society was established in 1992 for the purpose of preserving and disseminating the history of the Besancon, Indiana area. This and future issues of the Besancon, Indiana Chronicles will contain information about the activities of the Society, articles about the history of the area, genealogies, and historical documents pertaining to the history of Besancon.

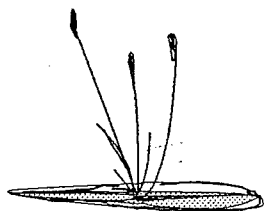
GENEALOGY DEPT.

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Allen County Public Library

Thousands of years ago the natural features of Allen County were shaped by glaciers which covered the northern two-thirds of Indiana. As these glaciers melted a number of topographical features resulted--including, eventually, Fort Wayne's three rivers system and a huge lake which once stretched from Allen County to what is now Lake Erie. This lake was known as Lake Maumee, the basin of which can still be seen in Jefferson and Jackson townships. When the first settlers of eastern Allen County began arriving in the mid-nineteenth century, only the remnants of this lake were visible. The following account focuses on the settlement of this "Black Swamp."

The greater portion of northern Jackson Township which once defied even the sunlight was referred to as the "Black Swamp," "Bear Marsh," and "Bear's Nest." This land was entered on government books as "condemned swamp lands" and was feared by home seekers, since it abounded in wild creatures such as bear, snakes and deer. It contained giant trees growing in water two or three feet deep. The soil (continued on page four)



DOCUMENTS

In 1910 the School Sisters of Notre Dame took charge of St. Louis School in Besancon. The following is an account of the fire which destroyed the first school in 1915. The pastor at the time was the Reverend Michael Louen. The account is taken from the Chronicles maintained by the Schools Sisters of Notre Dame and was found in the congregation's Milwaukee archives.

A fire of unknown cause started under the school building on the evening of Jan. 29, 1915. In less than ten minutes the schoolhouse was one great blaze. All efforts of the men who had been summoned by the ringing of the church bell were centered on the saving of the Sisters' home but that too was doomed. Very little could be saved and in an hour we found ourselves really poor. Our good Rev. Pastor forced us to take shelter in the parsonage until the next morning which was bitter cold.

Saturday we spent in Ft. Wayne, where the Sisters kindly provided us with the most necessary articles of clothing. In the meantime Rev. Father made arrangements to move to the opposite side of the highway where he occupied the summer kitchen of Mrs. Pio.

The parsonage was given over to the Sisters as residence and school. Tables, boxes, sewing-machine, anything that had height was used as desks and the following Tuesday classes were resumed. The children and teachers were cheerful and happy despite the great difficulties.

May 16 we packed up our few belongings and were heartily welcomed at St. Mary's, Ft. Wayne. There we remained until Sept. 1. The new school and residence were now complete and school opened Oct. 4 with three teachers and one hundred sixteen pupils.



THE "OTHER" BESANCON

Many of the original settlers of the Besancon, Indiana region came from the area around the city of Besancon in eastern France. In Roman times it was a military outpost of the Roman Empire, and the ruins of a triumphal arch and amphitheater are still visible. Today it is a city of about 120,000 and is the capital of the Department of Doubs. It is known primarily for watchmaking and clockmaking. The famous French writer Victor Hugo was born here.

GENEALOGY NOTES

"A Profile of the Henry Castleman Bowers Family" by Diana Voors

Henry Castleman BOWERS was one of the early settlers in the Besancon area. In 1836 when Henry was five years old, he moved with his parents, John Bowers and Margaret CASTLEMAN, from Richland County, Ohio to Allen County, Indiana. Their homestead in the Fackler Road area of Jefferson Township was in the midst of the great forest that covered the land.

Glenn ROSSWORM, great-grandson of Henry, related a family legend that notes that Henry made friends with several Indians of the Miami tribe still living in the forest. Game was scarce so the Indians often came to the Bowers' cabin to beg for food. Henry's mother put out a crock of clabbered milk for them. As many as six or eight braves would gather around it to eat. Occasionally, they would take Henry with them deep into the woods where they lived with their families. Henry played with the Indian children there. The braves always brought Henry home before dark.

In 1858 Henry married Catherine COONROD, daughter of Mathias Coonrod and his wife Magdalene. They had seven children, including Warren Nicholas, Peter Wesley (1861-1862), Mary Melissa, Francis Christeen, a stillborn son in 1867 and twin sons born on January 25, 1873. One twin died the same day, and the mother Catherine died the next day. The remaining twin Peter Christopher died in August of the same year.

In September 1873 Henry married Mary CONVERSESET. Her parents were Frank C. and Josephine Converse. Henry and Mary had eight children: Alise Mary Lucy (1875--1879), Henry Lewis (1878), Henry Bernard, Louis Frank, Bennet Joseph Julian, Stephen Augustine, Annette Louisa, and Emma Genevieve.

Henry remained in the Jefferson Township area for the rest of his life. He was a farmer and helped clear and establish the farmlands that are still a part of eastern Allen County today.

Henry's wife Mary died in 1895 when their youngest child was only three years old. Henry died on January 22, 1910 at the age of 79. During the nearly three-quarters of a century that he lived in Jefferson Township, Henry saw the area change from a forested land with Indians still present to a thriving farm community in the early stages of the automobile age. He witnessed the arrival of many settlers, including the French immigrants who settled the Besancon area. Many of his descendants have remained in the Besancon area and are still members of St. Louis Catholic Church where Henry's name is one of those on the Trinity window above the main doors.

Sources: The Bowers Family compiled by Beatrix Bowers, Mary Margaret Fracassini, and Margaret Hahn; St. Louis Catholic church records, and various historical articles.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

Late in 1993 the St. Louis Historical Society completed an application for the inclusion of the St. Louis Besancon Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. The application has undergone technical review by the Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Approval of the application is pending. The committee which prepared the application included Michael Bowers, Phyllis Brockmyer, Charlotte and Carlton Giant, Helen Jacquay, Rev. Thom Lombardi, Gladys Lomont, Joan Monnier, Mark Robbins, Ralph Violette, and Diana Voors.

"BLACK SWAMP" (Continued)

was of greater density and loftiness than was to be found anywhere else in the interior valley of North America. The soil was a deep muck overlaying yellow and blue clay. In dry weather fires in the swamp periodically lit up the eastern sky for the early settlers.

In 1840 Jacob Mooney built a cabin on Flat Rock Creek. Other permanent residents followed, including a number of French settlers in the 1850s. They included Florant Voirol, Francis Parnin, and Constant Pernot. The first village in the township was Edgerton which was platted in 1889. Another was Baldwin which was platted in 1890 and thrived for a while on the lumber industry in the area. This town, however, disappeared as the lumber was harvested. The disappearance of the forests and the eventual draining of the swamp resulted in some of the most productive farmland in Allen County.

ST. LOUIS CHURCH



A CHRONOLOGY

- 1851 Gideon Dickerson donated four acres of land in Jefferson Township to Bishop Maurice de St. Palais, Bishop of Vincennes. Construction of a frame church was begun on the site. The church was dedicated to St. Louis, a medieval king of France.
- 1864 The Reverend Louis Grevin became the first resident pastor at St. Louis and built the first pastoral residence. He was followed as pastor by J.C. Carrier, CSC (1866), F.M. Ruiz (1866-1867), A. DeMontaubricq (1867), A.J.M. Vandevnet (1867-1868), and A. Mignault (1868-1870).
- 1870 The Reverend August Adam became pastor and began construction of present church. He was succeeded by W. Demers, CSC (1875), Constance Maujay (1876), and Felix Veniard, CSC (1880). The Reverend Veniard was pastor until 1893 and was the only priest to die as pastor of the parish.