

ical series edited by Donald Thompson

# Henry Ristine, Willianson Dunn quite a pair

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This article was originally presented as a paper at the Onatone Club on Dec. 12, 1954. The author was a local attorney, county prosecutor, city attorney and father of Richard O. Ristine.

By HARLEY T. RISTINE

This evening I want to take you back a good many years to one day when two horsemen, in the uniform of the United States Army, were riding side by side in what is now the west end of Market Street in Crawfordsville. One was a captain and the other a first lieutenant. They were in earnest conversation. The lieutenant asked the captain, "Did you notice that the volume of water flowing out of that hill, a half a mile back?" The Captain replied "yes," and have you noticed the fertile land here, covered with beech and sugar trees?" Said the lieutenant, "Captain, this is the best land we have seen in our travels. The drainage is excellent and I have made up my mind that when this war is over, I am coming back here with my family and make this spot my home."

The year was 1813. These soldiers were scouts and the war of 1812 was going on. They were traveling out of Fort Harrison located near Terre Haute and they were looking for hostile Indians. The captain was Williamson Dunn, later known as Judge Williamson Dunn, one of the founders of Hanover College and Indiana University. The lieutenant was Henry Ristine, my great-grandfather. Both of these men lived at the time in Madison, down on the Ohio River.

Henry Ristine did return here with his family in 1823 and his arrival is described by Williamson Dunn's son, Gen. William McKee Dunn, then a lad of nine years. "In the front was a large covered wagon,

covers the business part of Crawfordsville. On March 1, 1823, the first board of county commissioners was elected with 61 votes being cast.

This county was named for Gen. Richard Montgomery and the town for Hon. William Harris Crawford of Georgia who was a personal and political friend of Ambrose Whitlock. It has been erroneously reported that our town was named for Col. William Crawford of Virginia, a distinguished soldier, who in the year 1782, while leading a volunteer force against hostile Indians, was captured, tortured and burned at the stake. But a sketch of the life of Maj. Whitlock makes very clear for whom the town was named.

The house which my great grandfather built and moved into in 1823 was on a site immediately south of the present Ramsey Hotel. It became known as the Tavern and was the only tavern in this part of Indiana for many years. Later on, he built another and larger tavern on the site of the old Post Office building, now used by the Eagles lodge.

Maj. Ristine was chosen one of the first Representatives to the state legislature from this county, being a member of that body in the session of 1826-27. Nine years later, he was again elected for the session of 1835-36 and again in 1837-38.

The first court ever held in the county was organized in the home of William Miller in May 1823. Judge Jacob Call of Vincennes presided. One John Wilson acted as clerk and Samuel D. Maxwell as sheriff. Judge Call was a lawyer of learn and ability and was appointed Judge of the First Judicial Circuit by Gov. Hendricks. He held Court here in 1823-24. Wilson spent a long time here and his

seeking homes. Men were here from all over this state as well as from Ohio and Kentucky, some even coming from Tennessee and Pennsylvania. Much land was sold at public auction to the highest bidder, with payments made in silver and gold. From the land office this money was sent to Louisville, Ky., and my grandfather, Ben T. Ristine, then a boy in his teens, conveyed \$40,000 in a two-horse wagon to that point. It required a week's time to make the journey. The roads were new and unmarked and passed over the great hills of Southern Indiana. In one place the kegs of coin had to be taken from the wagon and rolled up a steep hill by hand. I have heard my father tell what his father had told him about his sense of relief, whenever he recounted the incidents of that trip and seemed to see again the coin counted and receipted for by the agent of the government in Louisville.

In February of 1824, it was determined that a "jailhouse" should be built. This building was 24 x 20 with a double wall of logs. A space of one foot was provided between the outer and inner walls and the space between was filled with peeled poles not more than six inches thick. The foundation was stone 2 1/2 feet high by 3 feet broad and the floor of white oak timber 14 inches thick. The jail was built in the northeast corner of the present court house lot but in 1827, an inmate in attempting to burn off the lock of the door, burned the jail and escaped.

Sugar Creek in that early day was much more of a stream than at present. It was really a navigable river. In 1824, William Nicholson moved his family from Maysfield, Ky., to Crawfordsville in a keel boat of 10 tons. In this vessel he floated down

... recruiting druid of two great wars be roared like the sea.

In this same address, Gen. Wallace described some of the men who had figured prominently in that old court house. Rightly heads the list, Lockwood, the first lawyer, saying: "I was Rufus A. Lockwood, a man with will to lead amongst a dozen like, and mentally strong enough to have carried the public cares of a continent. Such as Tighman A. Ford, gentle of heart, fervid of spirit, clear minded looking always, and when in the hot of argument, as the shadow of his untidy end was upon his side. Such was Albert S. We, not gifted with eloquence, but with a faculty of decisive statement that would have made a peerless in the days of higher culture now ceasing on. Such was Edwin A. Hannegan, who with the singing soul of Byron had all the passion of Chatham. Such was Henry S. Lane, who defiance of every law delivery swept the whole range of oratory I always left the jury doing whether he excel most in pathos, sarcasm, wit, repartee, logic, rhetoric. Such was Samuel C. Wilson, who cross examination of the standing terror witnesses. Such was James Wilson, who though his course was badly begun, commanded audiences like a mast-

The only contemporary history of Crawfordsville's early years that I know anything about is contained in a little book by Sanford Cox entitled "Early Settlers." The Cox family came here in 1824. This man was a school teacher and apparently kept a diary, describing in some detail his impressions of early days in this town. Here is the first entry in the diary: "Crawfordsville is the only town between Terre Haute and Fort Wayne. The land office is here. Maj. Whitlock is receiver and Williamson Dunn, Registrar. Maj. Ristine keeps the tavern in a two-story log house and Jonathan Powers has a little grocery. Smith has a store near the land office and Maj. Elston one by the tavern. Doctor Holmes and Curry are the only physicians in the town and Providence Curry the only lawyer.

From this diary we find that ceiling prices are nothing new. The County Commissioners fixed tavern prices for 1824 thus: Lodging per night, a shilling (12 1/2 cents); Victualing, .25 cents a meal; Horse and hay, 25 cents a night; Mule, the same. A man mauled and split rails at 25 cents a hundred or cut wood at 31 1/2 cents a cord.

Cox says that in coming to Crawfordsville they took the wilderness road and it must, have pretty bad for another family who came that way later in the fall said the briars were so thick they had to

wrap the horses' legs in deerskins, and one of the boys who had buckskin trousers had to do all the running after the stock.

But it was a gorgeous October weather when the Coxes came 120 years ago. Sanford says "The ox team moved slowly along the narrow way that the settlers had widened from an Indian trail, winding through a vast primeval forest in the rich drapery of autumn" When they made camp at night, he says "A more gorgeous landscape I never beheld, sleeping in the golden haze of Indian Summer."

A little further on in his diary is a note that really shows up the sparseness of the population. There has been a grave illness in the town and a messenger was dispatched to Terre Haute for a young skillful surgeon. After four days and nights traveling the messenger brought the doctor whom he found electioneering for Congress. His district extended from the Ohio River to Lake Michigan. Cox says the candidate's district was like the candidate's whiskers — extensively laid out but thinly settled.

Cox describes the Land Office sales in this way "the land sales commenced today (Dec. 24, 1824), a stirring, crowded time" The sale must have been an orderly affair because he says there was very little bidding against each other. The eastern speculators and land sharks called the settler that were already

here "squatters." Quoting the Diary, "If a speculator makes a bid on a settler's claim, he soon sees a score of eyes snapping at him and he soon crawfishes out of the crowd. The settlers tell the foreign capitalists to hold off till they enter the tracts of land they have already settled on; then they can pitch in, there will be land enough for all and more."

The Coxes entertained three guests through the land sale, friend from buck east. "We were glad to see them," Sanford records "and altho we live in a 12 x 16 cabin and are in the family, we make room for them by covering the floor with beds which is no uncommon occurrence in backwoods life."

According to the records that Baptist Church was the earliest and generously invited the other denominations to worship there. A Sunday School was organized in 1831. The Crawfordsville Record, The early newspaper of the county, says in 1831 in a proud editorial that the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians have large and commodious buildings and adds that the highest compliment the editor could pay to the city was that the church services were better attended than most places he had been.

No account of the early history of Crawfordsville would be complete without some reference to the founding of Wabash College. Crawfordsville was but nine years old

when in 1832 nine pioneers convened at the home of James Thomson to found this College.

The house of James Thomson was a small brick on the south side of West Wabash Avenue, just west of the present home of Dr. H. A. Kinnaman. As a small boy, I well remember my father pointing out to me the remains of the foundation of this house.

The minutes of this first meeting are dated Nov. 21, 1832. There were present Edmund O. Hovey, James A. Carnahan, James Thomson and John S. Thomson, ministers, and John Gilliland, Hezekiah Robinson and John McConnel, elders, together with the Rev. John M. Ellis agent for the Indiana branch of the Presbyterian Educational Society and Mr. Bradford King, a member of the Presbyterian Church of Rochester, N.Y.

To be continued



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Henry Ristine did return here with his family in 1823 and his arrival is described by Williamson Dunn's son, Gen. William McKee Dunn, then a lad of nine years. "In the front was a large covered wagon, drawn by six horses, the typical emigrant van of that day and following it was another wagon with two horses containing the family, and in the rear was the eldest son, Ben T. Ristine, then a boy of 15, on horse back driving the cattle."

This account was given my father, Theodore H. Ristine, by General Dunn when he was some seventy years of age, but he said the picture was to him as distinct as the day it occurred. The Dunn family had arrived in Crawfordsville shortly before.

William Miller built the first house in Crawfordsville and Henry Ristine the second. The date of the first is uncertain but the second was erected in the spring of 1823.

In February 1821, William Offield had built his cabin near the mouth of the creek which bears his name and is accorded the place of the first settler in Montgomery County. A large stone, properly engraved, now stands at the site of this cabin near the bridge crossing Offield's Creek. This was erected some years ago largely through the efforts of the late Dumont Kennedy.

The year 1823 was momentous in the early history of Crawfordsville and it was in that year that the Land Office was moved from Terre Haute to Crawfordsville with Major Ambrose Whitlock in charge. The original plat of the city was laid off at that time which now

one of the first Representatives to the state legislature from this county, being a member of that body in the session of 1826-27. Nine years later, he was again elected for the session of 1835-36 and again in 1837-38.

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On Aug. 28, 1823, the court convened for a second time. Tradition has it that it was at the tavern of Maj. Henry Ristine. A grand jury of twelve men were in attendance for whom twelve summons had been issued in the former term. However, the session lasted but one day.

At the May term of 1824, James Stith and William Burbridge were sworn in by the presiding judge as associate judges. They were plain men, not learned in the law. At the first trial of the May term of 1825, one Jessie Payton was sent to the penitentiary for two years for receiving stolen goods. This trial attracted considerable attention by reason of the prominent lawyers on each side from distant parts of the state.

The court house was a structure 26 feet long and 20 feet wide, two stories high, built on hewed logs to face 12 inches. The building was well constructed and heavy joints supported each floor. The four lower windows each contained 12 lights 8" x 10". This building stood on Main Street on the site of the old J.C. Penny store.

In Dec. 1824, the first public land sale was begun in the town and continued for many days. It had been advertised far and wide and prospective buyers came from all parts, mostly land speculators and persons

on the subject walls and the space between was filled with peeled poles not more than six inches thick. The foundation was stone 2½ feet high by 3 feet broad and the floor of white oak timber 14 inches thick. The jail was built in the northeast corner of the present court house lot but in 1827, an inmate in attempting to burn off the lock of the door, burned the jail and escaped.

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In 1831, the Board of Commissioners advertised for proposals for a new Court house as the old one had become too small. The county then had 3,000 people and the times required a new building to meet the changed conditions. It was determined to build it of brick, two stories high, 40 feet square, with a cupola in the center. It was erected on the site of the present court house and was built by one John Hughes at a cost of \$3,500. The first one had cost less than \$300. Henry Ristine owned a brick yard adjacent to the town and furnished the brick for this building.

When the present court house was begun in 1875, Gen. Lew Wallace made the address when the corner stone was laid and thus spoke of the old building: "It was a brave old building and bore a charmed life. For about 40 years the lightning tilled against its brown faces and the wind heaved at it. Still it endured. Several times fire got a good start in its interior. Nobody ran to put out the flames. Somehow it would not burn, but the last day came, and the walls taken down brick by brick now serve ignobly as part of a coffin factory. Who will say the old house was not a useful property, aside from the purpose for which it was built? For what a variety of uses it served in its day! Think of the polls that have been opened as its southeast window. The conventions that came in and went out of its south door. How the ancient auditorium has rung with the cheers of excited factions! What partism debates the two great pillars of this room have witnessed. It has been the scene of inquests of coroners and of post mortem examinations by doctors. On the other hand its walls have been hung with garlands for the festival and countless times echoed to the music of minstrels, lecturers and preachers. Congregations too poor to own churches and despised sects and professors of new and un-

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