

FAIRFIELD: SNAPSHOTS FROM THE MIND

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As is suggested by this work, a "glimpse" of the past may just be enough to kick wide open a door that leads you to places you could not have imagined.

Yet they are places that did exist, with people who did live them. You just have to look through the cracks to get a glimpse of it. When this work was suggested, I decided to dig into the history of Franklin County, notably the Fairfield area where I grew up. There isn't much.

Or so I thought.

Then I let my mind wander and decided to look at the dots on the old map, dots that didn't connect until I picked up my pencil. One line went this way, another went that way, and eventually it made a picture of something I could neither interpret nor explain. Having achieved an image of nothingness, I decided it was anything I wanted it to be.

And that might just be good enough.

So let's begin at the end and tromp down a few paths that lead us backward to the beginning.

Pull your car off onto one of the scenic overlooks at Brookville Lake and cast an imagining eye out onto the water. You have brought a pouch full of magic fairy dust, so reach in and grab a handful. With that sparkling magic dust, whisk away the sights and sounds of the boats and recreational enthusiasts. No campers, no picnic tables, no comfort stations.

No lake.

You are looking down on a forest. It's the spring of the year and there is hope. Fear, maybe, worry, yes, apprehension, of course.

Danger, for sure.

Still, lots of hope.

It's 1804 and life as you know it has always been this way.

A bit more fairy dust may be needed here, so be generous with the stuff. (You have plenty.)

The community you are about to build is the very one that sat in the valley that now holds the lake. The valley had a soul, a sense of promise and a set of values. To a point, Fairfield was an important axis in the formation of the entire state of Indiana, and as a result, the abiding areas known today as the Great Midwest. Maybe, without Fairfield, the men and women who go round and round every year at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway would be doing this in Charleston, W. Va., instead.

As I suggested, fairy dust.

Names that matter, purpose unclear, destination, power and strength, independence and glory. To build, to achieve, to mold and declare. In 1804, or years either side of it, those were the driving ambitions of such men as McCarty, Butler, Templeton, Logan, Hanna, Ewing, others whose names are scattered about the history books.

History, oh ... yawn. Is that the truth, that history? The truth is that the truth is either lost to apathy or time, suggesting that truth is, in and of itself, of minor significance to the story. The truth lies along the river that meanders through this valley, the river that becomes the lake, that becomes the heartbeat. Truth tells its own lies.

Here's what we know:

The families of Templeton, Ewing, Logan and Hanna left Laurens

County, S.C., sometime in the early 1800s and moved west in search of land, land that had become more valuable as the politics of the time came into focus.

That politics was known as Jeffersonian Expansionism, and it included the Louisiana Purchase, the expeditions of Lewis and Clark, and the ongoing belief that America's Manifest Destiny included statehood and sensible government for all the territories.

It did not include the native Indian.

Rather than endure a rigorous history of the fate of these four families, suffice it to say that they came to the Whitewater Valley because they could afford the land. Initially, they needed cash and they needed enough cash to purchase an entire section, or 640 acres, quite a large piece of land. There was plenty to go around and Jefferson wanted people living on it.

Also suffice it to say the native Indians weren't on the same page in defining just who actually owned it. A few years earlier in 1795, the tribes had made a bargain known as the Treaty of Greenville. The treaty and what it meant to the development of Indiana Territory is a different history, a different set of lies. But the men who came to the Whitewater Valley in 1804 were beholden to it. East of the line, whites; west of the line, the native Indians. Fairfield was just east of the line.

The early white settlers came to the valley because they had essentially been invited by the federal government. What took them to Franklin County were the same reasons the fairy dust drives us today. There's a dream out there and it's ours for the taking. It was and still is about profit, the freedom to choose, the strength to mold and implant. Start your own church, your own school, grow your own crops and build your own markets. Those who have managed your life and

destiny are now far, far away, on the other side of the Tennessee mountains.

These families set up farmsteads in various locations around the valley, and they found common allies in the battle against the elements, the cruel winters, the long bitter stretches of being lonely, tired, sick and isolated. What drove them to stay?

They had committed both time and money. Their dreams were etched in the belief that they alone could determine the destiny of the valley. There was no Indianapolis, there was no Illinois, there was no Indiana, and there was no Interstate 74.

No phone, no pool, no lake.

Just fairy dust.

So, they built Fairfield a few years later and somehow carved out a road that took the people to Brookville and Dunlapville. Then a few other folks came along and set up a church here, a grain mill there, a sawmill, a bridge or two, and they began to play politics.

It takes less fairy dust now than it does common imaginings to see what happened next. By about 1811, folks who had come to call themselves Hoosiers began to gather. They created a taxing system, a way of collecting those taxes and a method for punishing people who didn't.

Names may matter to this process, but names are only placeholders. McCarty, Eads, Rose, Crocker, a few others. Chief among them may have been Joseph McCarty, whose father Benjamin is considered one of the original pioneers to Franklin County. Who got there first is a matter of speculation, but McCarty is in the first five or so. (Those who know the history of Brookville have this one down, so I won't extrapolate.)

Joseph McCarty, an opportunist with clout, became one of the original members of the first state constitutional convention. McCarty had a vision, and he had a reason to believe that Brookville held the economic hammer of southeastern Indiana. This is important to Fairfield for a couple of reasons.

When Franklin County was formed out of Dearborn County to the south and Wayne County to the north, Fairfield was essentially in the center of the geography. That made the town a logical choice to be the county seat. With that came a variety of luxuries, including a courthouse and the amenities that co-exist.

But McCarty had his eggs in other baskets, so as a state legislator, he persuaded his cohorts to establish Fayette County to the northwest. Along the way, he apparently helped (by accident or design) set up a feudal fight among landowners south of Wayne County and north of Brookville. A little fairy dust here, please. Union County was thus born as a peacemaking solution. After Fayette County was formed, McCarty went there and became the judge, jury and chief bottle-washer. (Pastures were not quite as green in Brookville, after all.)

Fairfield ceased to be the center of Franklin County.

This all occurred between 1818 and 1821.

Brookville did sustain, as a result, a period of economic prosperity with the addition of a federal land grant office. But in 1825, Indianapolis became a fairy-dust dream and when the land office was sent there, Brookville wallowed in an era of economic despair.

Fairfield just became a backwater.

As the canal system came into being, Brookville recovered for a time. Fairfield never prospered, despite its proximity to the river, which was too swift and unpredictable for major river commerce.

As you look out over that lake and see the boats skitter about, you may marvel at the sight. The lake appears serene.

It is as it should be.

We wonder what Templeton, Ewing, Hanna and Logan had envisioned in that fateful journey from Carolina to the Whitewater Valley. Perhaps they saw a lake, a place we can fondle and enjoy. Perhaps they saw, using their own pouch full of fairy dust, something else.

But before we move forward toward the beginning, we tread aimlessly toward the end, a period that doesn't actually begin, but one that exists inside a time warp known as history.

We're offering glimpses, nothing more. The rest is up to you.

Time and history are known to play cruel tricks on us. History is important for a simple reason: It is a compilation of our memories, all neatly organized into a series of events that make sense to us. The parts that are not important are deemed non-historical and are left out. Those parts are, in our minds, irrelevant.

In my research about Franklin County and the Whitewater Valley, the town of Fairfield seems to have been dismissed as irrelevant. It cast no major stone into the big lake and left behind no footprint. It was dammed up and left to die a slow, painful death.

Today, as Franklin County tries to make sense of its history, some have begun to realize that the soul of the valley disappeared the moment the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed its control tower on the north end of Brookville in about 1965.

To some, it meant progress.

To the 250 or so people of Fairfield Township, it was a tombstone.

The story of Fairfield doesn't get any better after that, and

we'll apply a little fairy dust to carry us forth. The town was platted in 1815, according to most records. One assumes that a community of sorts existed there a few years earlier than that.

After that, its history is sketchy, probably of minor importance and of little consequence. It appears to have survived for the same reason most towns survived in those days: Its population clustered together for a common good, a worthwhile agenda and a wholesome approach toward civilization. Merchants came and went, and for a time the town seemed to be an important center for harness-making. For awhile in the late 1880s, a man named George Loper ran a carriage factory in Fairfield, though it's not clear why he went out of business. As the twentieth century approached, he'd have been hard-pressed to continue anyhow.

Along the way, a few names should be mentioned. These are not important men, not because they are irrelevant. They are simply interesting, a part of the story you should see when you look out over that big forest where once stood a lake.

Thomas Eads is frequently mentioned as one of the founders of Fairfield. That is slightly overstated. Eads was the younger brother of William H. Eads, a transplanted Kentucky businessman and land speculator who was a member of the first state constitutional convention, representing Franklin County and Brookville interests.

Thomas Eads, about 15 years younger than brother William, came to Fairfield in about 1816 with his bride Nancy Anne Buchanan Eads. Thomas was a storekeeper in Fairfield for awhile and failed. He went on to Lawrenceburg where he and Nancy became parents of a boy named James.

Nancy was a cousin to James Buchanan, who was president of the Grand Old United States of America in the 1850s, suggesting the Eads

family was not of the peasant class. Buchanan had a rather convoluted political opinion about internal rebellion, a matter that came four-square and several states later in front of the man who replaced him: Abraham Lincoln.

James B. Eads went on to become a major bridge builder and architect, designing the jetty system that allowed for ships to navigate the Mississippi River at New Orleans, as well as some landmark structures at St Louis. If you can connect James Eads to national railroad tycoon William Crocker, you may have another valley connection, but it's a stretch. Crocker, easily one of the world's most powerful men of the time of the Transcontinental Railroad, has "kin" who are buried in Union County graveyards. Crocker himself has no other discernable ties to Fairfield or its environs.

Thomas Eads and his brother William are important to the development of Fairfield. A map from the 1880s shows an area known as the Eads Addition. Alleging it occurred during Thomas' time in Fairfield, the addition comes equipped with a much larger public park than the main town square. If we can guess at it, the Eads brothers were speculating on the county seat issue, bought the land, platted it and managed to get it connected to Fairfield.

When Joseph McCarty's Fayette County coup came about, that public park that Eads saw as a key to governmental development declined in value. One would surmise that the William Eads-Joseph McCarty relationship in that early state legislature was tenuous.

Thomas Eads can be followed west. In short, he was a speculator, a con man and a scoundrel. But his son grew up in St. Louis and learned the lore of the river, eventually learning to profit handsomely from it.

Many of the early settlers in the Whitewater Valley served in

important roles, ranging from sheriff to judge to state representative. They aren't hard to track.

Fairfield's other notable name is James Maurice Thompson, whose 1912 novel, "Alice of Old Vincennes," is still classic literature. Thompson was not living in Fairfield at the time the book was published. My research indicates his life was rather sad.

Now, reach over there and get that shoe box, the one with the Red Goose on the side, and get some more fairy dust. My, how it sparkles in the sunlight.

The rest of Fairfield's history can be directed toward the east fork of the Whitewater River, which was a contributor to flooding downstream in most springs, the worst being 1913 and 1937. When it came time to control the flooding, the federal government decided to build a dam just north of Brookville. There, the story of Fairfield comes to a dead end.

Since I allege that this publication will endure after I am long gone, I endeavor to present an essay that glorifies not the history of Fairfield, but the idea that history is simply interesting.

Once, every two years in June, those who once lived in Fairfield gather in a community center in Dunlapville. We share a lunch, some laughs, pictures, a story or two. The numbers continue to decline. We don't talk much about the town. We don't feel a need to do that. It would serve no purpose. We don't have to choose whether to stay or go.

At least one of the men who has regularly attended is named Logan.

A few years ago (2003), I put together a Website

(www.Fairfieldindiana.com) that is the definitive story of Fairfield. It's definitive because it's the only one in existence. There, you can find pictures, some personal remembrances and mis-gathered facts. Some of it is flat-out wrong.

But it is my history, my memories, all strung together in a series of dots that had eroded away with time and apathy. The pictures posted there, and the ones I hope to post as a result of this essay, serve to remind me that Fairfield was not irrelevant. There are other snapshots that can't be posted. They were photographed by my mind.

As time went on and all those dots became connected, I began to see a bigger picture emerge. History isn't about a contrived little tourist trap or a cast-iron sign on a stainless steel post.

History is about people.

When the people of Franklin County go looking for their history in its bicentennial year, they may go looking for that soul. The people of Fairfield can help them find it. Just sprinkle a little fairy dust out over Brookville Lake.