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A Brief History
OF
"Old Knox"
The Mother County

By

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Former Principal of the French-
town School,
Vincennes, Indiana

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**A BRIEF HISTORY OF OLD KNOX,
THE MOTHER COUNTY
OF INDIANA**

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School, Vincennes.

INTRODUCTION

"Old Knox" has been a political slogan in Indiana for years.

This has aroused the question "Why?" in many minds. Some children living near an old French lady, who had been in the midst of "the history making" of Indiana, asked Grandmere Persenue "Why do people say 'Old Knox?'"

Her explanation contains facts that all children should know.

THE AUTHOR.

"Grandmere, why is our county always called Old Knox?" To Mattie Hopewell's question Grandmere replied: "Because it is older than this state. Oui, strange is it not that a county is older than the state of which it now forms a part and it was more than twice as large as Indiana now is. Bien on July 13, 1787, Congress passed an Ordinance for the government of the territory northwest of the Ohio River. The state of Virginia ceded her rights to this land January 2, 1781, demanding that the French and Canadian settlers in that domain continue to enjoy all

the rights and privileges that they had while under the British rule and which had been granted them while under the state of Virginia. Congress accepted Virginia's demands, but not until 1787 was the great "Ordinance of 1787, for the government of the Northwest Territory" passed.

"Grandmere, you talk like a lawyer," suggested Grace. "Oui, one must tell these American facts like a school teacher" said grandmere smiling as she continued. "The Northwest Territory embraced all the land north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi and from it have been carved the five great states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and that part of Minnesota lying east of the Mississippi River and extending to Lake Superior. This Northwest Territory was vaguely claimed by Connecticut and some of the Eastern states because their charters from the King of England granted them land from ocean to ocean. Every one knows where the western boundary of the U. S. would have been placed had not George Rogers Clark won the Northwest Territory from the British in 1779. After capturing the many French forts on the Mississippi River, Clark made one of

the most wonderful marches in the history of the U. S. This march across the flooded prairies and bottom land of Illinois was stupendous in the discomfort and misery of the soldiers and stupendous in its results, for the diplomats who settled the final treaty of the Revolutionary War in Paris were forced to recognize the claims of 'Conquest by Gen. George Rogers Clark,' whatever their views on 'Charter Rights.' Oui, oui, the English also had to acknowledge the right of conquest of the Northwest Territory by George Rogers Clark. This gave the struggling newly formed United States the means by which its debts could be paid. The national leaders organized the land gained by George Rogers Clark, and called it the 'Northwest Territory' and on July 13, 1787, they gave to the United States that wonderful document known as 'The Ordinance of 1787' of which Daniel Webster wrote: 'We are accustomed to praise the lawgivers of antiquity; we help to perpetuate the fame of Solon and Lycurgus; but I doubt whether one single law of any lawgiving nation, ancient or modern, has produced effects of more distinct marked and lasting character than the Ordinance of 1787'. "The Decla-

ration of Independence,' 'The Constitution,' 'The Ordinance of 1787' form a documentary triumvirate of the American Government."—A Hoosier. This ordinance provided for freedom of worship; it organized a system of free schools to be supported by taxation and by money derived from the sale of public lands. It enacted that slavery and involuntary servitude, except for punishment for crimes, should be prohibited forever in the Northwest Territory."

"It is claimed that Rev. Manasseh Cutler was the lever that wedged this slavery plank firmly into the Ordinance. He, as agent for the Ohio Land Company, pledged himself ready to buy, 5,000,000 acres of land in the Northwest Territory if it were organized as a free territory. He won. No slaves were to be held except those of the French who were permitted to keep theirs. He planted a colony at the mouth of the Muskingum River in the summer of 1788.

"Bien, Congress appointed Major General Arthur St. Clair as the first Governor, and Winthrop Sargent as secretary of the Northwest Territory. Governor St. Clair, on his journey to the new dominion over which he was to preside, stopped at what was then

known as Fort Harmar and now Marietta, Ohio. After staying a short time, he went down the Ohio and up the Mississippi to Kaskaskia, Illinois, sending Secretary Sargent to Old Post Vincennes on the Ouabache, to lay off a county. Secretary Sargent did this during the summer of 1790, making the boundaries of the county include all the land now known as the states of Indiana and Michigan. He named this vast stretch of land in honor of the great General Knox, who was then the Secretary of War.

Knox County continued in its first allotted size and prestige until 1790, 1798 when it was reduced in size but not in material richness. A part of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio and all of Michigan were formed into a county that was named in honor of General Anthony Wayne, its county seat being Detroit.

In 1796 the great Northwest Territory was divided into, not states or territories, but just counties: Washington County had its headquarters at Marietta, Ohio; Hamilton County with Cincinnati as its county seat; St. Clair County had Cahokia, Illinois, as its county seat; and Old Post Vincennes was the rallying place for Old Knox, the mother county.

St. Clair County was divided, its southern part was made into Randolph County, Illinois. Jefferson, Adams and Ross Counties were organized with Washington and Hamilton Counties in Ohio Territory.

May 7, 1800, Congress, with the approval of the President; passed "An Act dividing the territory of the United States northwest of the Ohio River into two separate governments," Ohio being one and Indiana the other. This was the year in which Connecticut fully yielded all claims to the Northwest Territory. Early in March 1784, Congress instructed a committee with Thomas Jefferson as chairman to fashion a permanent form of government for the entire new territory, called Western Territory. Virginia ceded her claims in 1784, Massachusetts in 1785, and Connecticut partially 1786 and fully in 1800. Oui, politics of course, mais the French did not care for state privileges; we liked not the heavy tax to pay twice. In 1800 William Henry Harrison, who had been the delegate to Congress from Ohio Territory, was chosen the first Governor of Indiana Territory, which included the present states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin

and the part of Minnesota lying east of the Mississippi River.

John Gibson was appointed as first secretary. Secretary Gibson came at once to Vincennes, but, the Governor did not arrive until the next year. On Jan. 10, 1801, he issued a proclamation requiring all judges to attend court on Monday, Jan. 12, 1801. The first General Assembly of the Territory of Indiana convened in Vincennes July 20, 1805. The members of the House of Representatives were: Jesse B. Thomas of Dearborn County, David Floyd of Clark County, Benjamin Parke and John Johnson of Knox County, Shadrach Bond and William Briggs of St. Clair County, and General Fisher of Randolph County. Harrison's old legislative house and the desk he used in it are still preserved." "Have you seen them, grandmere?"

"Oui, oui, so have you. Here are pictures of both house and desk," said grandmere.

"Old Knox had been cut in 1798 on the north to form Wayne County; in 1802 Clark and Randolph Counties were chipped off; in 1805 the territory of Michigan was formed; Illinois was separated from Indiana Territory in 1809.

In 1805 the territory of Indiana had the counties of Dearborn, Clark, Knox and St. Clair. In 1810 Gibson and Warrick Counties were cut from Old Knox; in 1817 Sullivan County was formed; in 1820 Green County reduced the "Mother County of Knox" to its present limit.

Old Knox County was in 1791 divided into two townships—Vincennes and Clarksville. Vincennes Township began at the dividing line between Knox and St. Clair Counties, its south boundary the Ohio River to the Blue River on the east, the Wabash its western boundary; its symbol, the letter V, Vincennes Township, still exists with modified boundaries.

The order read, "Clarksville Township shall comprehend the remainder of the said county of Knox, from the Blue River to the bounds thereof of the county of Hamilton. The letter C is its symbol or mark."

In 1801 an order at the court was given to divide Vincennes Township. The part containing the village of Vincennes, the upper and lower prairies and the commons shall be known as Vincennes Township. Ordered the second township be named and styled Harrison Township; this name was

in honor of the great Indian fighter, William Henry Harrison, also the ninth President of the United States.

Then was ordered that a third township be formed and known by the name of Palmyra Township. Its name was for the old Bible Palmyra in Asia.

Steen Township was taken from Palmyra in 1857 and named in honor of Richard Steen, a pioneer settler.

In 1808 Busseron Township was laid out in the northern part of Vincennes Township. This township was named in honor of Francois Busseron, a Frenchman who acted as an Indian interpreter, and who was one of the judges appointed by Secretary Sargent in 1790. Many interesting Indian and Mound Builder relics have been found near Oaktown situated in this township. The Shakers settled on Shaker prairie in Busseron Township in 1805. They built a saw mill and also a grist mill on Busseron Creek. Their works in buildings and manufacturing were varied and interesting. The Great Pear Tree of Busseron Township was 12 feet in circumference at its base, 120 feet high, bore crops averaging 50 bushels, was planted by a Shaker and was visited

by the noted Henry Ward Beecher, who took its dimensions.

Johnson Township was organized in 1812, but was not reduced to its present limitations until 1823. It was named for Thomas Johnson, who settled there in 1800.

"Vigo Township was set off in 1837 and was named in honor of Col. Francois Vigo who so generously gave financial aid to Gen. George Rogers Clark when he was greatly in need of supplies for his army. Col. Francois Vigo is justly called 'the Robert Morris of the Northwest' and George Clark is called the 'Father of the Northwest Territory.'

"Vincennes Township, one of the original townships into which Knox County was divided, was named in honor of Francois Morgane de Vincennes, one of the early French commandants of the Old Post on the Ouabashé River. The Sieur de Vincennes, went with de Artaguiette, who was in command at Old Fort Chartres on the Mississippi, to subdue the Chickasaw Indians. These two commandants from the upper posts of Louisiana were to be met by Bienville with his army from the Gulf of Mexico. Dashing de Artaguiette, noble St. Ange and gallant de Vin-

cennes led their batteaus filled with their soldiers to the Chickasaw strong holds and waited for Bienville and his force from the south. The Indians who accompanied the French were anxious to fall on their enemy, the Chickasaws, and could not be restrained, especially when a titled Frenchman, who understood not the Indian warfare, taunted de St. Ange and de Vincennes for cowardly waiting. Stung by the unmerited words St. Ange said, 'We will fight and wherever you are I will be at your side or in advance, never in the rear.' The French won two forts, but at the third village they were surrounded: St. Ange, de Vincennes and Father Senet could have escaped with some Indian allies, but would not desert their soldiers. All were burned at the stake. In honor of the heroic conduct of the brave Sieur de Vincennes, the Old Post on the Wabash came to be known, after this in 1736, as Post de Vincennes; also in honor of this hero, one of the first townships was named Vincennes Township.

Widner Township received its name from John Widner, its first settler, who came to Knox County in 1798. Fort Widner was built in the township in 1812.

Washington Territory was named in honor of the "Father of Our Country," the first President.

Decker Township was cut off in 1812 the same year as Johnson Township. It was named in honor of Luke Decker who settled there in 1783. This township is noted and known all over the country for its fine melons.

Knox County has always been an interesting spot. The Mound Builders left their monumental insignia on it. The Indians loved its land and water. The French from the days of La Salle have ever had homes covered with vines, where all gathered to feast and dance. Missionaries and fur traders from the days of Juchereau de St. Dennis have had a church and a trading post on its land. The English-speaking people have ever found peace, plenty and prosperity in the soil of Old Knox. Theologians, philosophers, sages, writers, workers, educators and politicians have found the air of Old Knox conducive to spiritual, mental and physical alertness. They have been called to fill honored positions from Massachusetts to California and on the oceans have done valiant work. The roll call of hon-

ored names from Old Knox would today bring responses from many states, colonies and foreign lands.

In old Post Vincennes in Old Knox County the first public school west of the Alleghany Mts. was taught. Washington, the first President of the U. S. ordered Congress to pay Father Rivet at Post Vincennes on the Ouabache two hundred dollars a year for teaching the Indian and white children in his parish. This father therefore was the first public school teacher in the state or rather territory of Indiana. Here were gathered all the children, Indians as well as the white, in the first public school in the Old Knox and therefore the first in the Territory of Indiana. Old Knox claims the distinction of having her first teacher paid by the First President.

If Old Knox County claimed her original boundaries she could call many writers from the poet, James Whitcomb Riley, to the humblest newspaper scribe to sing her praises. This diminished Old Knox County is proud of being a vital fractional part of the great state of Indiana, whose centennial every county has assisted in celebrating. She is like a parent honoring childrens' birthdays.

“The Mother County’ knows that her early history was the history of the state of Indiana so she asks that the poet sing of the land, the trees, the air, oui, sing of the sturdy boys and girls fair from the schools of Old Knox County. They’ve filled honored posts all over our land, to deserving causes they gave a helping hand, these students of Mother County. Whether from log cabins or homes of stone; whether toasting with wine, or good corn pone, won honor for Old Knox County. Yell the slogan, ye students, one and all who can sing and sew, plow and maul the logs, found in Old Mother County. Educate! Educate! Educate rightly!—until women can use a free man’s might and vote in Old Mother County.”

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