

TRAVEL IN INDIANA LONG AGO - PART I

The first highways in Indiana were waterways. The early Indians paddled their canoes along the lakes and rivers. Short paths called portages through the woods connected the waterways. The Indians carried their canoes on their backs as they walked along the portage to reach other rivers along their paths. The early French explorers followed these same portages and rivers to reach the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

Paths and trails through the woods made by the deer and buffaloes became the Indian trails. When American settlers began to move into Indiana, bringing their household goods in covered wagons, the trails had to be widened. Bushes and trees were cut down and sometimes the stumps were left in the ground.

The heavy wagon wheels made deep ruts in the soft earth. In rainy weather the wagons mired down into the mud. Even the horses and oxen that pulled the wagons sank down to their knees.

The first improvements in roads were made by cutting down trees and laying the logs across the low, muddy places. These roads were called "corduroy roads." This type road kept horses and wagons from sinking into the mud. A later improvement was made by laying planks across the roads. Travelers were saved from some of the dust, mud, and jolts, but the horses slipped on the planks in wet weather. The plank roads were expensive and soon wore out. Gravel roads were tried next and they proved to be the best as the water ran off quickly among the small stones, and the gravel packed down into hard, smooth surfaces.

After Indiana became a state, the national government in Washington D.C. helped Indiana build a good gravel road across the state from east to west. It was called the National Road. It passed through Richmond, Indianapolis, and Terre Haute. Covered bridges were built over the rivers the road crossed. It took ten years (1829 to 1839) to build the National Road across Indiana.

Another highway, running north and south, was built in Indiana by the state government about the same time. It connected Madison on the Ohio River with Michigan City on Lake Michigan, passing through Indianapolis and South Bend. It was called the Michigan Road.

STAGE COACHES

Closed carriages, called stage coaches, pulled by four or six horses, carried passengers over the highways. Travelers paid their fares and rode as we do on busses today. The drivers also carried the United States mail and a few boxes of goods or freight. The passengers often carried pistols to protect themselves from highway robbers. The travelers were jolted and tossed about in the stage coach as the horses trotted along the bumpy roads and everybody was covered with dust in dry weather. If the coach mired in the mud, the passengers climbed out to help push or pry the wheels free with fence rails or cut poles. Travelers stayed at roadside inns or taverns overnight. It took two long days to go by stage from Richmond to Terre Haute in the early days.

The drivers were experts at handling the four horses that pulled the heavy coach. As they approached a town they would blow a horn to let people know they were coming in. Then they whipped up the horses

and came galloping into town in grand style. A great cloud of dust usually followed the coach. All the children and grown-ups in the towns ran out to meet the coach and watch the travelers. Sometimes the passengers went into an inn to eat. The mail and boxes of goods were unloaded. The tired horses were changed for fresh horses. The passengers climbed back into the coach, and it was on its way to the next town. Traveling a long distance in a stage coach was surely uncomfortable, but they say it was very exciting.

The glamour of the old days is long gone, kept alive only in the history of the writings and movies depicting our past. Have you ever wished that you could go back, even for just one day, and experience the past?

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April 8, 2008