

Brown County Fifty Years Ago

By GEORGE S. COTTMAN

Brown County's inherent poverty and its topographical relation to the most prosperous part of the state paved the way for its present publicity. Lying at the northern boundary of the broken country that distinguishes certain areas of southern Indiana from the level lands up state, it thrusts itself into the central plain as if offering its wild and picturesque surface as a play-ground to the plainsmen of the North who are less favored with romantic surroundings. In the heart of it lies the town of Nashville, some forty miles from Indianapolis—an easy journey in this auto age.

A succession of developments has placed Brown County in the limelight. After long years in which no railroad touched the County at any point, one of those harbingers of civilization cut across a corner of the region, but missed Nashville by six miles, so there had to be a connecting bus. By reason of some mysterious atmospheric richness, the hills and dales and wild, woodsy landscapes are bathed in a beauty of tints all their own, and this, coupled with an abundance of log cabins and the quaint living conditions, survivals of the pioneer period, made Brown County a wonderful find for those persons who are searching for the unusual in human life and nature. Consequently the painter folk, Gypsies of American life, came drifting thitherward till by and by a full fledged artists' colony was established.

Not a few members of the artist gild manifested their faith in the permanency of the wild country by buying property and building homes there. A natural result has been that other people of idyllic tastes with leanings towards the idea of a lodge in the wilds began to look about for cabins where they might flee the madding world on occasion. In time, came Kin Hubbard, the creator of that most popular of rural characters, *Abe Martin*, whose sayings were for a score of years household words far and wide. The gifted humorist made Brown County his habitat, which helped not a little to keep that natural beauty spot in the public eye. More recently the state Department of Conservation has added to its system of public holdings an extensive forest and game preserve near Nashville. The highest hill crest, Weed-

patch Knob, has been crowned with a steel observation tower, from the top of which what seems the most of Indiana can be seen at one glance. Last, but not least as factors in the changes that have taken place in the County during a half century are the improved roads and the ever present automobile for these have made the region easily accessible.

Fifty years ago Brown County was famous in a small way as an isolated region, difficult of access, peopled by hill folk who lived in log cabins, the conservers of primitive customs rapidly passing in other parts of the state. That wild country borrowed romance, also, from the tradition that it was a land of gold. As early as 1850, as a local offset to the California excitement of that period, newspapers began to spread tidings about findings of the precious metal in this little known Indiana county. For years there persisted dreams of great wealth hidden there. Along with the gold, in the tradition, went precious stones of divers kinds, from diamonds down, all of which were to be found. Then there were the fruits, particularly peaches, which abounded in season.

Among the country boys of my acquaintance, it was considered quite an outing to drive "down to Brown" in the latter part of summer, with a camping outfit, to return with a load of its choicest peaches. Thus there were multiplied incentives to the adventure of exploring the county, made more intriguing by the difficulty of getting there.

That is why I, a farmer youth, with a disposition to extend the horizon of my little world, made my first trip into this fascinating land of hills, afoot and alone, prepared to live like an Indian if need be. The nearest railway point to my Ultima Thule was the village of Morgantown, northward of the county line. This I reached from Franklin over an obscure "jerk-water" road on a mixed train which conveyed a miscellaneous burden of freight and passengers all at the same time, the passengers riding in an ancient coach appended like a tail to the freight cars. When the train was moving, people, live stock and merchandise went rocking and jolting gayly along the right-of-way at a fifteen mile clip, but when the train stopped to leave consignments of freight at wayside platforms, many of the travellers would leave the coach to

stretch their legs and look about. At one of these stops, the conductor invited us all over to a nearby orchard to enjoy some apples, and while there the owner and his wife came from an adjacent house to have a social chat with the visitors. The good woman brought with her some samples of dry goods which she gave to our conductor with the request that he do a little shopping for her when at Martinsville and leave the purchases on his way back. A feature that added further variety to the journey was a load of squealing hogs, that were going to market in a car immediately in front of the passenger coach.

When this happy assortment of swine, people, farming implements, dry goods, and what-not reached Morgantown it still lacked an hour or so of dark. Not far to the south of us the visible hills of Brown County beckoned, and, as I had with me rations for a cold supper, I tarried not but struck out on foot trusting to Providence for a bed a little later on. The rude dirt road which I followed led into regions that grew wilder and more broken, and the humble houses along the wayside became farther and farther apart till they seemed to cease altogether. The prospect for a bed grew correspondingly slim, and finally, as the dusk deepened into night, a strawstack just over the fence at the side of the road, suddenly loomed up in the darkness. What better refuge than this did a husky young man out for adventure need? Investigation proved it to be a new stack with an abundance of clean soft straw out of which to make a nest on the leeward side. To abbreviate this part of the narrative, there I spent the night, sleeping the sleep of the weary, on a couch that seemed of feathers.

This was my introduction to Brown county. To tell anything like the complete story of my haphazard wanderings there for several days—of the diverse characters I met and the interesting things that befell me would be to swell this article beyond proper limits. I can only give the high lights as they linger in my memory. First, I recall the wildness of the place. If you read the records of Indiana in the Civil War, you will find that draft-dodgers and deserters from the army at that period came from afar to lose themselves in the quiet and remote hills of Brown County. I can see why they did so, for I got lost there so often that it ceased to be a novelty.

Since I was headed for no place in particular and rather enjoyed not knowing where I was, I journeyed by the winding paths as often as by the primitive public roads.

The crude by-ways took me into the very heart of the fastnesses, and as they always led somewhere, being for the most part short cuts from place to place, they not infrequently brought me to a log-cabin home where the family lived in real seclusion. To these people the unexpected advent of a stranger with a haversack on his shoulder was no commonplace event and it needed only a friendly advance on my part to encourage social reciprocity. One instance stands out conspicuously. That was when I came upon a veritable "cabin in the clearing," buried in the woods, miles, as it seemed to me, from anywhere. A man and a boy were plowing among the stumps with a yoke of oxen to the accompaniment of vociferous "gees" and "haws," while in and about the cabin were the rest of the family—wife, children, dogs, pigs and chickens. The prospect of a morning call caused all other business to be suspended and I became the center of interest. The man was as curious about my manner of living as I was about his. When I told him how I happened to be there, he could not quite comprehend why anybody should come so far just to see a wild, hill country. However, he "reckoned" it took all sorts of people to make a world. As for himself, there seemed a reason why one should spend money and sweat to visit a big town to see the sights. "Or a cir-cuss," added his young scion, the ox driver, "I'd walk clear to Injenapolis to see a cir-cuss, if pap 'ud let me."

Our little confab was broken up when an unruly member of this backwoods family, a long-legged shoat, came familiarly nosing about its master's feet. A long-eared hound resented the intrusion by sharply nipping the young porker. The latter, galvanized into sudden activity, got entangled in the man's underpinning and the biped came down in a heap, wildly clawing the air with all four limbs. Up he came again with a club in his hand and fury in his eye, but, as both shoat and dog had vamoosed to a safe distance, he shied the club at the son who stood by shrieking in irreverent mirth. Next, the good-wife appeared in the doorway with the query: "What's all the furse? What's the matter, Pa?" The hillman was in no mood to explain, and I, bidding the family a hasty fare-

well, disappeared in the brush where I was no longer obliged to repress my laughter.

Among the interesting characters that I ran across was an inventor living in the northern part of Brown County. His name I have now forgotten, but the man was evidently a student and a thinker, as well as a skillful mechanic. The proof of this was the numerous ingenious contrivances that cluttered up his workshop. One was a novelty in the form of a table with certain parts movable so that one sitting at it could bring within reach of his hand whatever was on any part of it. Another was a washing machine, which he was then working on with the intention of showing it at the next Indiana State Fair. I have often wondered what became of this man and if any of his creations were successes.

As one of the few definite objects of my trip was to hunt up the "gold region," I enquired my way to the likeliest place to satisfy my curiosity on that point. This turned me in the direction of Bear Creek, which flows through the west part of the County. I brought up at Richard's Postoffice, which was, I believe, about where Trevlac now stands. Bear Creek, I was told, ranked as the best gold-bearing stream in the County. With every freshet the tiny flecks of yellow mixed with black sand would be washed down the Creek and lodged in the hollows or cracks of the bed rock. For more than a generation, men had been prospecting up and down that creek with their pans, washing for gold. An expert could count on making ordinary wages at the business, and, as the lure of bigger returns was ever before the gold-seeker, not a few followed the business of panning for the precious metal in preference to that more ordinary form of exercise known as work.

Richard's Postoffice took its name from a pioneer, old Johnny Richards, who had lived there since 1830, and who now, as he expressed it, owned more fine scenery than any other man in Indiana, his holdings amounting to upwards of a thousand acres of hills and hollows with small valleys. I spent a night at his house and was entertained in good old country fashion. There was good eating to surfeit which was supplemented by many reminiscences. One story was to the effect that, soon after accounts of gold in Brown County began to spread, a group from Indianapolis, hot on the scent of wealth, leased of Richards a stretch of Bear Creek and constructed a

long flume of picked oak timber for gold washing. Just as they completed it, however, one of the typical hill freshets came along and carried the whole structure away. What became of the "syndicate" of gold miners, Johnny Richards never learned.

Richard's home, I found, housed a vanishing art—that of the pioneer hand-loom, and an artist-weaver, of a type that was then growing scarce, in the person of old Mrs. Richards. The big loom, with its piece of unfinished fabric, stood in a little room adjoining the kitchen and the weaver worked at it zealously whenever able to get away from her domestic duties. When she saw that I was interested in her handiwork, she proudly showed me the wealth of products that she had accumulated—counterpanes, table covers and what not, including genuine linsey-woolsey cloth, out of which she still made her husband's clothes. Of the garments that he had worn in past years, she had thriftily manufactured patchwork quilts, also artistically fashioned as to colors and needlework. She was innocent of the knowledge that she was a natural artist and a faithful exponent of that first art in our state which has never been credited as it deserves.

I might tell other interesting experiences among these naïve and friendly hill folk as they were fifty years ago before they knew so much about visiting tourists. There was the goldsmith at Georgetown who manufactured frames for spectacles, furnishing a market for the Brown County gold, but his name I have forgotten. Also, there was Dr. A. J. Ralph of Belleville, a country practitioner. On the side he was a naturalist, taxidermist, collector and all-round scientist. His office looked like an aviary with its hundred or more Brown County birds, all of his own mounting. He also had a cabinet of insects indigenous to the region, and quite a surprising collection of precious stones—small, but genuine, such as opals, garnets, rubies and one diamond. All of them, he told me, had been gathered from the creek beds of the County. He seemed delighted to have a visitor who was interested in his hobbies and we spent a cordial and animated hour together, parting, finally, with the reluctance of old friends.

I made a note at the time in regard to the last meal I ate before crossing the county-line on my way homeward. The

bill of fare as I recorded it follows: "Ham and eggs, beans, bread, potatoes, peach-butter, two kinds of jelly, peaches and cream, cake, pie, coffee and milk." The price was twenty-five cents.