

The Newcomer

A Publication of the NEWTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

INDIANA'S *youngest* COUNTY



Volume 2; Number 3

Autumn, 1995

Ned Barker remembers Beaver Lake



By Gerald Born

we men knew the old Beaver Lake region like Ned Barker. For most of his 86 years he was a resident of the old Beaver Lake region, having been born in Jackson Township and having hunted and trapped the shores of the lake before it was drained. His lifestyle put him in constant touch with nature. He quickly learned about the plants and animals, studying their habits in their natural habitats and soon became the most noted naturalist in the region.

It was through his talks at various schools in the county that many residents first encountered the wonders of the Kankakee Swamp and Beaver Lake. With his pet owl "Hoot" he delighted in speaking to school children about his experiences and the animals he loved, and the children listened in awe as he told of a life that was long passed before their memory had begun. He also became a tireless worker to help restore wilderness areas for his animal friends.

Ned had been taught well for his father Thomas R. Barker was also an ardent outdoorsman. Tom Barker had come to this country in quest of furs, which he shipped back to his native England, where there was a ready market for them. Thomas Rogers Barker was born in Lincolnshire, England on Feb. 4, 1813 to John and Ann Barker.

Tom Barker left England in August 1831 and landed at New York in September. He came first to White County, Indiana and in 1832 located in Fountain County where he engaged in butchering. With so much new land to explore, he set out for New Orleans, then to Texas, and went several western states as well. In 1840 he came to this county where he first encountered the wonders of Beaver Lake, which was still in its pristine state.

After a short detour to Fountain County, where on May 15, 1841, he married Mary J. Myers...he again returned to Jackson, then Jasper County, which would, through his intervention, later be known as Newton County. He was one of the first settlers in Jackson Township and eventually owned some 700 acres of the wild land.

To obtain some idea of the region that Tom Barker found when he first settled in this county, one has to be possessed of a vivid imagination, for Beaver Lake was so large that remnants of its shoreline can only be discerned from the sky. An 1876 map indicates the original lake outline which covers a large portion of the north part of McClellan as well as sections of Colfax and Lake Townships.

The chief landmark in this vast body of water...was a sand dune which rose some 75 feet above the level of the lake was known to the settlers as Bogus Island.

The chief landmark in this vast body of water (the lake comprised 16,000 acres and was located in a marsh area which totaled 36,000 acres), which was at the time the largest lake contained within the boundaries of the state, was a sand dune which rose some 75 feet above the level of the lake and was known to the settlers as Bogus Island. It occupied the central portion of Section 16 of McClellan Township. Little Bogus Island and Cherry Island to the north and Squawk Island to the east were also familiar landmarks.

Highway 41 runs through the old lake bed, and when it was made into a limited access highway, tons of

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the sand from Bogus Island were mixed with the concrete, reducing the island to a low lying protrusion of sand which is barely visible from the highway.

If by some magical process Beaver Lake could be restored, one could go to a point about three miles north of Morocco, obtain a boat at the shoreline, and travel in a straight line the rest of the distance through McClellan Township and for a mile into Lake Township before disembarking. On most of the trip as far as the eye can see, there would be nothing but water. It must have been a very impressive sight, a lake covering thousands of acres seeming to revolve around a large island in the center, and covered and filled with some of the greatest abundance of wildlife ever recorded anywhere in the world. In addition to Beaver Lake the whole swamp region along the Kankakee added to the richness of the area. It was as if the region were doubly blessed with wildlife.

Tom Barker had eight children including Ned (Alexander Lanier) Barker who was born Dec. 3, 1853. Ned Barker, who lived until 1939, gave a talk entitled "Bogus Island or the Wild Life of Beaver Lake" to Morocco High School students in January, 1935, and the *Morocco Courier* carried the following account of Barker's remarks:

"My father came here to find a location for fur and game among the Indians. He located in the Beaver Lake swamps, then went to New Orleans returning in 1840 to locate here permanently. He found large herds of deer so tame that they passed near his home in droves as large as 60 head in going to a nearby water pond. The lakes were full of fish - bass, pickerel and buffalo - and covered with ducks, geese, brandt, cranes and swans, migratory birds opossum and muskrat, the best known on the market were plentiful.

"My father carried furs to Fort Dearborn (later Chicago) for shipment by boat via Lake Huron to England. He found the climate healthful with plenty of fuel, food and water.

"He built a house with an open door on each end and a large fireplace in the middle, in which we burned whole logs. Deer drank in the stream and were so plentiful we had to be careful they did not injure us. Birds could be shot from the windows of the house.

"Thirty-six thousand acres were covered by water, and one could go from when the Farmers' elevator now stands in Morocco to the Kankakee River by boat.

"In my father's day Bogus Island was inhabited by horsetheives and counterfeiters. The people knew they were there, but they did no harm to the neighbors. They would trade a poor horse and

bogus money for a good horse and then sell the good horse for good money. Father had some of these bogus machines in his house after the gang was taken. I have played with them often. They worked similar to a lemon squeeze, into which the counterfeiters put metal with silver on the outside. The operators were skilled. They were bankers and silk hat gentlemen, smooth talkers, but had rougher ones to do the stealing and dirty work.

"Father bought furs from the bogus makers and in this way was quite friendly with them. A few years ago I was hunting in Iowa and stopped at a blacksmith shop to warm. A man asked me if I was from Newton County and said that he knew Tom Barker. He had been there with a sorrel horse, and the next morning the horse was gone. He was told to see Tom Barker to find

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THANKSGIVING

*Another year has passed away,
And comes, again, Thanksgiving day;
And, Father, for Thy mercies given,
To-day we raise our eyes to Heaven,
And thank Thee for Thy generous hand
That gives abundance to our land.
We thank The for the bounteous yields,
We gather from Thy fertile fields;
For love and home and health and friends,
For through these all Thy help extends.
Each human want hast Thou supplied;
Nought that is good hast Thou denied;
Thou givest more than is our right
For our week service in Thy sight.
Teach us, O Lord, to do Thy will,
And bid the Tempter's voice be still;
Give us the spirit toward each other,
To help each needy, erring brother,
And teach us still to sing Thy praise,
Through dark as well as sunny days.*

—WILL. W. PFRIMMER
from *The Legend of Grape Island*

GREETINGS!

**YOU ARE
CORDIALLY
INVITED...**

**The Newton County
Historical Society**
has sent you this
complimentary edition of its
quarterly newsletter. A
subscription to its quarterly
newsletter *The Newcomer* is
just one benefit of
membership. There are
monthly meetings with
interesting programs, special
projects like the cataloging
county cemeteries,
genealogical activities, and
designation of historical
markers around the county.
There are no mandatory
meetings or activities, and
you are welcome to be as
active or inactive as you
choose. Join today and share
in preserving our Newton
County heritage.

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it.

"Father said it depended on the condition of the horse where it could be found. If it was a poor, skinny horse, the Indians had it; if it was a good one it would be on Bogus Island. When he was told it was a very good one, father went to the island, asked the return of the horse and advised them not to take horses so near home or settlers would band against them.

"Along the Kankakee River and at Lake Village, a fine group of citizens were coming in. In coming with their enterprises they drained the swamps with disastrous results.

"My father had a hunting camp on the big lake. Alexander Lanier (distinguished Civil War era financier) was with him here, also A. J. Kent. Lanier said this was the greatest hunting territory in the world. He suggested that I be named after him, so father said I would be named after a businessman and a hunter—Kent and Lanier. Lanier wanted to give 1,000 acres of land to me, but father objected because the drainage would destroy game and increase taxes.

"Even as late as the 1880's I saw thousands of swan on the lake. Waterfowl could be seen in every direction. The birds went south to Fowler and Boswell to feed. I could look as far west and east as possible and see a solid column of birds moving until 9:00 o'clock. Swan and geese were moving at all times. The birds landed on the swamp lands at night for safety from predatory animals. In shooting, the birds were so thick you couldn't miss a shot. We always had any kind of fowl we wanted to eat.

"We had no fences and had to herd the cattle. We boys had to watch to see that the cattle did not fall into the river. Cranes and prairie chicken abounded. I often changed the bird's eggs and put tame goose eggs with wild ones and vice-versa.

"There were only two crossings on the lake—the big narrows and the little narrows. These were also deer fords. The little narrows were to the east and led to the Roselawn swamps. Bogus Islanders used a raft to take horses into the island after they came to deep water, which was 12 to 14 feet deep in places.

"I saw the lakes drain and millions of fish die as a result. Some survived in small standing pools only to be frozen out and die when winter came. Some of the buffalo fish weighed as high as 40 lbs. Geese and goslings could not fly in summer and when they came out to drink, the eagles, mink and turtles preyed on the goslings.

"Some of the old birds tried to go on foot to other swamps. some of us boys put big clothes baskets on horses and filled them with birds and took them home and watered them so they might live. We had to be careful to take the young along with the old to save all, or the old would return to the drained land and perish. Birds perished by the thousands and fish by the millions when the lake was drained."

Historical Society Notes

For many readers this may be your introduction to the Newton County Historical Society and its quarterly newsletter *The Newcomer*. At the Society's October meeting the active membership was asked to suggest the names of relatives and friends who might be interested in the activities in Newton County.

The Historical Society usually meets at the George Ade Home, but 1995 has been the year of the renovation at the Landmark, so the Society has held meetings around the county to visit some of the interesting and historical sites. Recent meetings included these interesting programs: Gerald Born speaking on the artifacts in the George Ade collection; Bob Simons shared memories of Kentland history in this century; and visits to the Lincoln Township homes of Mr. & Mrs. Jack Leesie and Mr. & Mrs. Nick Yacuk, which were respectively the old Fogli Hotel and the Diana Hunt Club. Site Manager Dave Spitsnagle told the history and development and usage of Willow Slough Fish and Wildlife area. And added pleasure at that meeting was Carrie Evelyn Linduska's recollections of her father J.C. Murphey and the day Willow Slough was dedicated. County Clerk Kyle Conrad hosted a meeting at the Brook Museum, which contains many fascinating photos and artifacts of the early days of Brook. The history of the Pennsylvania Railroad Depot and its relocation and restoration at Alvin C. Cast Park in Kentland were the topics of John Yost's talk at the annual membership dinner meeting held in June at the Depot. Most recently, Velma Dart gave a colorful review of the history and many changes that have taken place at Goodland. Historical Society programs are taped to provide a living research tool.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY UPDATES: Community Service workers supplied with the cooperation of the Newton County Probation Department conducted a clean-up work-day at the Morgan Cemetery in Willow Slough....Another Community Service work project was the reinstallation of the old photos and County Home artifacts in the lobby of the Courthouse....John Yost met with the County Commissioners to discuss the Society's interest in establishing historical markers. The Commissioners expressed an interest in the project and suggested that the locations could be included on a forthcoming update of the county map....The work is progressing on the Ade Home restoration. Work is virtually finished on the new roof and the chimney. Work continues both on the inside and out. A spring reopening celebration is anticipated.

FAMILY DIVISION ITEMS: Progress continues on the cataloging and preparation for publication of the cemetery inventory from Beaver, McClellan and Lake Township. Joyce Kay is working on the computerization of

of cemetery records. As our family section gathers data which will be helpful to genealogists, and from time to time we present information on individuals and families with interesting links to our county history. The following obituary of one of the earliest Newton County settlers was submitted by Loring W. Spitler who supports the Historical Society with a membership from Taos, NM.

ZECHARIAH SPITLER

Zechariah Spitler was born in Shenandoah County, Virginia, March 18, 1817. He was the third son of Abram and Mary Spitler. In 1838 he came to Indiana, and on Sept. 22, 1842 was married to Miss Sallie Rider. To this union were born eight sons, five of whom are still living, namely Mann, Henry, Zachariah, George and Joseph W. He died July 21, 1905, aged 88 years, 4 months and 3 days.

Uncle Zack Spitler was among the oldest of the few old-timers of Newton County that have nearly disappeared, and with one exception, at the time of his death, was probably the longest resident of the territory now known as Newton County. Coming to this county 67 years ago, he has been a continuous resident since. Nearly all of this time was spent on his farm southwest of Brook, near the Mt. Zion Church., but for the last few years having become nearly helpless, he moved to Morocco, and has been under the care of his son Wesley and family since.

Mr. Spitler has been closely connected with the history of Newton County since its foundation as a county. And before this county was platted out, when the population did not exceed a few hundred, he was among the number that helped develop the then territory into what is now one of the garden spots of the world. In the early 1840's when the counties of Newton, Benton and Jasper were one territory, and later on when the counties were divided in their present shape, he was elected the first county clerk of Newton County.

In all the relations of life, Mr. Spitler was exemplary, and his working motto was the golden rule. He was well known over the county and was highly esteemed and respected by everyone.

He is survived by his aged widow, 5 sons, 22 grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren. Funeral services were held at the Mt. Zion church and interment in the Mt. Zion cemetery, near the home where he spent over 60 years of his life. Thus was laid away another of the grand old men of Newton County.

The Day 60,000 Neighbors Dropped By

By John J. Yost

The weather was ideal. A warm sunshine flooded the grounds of the Newton County Infirmary—perhaps you know it better as the County Farm. On that last Thursday in October, 1938 “all roads in Indiana and adjacent states are leading to the Newton County Farm,” according to the *Kentland Democrat*, and it probably seemed so. As the traffic passed through Kentland, the crowd found a town decked out and ready to receive company. According to the *Democrat*, “Kentland’s business district is elaborately dressed for the day. Practically every store front and light post is neatly adorned with flags, pennants, bunting, corn, etc., and streamers stretched across the streets. This bespeaks a fitting appreciation of the favor of the state corn husking contest having been given to our community....”

In that final autumn before a European war broke

Join us today!

The members of the Newton County Historical Society invite you to join their journey into the county’s colorful past. Meeting attendance is optional, but by joining you will receive notification of each meeting and its topic. You will also receive the quarterly newsletter, *The Newcomer*, edited by John J. Yost. Be as active or inactive as you choose. Membership levels include: Student, \$2; Individual, \$5; Family, \$8; Institutional, \$25; Contributing, \$50; Individual Life, \$100; and Family Life, \$175. Mail this form with your check for the amount of the membership level you choose to:

Newton County Historical Society
P.O. Box 49, Kentland, IN 47951.

out which eventually engulfed the globe, it must have indeed seem that the world was beating a path to Newton County for a crowd estimated at the time to be in the neighborhood of 60,000 people was on hand that day to witness a competition, whose roots went back to the Hoosier State’s pioneer days.

The months of planning that preceded the great day paid off in the efficient handling of an event of unprecedented dimension for the County. As the *Newton County Enterprise* reported, “Hotels in Kentland were filled to overflowing last night and private rooming houses were being used to house the overflow of persons who came from a distance.... Spectators began arriving at eight o’clock, and in two hours’ time all roads leading to the site were filled with solid streams of cars filled with spectators from Indiana and Illinois. Twenty-five State Policemen under Sgt. Charles Biltz of the West Lafayette barracks, and hundreds of local assistants, handled the big crowd in a very satisfactory manner. The parking was cleverly handled by members of the several American Legion posts of the county, and it was remarkable how easily this large delegation was admitted to the grounds and just as easily dispersed.” The grounds at the County Farm were filled with concession stands sponsored by local clubs and church and school groups. In the center of things was a horseshoe shaped grouping of tents which housed displays by commercial exhibitors.

Festivities got under way at 11:30 a.m. The Kentland High School band led the “spectacular parade.” The parade line-up included royalty and dignitaries. Miss Janice Williamson of Morocco, the recently crowned Indiana Corn Queen, and members of her Court were on hand. So were Gov. Clifford Townsend, Lt. Gov. Henry Schricker, and Rep. Charles Halleck. More music was supplied by the Morocco band as well as third band made up of musicians from Goodland and Brook. Also in the parade were the 16 contestants, who had earned their places in the event by winning local husking contests around the state.

Following the parade all eyes turned to the large tower which had been erected near the area in the corn field where the 16 lanes for the competitors and their tractor-pulled wagons was located. The contest began at high noon when the official starter George Ade detonated a bomb. While the huskers worked frantically, the crowd and the radio audience throughout the Midwest enjoyed musical entertainment supplied by WLS which broadcast the event live from the platform on the tower. Performers included stars of the WLS Barn Dance show, the Prairie Ramblers, the Arkansas Wood Chopper and Patsy Montana. Local talent under the direction of “Scrappie” Claude Warr of Brook featured the Goodland Male Quartet, Paul Johnson and his accordion (Continued to Page 6)

(Continued from Page 5) from Brook, a vocal solo by Patty Ann Murphy of Kentland, the guitars and singing of the Manno Brothers of Shelby, soloist Mary Cole of Kentland, Marcia Roberts of Brook tap dancing accompanied by June Lyons also of Brook, a guitar and vocal solo by Bernard Walkup of Kentland, Schuyler C. Michaels and Company from Goodland, Joe Hayworth and the Newton County Home Economics Clubs' Chorus.

After 80 minutes of furious competition, the computations were made, and the results showed a sweep of the top three places by neighboring county contestants. Vilas V. Jacks of Jasper County took first with 24.41 bushels and won \$100. Second went to Ed Puetz of Benton County with 24.20 bushels, earning him \$50; and Leslie Taylor of Newton County took third with 23.97 bushels, winning \$25. Jacks and Puetz earned the right to compete in the nationals.

The contest was sponsored by the *Prairie Farmer*, but its success was due to the local organizing committee. The general committee consisted of County Agent J.D. Thompson, J.B. Staton, Ira Dixon, Glen Reed, Lyle Constable, Frank Billings and Mike Murphy. Committees worked under these chairmen: Parking in Grounds, Rolland Ade; Highway, L.K. Staton; Field Policing, Richard Conn; Concessions, A.M. Schuh; Saddle Horses, Major Rafferty; Wagons, William Reed; Time Keepers, Francis Fletcher; Judges, S.E. Molter; Computations, Harry Lawrence; Weighing, Walt Atkinson; Weighing Wagons, Jack Ricker; Parade, Lyle Constable; Broadcasting Tower, the light and telephone companies; Score Board, N.K. Gilmore & A.J. Reames; Markers, Rev. Uncapher; Publicity, Ira Dixon; Water, Willard Sprowl; Fire, L.E. Ford; Red Cross, Robt. Hufty. The *Enterprise* concluded, "A few reports of pickpockets were reported, and one woman fainted, but otherwise the contest was without unusual incident....At least three hours were required for cars to get off the grounds after the contest, a steady stream of traffic continued until 6 P.M. The remarkable thing, however, with the thousands of cars lining the highway, not one accident was reported."

The Newcomer

A publication of the Newton County Historical Society, Inc., is published quarterly. Articles for submission are encouraged and may be sent to editor John J. Yost, 508 N. Third, Kentland, IN 47951.

Membership dues to the Newton County Historical Society are annual from July 1 to June 30 and are structured as follows: Student, \$2.00; Individual, \$5.00; Family, \$8.00; Institutional, \$25.00; Contributing, \$50.00; Individual Life, \$100.00 and Family Life, \$175.00.

Membership includes receiving the quarterly issues of *The Newcomer*. Gift memberships are always welcome. Meetings are held on the fourth Monday of each month.

Officers of the Newton County Historical Society are: President, John J. Yost; Vice President, Sue Humphrey; Secretary, Robert Williamson; and Treasurer, Janet Miller.

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INDIANA'S *youngest* COUNTY

P.O. Box 49
Kentland, IN 47951

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TO:

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★
 ★ Take a Trip ★
 ★ Down ★
 ★ Memory Lane ★
 ★ with the ★
 ★ **Newton County** ★
 ★ **Historical** ★
 ★ **Society** ★
 ★★★★★★★★★★★★★★