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# LAND OF THE FAIR GOD: INDIANAPOLIS

— Opal Hartsell Brown

Geese honked, ducks quacked, and chickens cackled a requiem in Indianapolis. Indianapolis, Oklahoma, that is. It was vesper-time, but the fowls were the only supplicants. They belonged at two trailer houses, the only occupied buildings where once stood a thriving, hopeful, and noisy community.

Located about 90 miles west of Oklahoma City on the Rock Island Railroad, the site and surrounding country were tagged "Land of the Fair God" on July 13, 1893, by B. F. Conover, an Indiana Professor.

Writing in the Rushville (Indiana) REPUBLICAN, the former superintendent of Rush County Schools described in glowing terms the Cheyenne-Arapaho country, where he planned to move his family. He had homesteaded there on Beaver Creek near Arapaho in 1892.

At that time, Arapaho, the nearest town to the future Indiana namesake, was five miles northwest. It had a post office, established in a covered wagon, and a newspaper, THE ARAPAHO BEE. Conover's article was reprinted in "The . . . Bee."

*"This is the loveliest country one ever traveled over. The valleys of the North and South Canadian and Washita Rivers are unequaled in the United States for beauty and fertility."*

*"Especially is this true of the Washita Valley, which is from one to four miles wide, opening into beautiful undulating prairies with here and there ground rising into hills, 50 to 200 feet high, with clear running streams. . . ."*

*"In G County, where one year ago no white man lived and only red men and coyotes held sway, now there are five organized churches, eight Sunday schools, and 15 district schools."*

Others made similar reports of Cheyenne-Arapaho country, which became part of Oklahoma Territory in May, 1890. After 3,320 Indians were allotted 160 acres each (1890-1892), the rest was settled by run.

G County, in which lay the site of future Indianapolis, was renamed Custer County for Maj. Gen. George Custer soon after it was organized. Children in that vicinity attended Lone

Star School, three miles north of the site.

Records for Lone Star go back to 1896, when Allie Wolverton of Arapaho was teacher. Board members were R. W. Wadsworth, J. A. Carlsburg, and J. W. Dixon.

In 1901, the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf built a railroad from Weatherford to Elk City, crossing the site of future Indianapolis, then leased to CRI&P (Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific). About 12 miles west of Weatherford was Bear Siding.



PHOTO BY PAT LAZELLE

Rusted Ranger: Remnant of a bygone day.



Five teetering mailboxes await delivery.

The name might have come from an Indian or from the animal. There were bears in Oklahoma in early days. Anyway, enough people gathered around Bear Siding to organize a town. By February, 1902 or earlier, it was called Indianapolis and a post office was established. The Newcomb Addition was annexed.

Owned by Benjamin and Edith Newcomb, the land was surveyed by J. A. Cailbug, county surveyor, and offered for sale. W. C. Russell was registrar of deeds.

In February, 1904, a Democratic paper, INDIANAPOLIS BEE, opened for business. The first publisher's name was unavailable, but three months later, H. A. Solderberg from Iowa became the "third king of the hive." James Potter from Custer City was printer and assistant editor.

The one-sheet publication came out on Fridays and cost \$1.00 a year, "paid in advance, if possible."

The first subscriber under new management was Miss Katie Newcomb of Washington, Iowa. The next were W. M. Ross of Indianapolis and his son, H. W., of Izard County, Arkansas.

The paper extolled the advantages and beauty of the area as graphically as Professor Conover had a year earlier. Within a radius of six miles were 5000 acres of cotton, many acres of corn, wheat, kaffir, broomcorn, fruit, and vegetables. Pleas were made for a gin, bank, elevator, and hardware store.

Within the next few issues of the "Bee," there were ads by A. Joslen, photographer, who bought his supplies in Weatherford; Landlord and Mrs. E. Spiva's boarding house with meals for 15c; Hardin and Potter Store, where shirts cost 30 to 50c.

Coffee was seven pounds for \$1.00, eggs 8½c a dozen, and butter 12c a pound. Other items for sale were buggy whips and peanut seed.

J. A. Newcomb advertised a shoe and harness shop. Soon he added a silver plating apparatus to "make tin spoons look genuine."

From Weatherford were ads by Wilbourn wagonyard, with J. D. Samples, proprietor, and George T. Webster, attorney-at-law. A story from the same town stated "further evidence automobiles were dangerous." One of the "heavy machines" ran over a dog, breaking its neck.

There was a story about the new city of Clinton on a hill, six miles west. (Indianapolis was then three years old.) Clinton had adopted a whole page of ordinances.

Joseph Wolverton near Bellview sent for a consignment of mail boxes for a route to be established July 5, north and east of Indianapolis. The temporary carrier was to receive \$65 a month for serving 120 families. Postmistress was Henrietta Jones.

Oklahoma City was mentioned as having 33,000 population.

By June 3, 1904, Indianapolis had 150 people. boasted "a shoeshop, two churches, a notary public, boarding house, A-1 blacksmith, law-abiding citizens, two grocery stores, good drinking water, printing office, public scales, photography gallery, fine park and grove, excellent facilities, progressive businessmen, rock for building, a building good enough for a grade school, and drawbacks like any other place."

## LANDMARKS

Also, there was "a lodge of the M.W.A. pending, the handsomest girls and finest boys, the finest farming country in Custer County to draw trade from, fine jobbing center (Oklahoma City), a telephone exchange for short and long distance messages, large deposit of gyp within two miles, A-1 building material."

"A townsite on a slight incline with a good view of surrounding country; good business and residential lots, plenty of wood within hauling

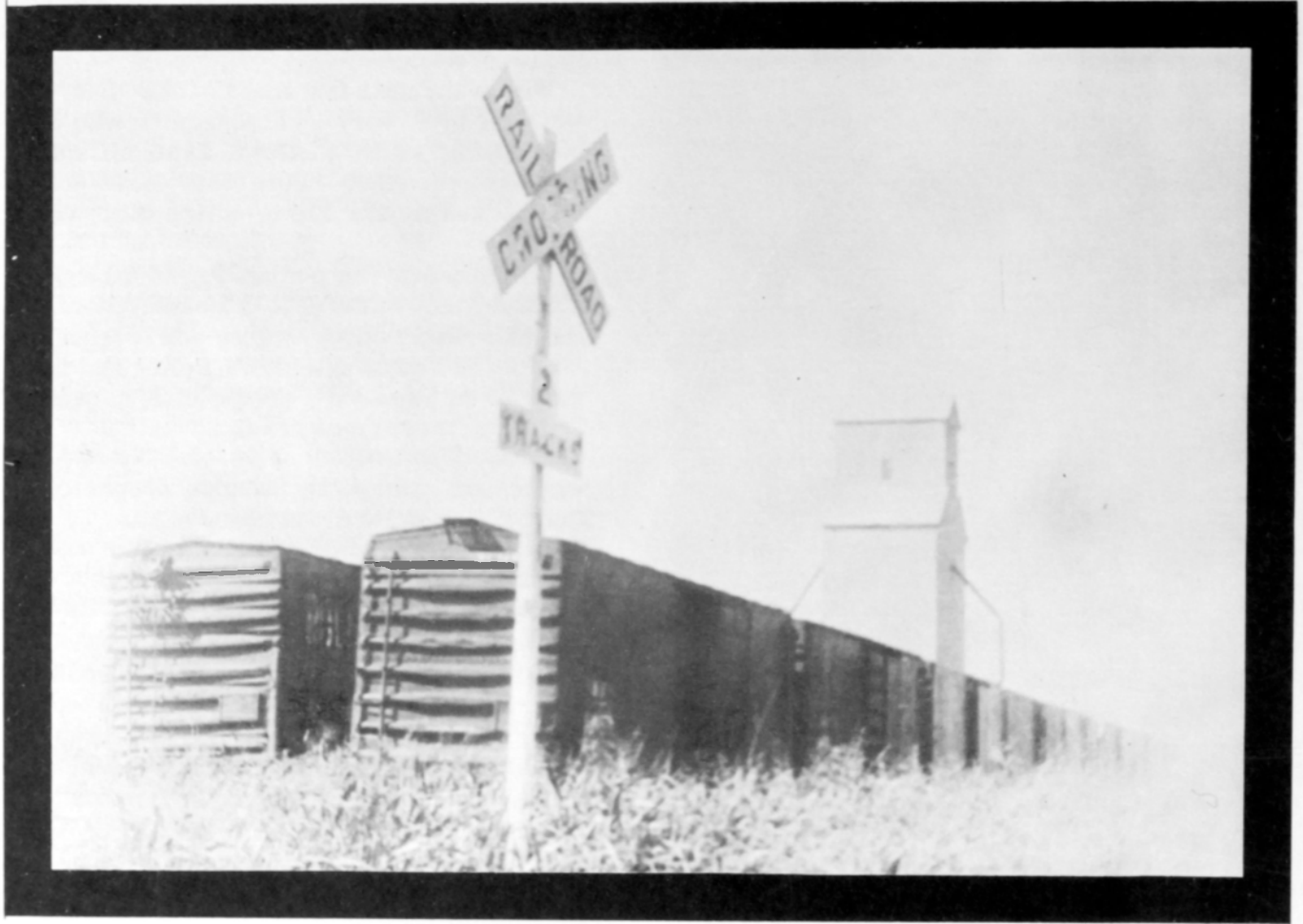
honest lawyer, dry goods store, first-class doctor, farm implement house, real estate man, no man who wants \$10 before he turns out \$1.00."

"Men who are not expecting to pick up \$20 gold pieces, but willing to work and hustle for them. No dead beats; none of this species ever helped build a town. . . all people who do not fill the qualifications for good citizenship keep on going until they reach Arapaho."

The town needed 500 paid up subscribers

45

PHOTO BY PAT LAZELLE



Elevator towers above once busy railroad passing Indianapolis.

distance. Coal costs about \$8.00 a ton unless you steal it from the railroad."

"Good fishing within a few miles and you can hunt almost anywhere. Rabbits are quite plentiful. Some farmers raise them for wool."

The "Bee" listed Indianapolis' needs: "a bank, cotton gin, drug store, lumberyard, harness shop, clothing store, grain elevator, hardware store,

for "the Bee, the smallest but most readable newspaper in Custer County — proof that good things come in small packages."

An issue of the "Bee" later that month begged for a gin. It listed cotton growers of 2,170 acres, but said about 3,000 acres were still unreported. Acreages ran from ten to 170 acres. Growers included: A. B. Stanberry, S. A. Sharum,

B. B. Newcomb, Tillison Cope, H. W. Newcomb, Hiram Newcomb, W. T. Mizelle, James Victory, E. Spira, and A. Joslen.

Also John Hardin, L. D. Hix, John Thurman, Grif Hardin, James Hays, Si Henry, Roy Jones, Henry Koch, Thomas Dozier, John Ballard, H. W. White, C. C. Kennedy, Charles Ivy, C. C. Clayton, H. N. Yearly, McCrea Bros., M. Jordan, Will Blakely, J. W. and W. W. Dickson, Doc Dewees, Monroe Sessions, Frank Burt, Jacob Bowles, L. J. Meeker.

And I. N. Sprawls, Fitzgerald Bellview, J.W. Hill, W. T. Jean, Lon and William Daves, Christ and Henry Gauger, Alten Smith, Henry Blair, E. W. Fitzgerald, Holman farm, F. Wadleigh, W. J. Carter, Charles Putnam, Kitchmiller, R. C. Charlton, and G. C. Janney.

The Modern Woodman of America was soon organized with H. A. Solderberg as V.C.; Will Victor, clerk; 14 beneficiary and three social members.

A lumber yard was established by A. L. West of Foss, and W. J. Newcomb used four teams to move his shoe and harness shop to Main Street. He added a carpet weaving machine.

A new Republican newspaper, THE HERALD, was established, with J. D. McGill as editor. The BEE's column, "Extract of Honey," dropped a few "stingers," criticizing THE HERALD's editor and all he advocated.

The column told, otherwise, of political rallies, a box supper, and good crops. Also that Indianapolis School had 26 pupils. Lula C. Bryan was teacher.

By July, 1904, there were four trains daily. One east and one west bound stopped on the flag. The others stopped only to let people off. A depot was scheduled for October 1, but the bank had been delayed. The proposed cashier was hired by another bank at a better salary.

J. M. Cherry of Mena, Arkansas, planned to construct a gin adjoining the railroad track. H. A. Solderberg, the BEE editor, was in the real estate business.

A cyclone and cloudburst, terrors of the plains, struck July 8 (1904) on Turtle Creek, two and a half miles west. The worst tragedy was to the Fleming Family. Their house was blown off the foundation and washed down-creek, drowning

Mrs. Fleming and five others. Mr. Fleming lodged in a treetop and was rescued. Railroad tracks and bridges were washed out.

The Indianapolis Development Company with headquarters in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, was working to make the town 1,000 population. Incorporated under the laws of Oklahoma Territory with capital stock of \$50,000, it was headed by B. B. Newcomb of Indianapolis, president; J. E. Dunn of Oklahoma City, vice-president; C. S. Avery of Vinita, I.T., secretary-treasurer. The office was in the Culbertson Building, Oklahoma City.

L. D. Hix planned to build a store 22x60 feet with a \$100 glass front.

No copies of the newspapers past 1904 were available. Additional information came from interviews with Mrs. John Gossman, near Indianapolis; Mrs. Ray Ford, a former resident of Indianapolis then living in Clinton, and Cloyse Boyd, a game ranger from Arapaho.

Mrs. Gossman, formerly Cora Helen Howenstein, was once postmistress at Arapaho, Custer County Court Clerk, a teacher, Public Welfare worker, and supervisor of Public Health in the Indian Service. Her husband, John, and parents came to Indianapolis in 1904 when he was 12 years old.

They came by train from Illinois, finding the country dry. But Indianapolis was a nice little town, one of the biggest in Custer County. It was platted along the Rock Island Railroad.

Harden's Store sold coffee from barrels. People



PHOTO BY PAT LAZELLE

Ominous warning to passersby.



bought it in large quantities, because it was cheap, and had it ground. Frank Harden had a cotton gin, and there was a school. Later, Henry Hays operated an elevator.

Ruth Clark married Ray Ford in 1932 and lived in Indianapolis. Her in-laws, the Mack Fords, moved there in 1911 from a farm east of town. Mack had a store and sold harness, horseshoes, groceries, gasoline, and about all essentials of life.

The post office was in the store; Mack was postmaster.

Of the four boys and one girl in the Mack Ford Family, Ray was the only survivor. He recalled being pitcher on the town's baseball team, singing with his family, and attending the local school.

Later, Indianapolis had 325 people. There were a depot, from which up to 25 sacks of mail were shipped; a telegraph operator, section house, three story school, mill, two lumber yards, two blacksmith shops, three stores, and two churches.

The Mennonites bought one of the churches and moved it five and a half miles southeast of Thomas. It still stands.

During picnics in the park, horses and buggies were tied to racks 100 yards in each direction. Sometimes small circuses came to town.

Ray Ford operated a barbershop and the post office. Some of the mail carriers were Mr. Langdon, Dick Wadsworth, and Scott Smith.

Up to 1940, the "COW" train (Clinton, Oklahoma, Western) stopped or could be flagged. Mail was hung on a crane to be snatched as the train whizzed past.

A severe snowstorm struck April 9, about 1936. An airplane dropped mail and bread. People drove tractors to the store.

Before REA, most residents had kerosene lamps. Ford's Store had carbide. During WPA days, the 1930s, everybody got a good outdoor toilet.

When Ray and Ruth married, the school was already gone. Their children attended Red Rock, a two room building southwest of town. They were Gary Ford, doctor of optometry, Elk City; Douglas Ford, manager of Hoffman Furniture, Clinton, and Mrs. Joy Smith.

Other residents of Indianapolis included: the H. C. Greens, later managers of College Oaks Apartments in Weatherford; Mr. and Mrs. Woods, the Nichols Family north of town, Simon Ford,



PHOTO BY PAT LAZELLE

August sun and entwining gourds reclaim idle masonry.

Roy Lewellen, section foreman who was killed by a train; the Browns, Jack Gayle, the Sawatzkys south of town, and Tom Whitworth.

Nobody contacted had information about Professor Conover from Indiana.

Highway 66, automobiles, and migration to the cities took its toll of Indianapolis. The post office was discontinued August 15, 1949. Stores closed; the community dwindled and died.

Still standing, the grain elevator reached into a gray sky, a monument to a dream, a birth, and a death. Nearby oil pumps reached into the earth for "black gold."

The geese, ducks, and chickens became silent, their requiem ended. Twilight turned to dusk and dusk to deep darkness. Rain clouds swept in to garnish tomorrow's whatever in "The Land of the Fair God."■