

Along The Trace

By Raymond Davis

The old Fort Wayne Trace continues to fascinate many Madison County history lovers. This first State Road crossed the county in a northeasterly direction through present Jackson, Pipe Creek, Monroe and Van Buren Townships. Its commissioners James Blake and William Conner attempted to follow high ridges, Indian trails and to head for river fords. At first it was only a swath about twelve feet wide and wound through the large virgin trees. In time there were some grades, river banks were leveled at the fords and some places were corduroyed. It is doubtful if any part was permanent but the general route across the county is fairly well established.

It first crossed White River at the McClintock ford and possibly later at the Perkinsville ford. It once passed through the present scout camp. It left Jackson Township at Section 14 and entered Pipe Creek Township through Section 11. This course held slightly to the east of Frankton. The old Pipe Creek ford was just west of present 300 W and there the Trace picked up the old Indian trail running north from Pipe's village. Then it veered to the northeast and 100 E that angles into Summitville was once a segment. Three very old cemeteries began along this Trace, the Lily Creek in section 10 Monroe Township, the Starr in section 12 and the Vinson in section 31 Van Buren Township. The old section of the latter is to the west and was along the east side of the Trace. In fact, the fence angles to the northeast.

My friend Charles Bramel lives just south of the Vinson Cemetery on Road 1450 N. The Trace was just north of his nice home, and there once stood an old log cabin and it was called the "Half Way House". This was just about mid-way between Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. Reading from Mr. Bramel's abstract - Elijah and Matilda Shinkle entered this land on September 22, 1835. In 1839 it was deeded to Joshua Vinson, in 1869 to Francis Vinson, in 1875 to Charles W. Bramel, in 1906 to Zacheus Bramel and finally in 1949 to Charles R. and Isabel Bramel.

This township was mostly entered during the 1830's and named for the president of that period, Martin Van Buren. According to history, the Trace saw considerable travel by 1839. Elijah and Matilda Shinkle, early settlers mentioned above, built a rather large cabin along the Trace. For about four years this served as a "putting up place" for early travelers. In 1839 Samuel Fenimore built a tavern in present Summitville. It was this same year that the Shinkles sold out to Joshua Vinson.

As the crow flies, the Shinkle Half Way House was about sixty miles equal distance from Fort Wayne to Indianapolis. The mail and passengers were carried in the sturdy old stagecoach. They were usually drawn by two teams of horses and could average about five miles per hour. So a stage could leave Indianapolis at daybreak, change horses at Strawtown and make it to Shinkles by bedtime. With good fortune Fort Wayne could be reached by the following night.

About 1830 a road was cut through north out of Shelbyville. It passed through the settlements of Anderson and Alexandria. In time it was called the Alexandria pike. This road formed a junction with the Fort Wayne Trace just south of the northern line of Monroe Township. Shinkle's Half Way House was also about mid-way between Fort Wayne and Shelbyville. In relation to this junction, the old log inn was less than a mile to the northeast.

When the Trace was surveyed, early in the 1820's, they established the watershed of the White and Wabash rivers. This point or summit was the high point between Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. As a settlement grew near this spot it drew the name Summitville. As this settlement developed it was the logical location for Fenimore Inn established in 1839.

The Shinkles sold to Joshua Vinson in that year. The Vinson's, George, Henry and Joshua were early and prominent pioneers in Van Buren Township. The cemetery just above the old Half Way House drew its name from Joshua Vinson. However, when Shinkle sold to Vinson in 1839, the cemetery had already been started as the abstract set aside one half acre for this purpose. This cemetery stood just east of the Trace and there was once a fence along the west side of the cemetery made of oak planks. Mr. Bramel used some of these planks in a backyard fence.

Two good members of the Madison County Historical Society own lands that the Fort Wayne Trace once crossed; Ralph Reavis, section 11 Monroe Township and Lloyd Harrison, section 28 Pipe Creek Township.

So the old Trace began as a blazed trail and parts at least were rather well traveled until well after the Civil War. As time passed it was often altered and straightened along the lines of the official survey. The turnpike era began in Central Indiana about 1855. However, because of the Civil War, there were few paved turnpikes until the 1870's. As the settlements grew near the Trace, they were often connected by side roads. Later this was sometimes confusing. The side road might be considered part of the original Trace.

Where we carried back through the realm of time or imagination to early winter dusk in 1836, a stagecoach might just be passing the junction of the Fort Wayne Trace with the Shelbyville road. Four horses tugged at their traces in response to the shouts of the drivers. The fetlocks of the horses were still wet from fording the last creek, a stream that would later carry a name of Mud Creek. The two drivers were weary and begrimed. As the days grew shorter, it was a strenuous task to drive from the Capital as far as Shinkle's in a day. The passengers were just as tired. They had been jostled about the live long day, only stopping for a drink of creek water and to stretch a leg. It carried a very important dispatch to the U. S. Ranger post at Fort Wayne. A new president had been elected, a man by the name of Martin Van Buren.

Then there was a dim light through the sycamores and maples. It was the Half Way House and most welcome to the weary travelers and equines as well. A wood smoke drifted up through the clearing and supper was ready. The door opened at the inn as the stage ground to a stop. The Shinkles came out, with their barking black and tans, and tried to extend some early Madison County hospitality.