

West Lawrence

FIRST SETTLER ROLLS INTO TOWNSHIP

Elisha Reddick, family brave swamps, predators and forests to call Lawrence Township home

On a fall day, seven years after Indiana became a state, Lawrence Township saw its first white settler.

On Oct. 18, 1823, Elisha Redlick left the rough American Indian trail he had traveled. He then struggled through four miles of ugged forest to a hill above a running stream.

Lawrence Township has indeed changed in 175 years. It's nearly impossible to imagine the wild, inhospitable land described by Indianapolis and Marion County historian B.R. Sulgrove in 1884, 51 years after the first settlement.

Today's furious beltways, fast food joints, malls, boom boxes and flashing neon replaced swamps and immense dark forest made even more impenetrable by enormous grapevines and other underbrush.

The most giant oaks of 1999 would be but a sapling to the ancient forests of central Indiana in 1823, which consisted of some 54 varieties including walnut, sugar. poplar, ash, beech, hickory, ,sycamore, lime, buckeye, oak and hackberry.

Through this perilous country, 26-year-old Elisha Reddick drove his wife Elizabeth and son James Milton in a Pennsylvania wagon. The wagon bed could hold 75 bushels of corn. Instead of corn, The Reddicks wagon was laden with the family's household goods and provisions.

The Reddicks also brought with hem two yoke of oxen, two horses, 25 hogs, two milking cows and 12 sheep.

Reddick had come from Clermont County, Ohio, along the Ohio liver southeast of Cincinnati. Born in Pennsylvania, his family moved to Kentucky while be was a youngster.

At 16, Reddick set out for Ohio and courted a young lady named Elizabeth Johnson. They married when he was 24 and two years later set out as pioneers.

Sulgrove's history recounts how early pioneers recklessly denuded the central Indiana landscape of valuable timber.

Jeannine Montgomery, an interpretive naturalist at Fort Harrison State Park, likened the clearing of the Indiana landscape after 1823 to the destruction of the Central American rain forest today - an event which has the effect of changing the weather and moisture in

the atmosphere. Heavy forest~ in 1823 allowed swamps and quagmires to flourish. The swamps indeed harbored sickness and were one reason Lawrence Township was the last part of Marion County to flourish.

The arrival of white settlers also threatened the abundant and dangerous wildlife in the township. Reddick recounted to Sulgrove the toll upon native animals that first year.

To Reddick and his family, it was a matter of kill or be killed. Reddick fought and defeated numerous wolves, 50 wildcats, three black bears and other animals seeking to devour his livestock. Reddick was severely injured and his two dogs nearly killed during what he called a desperate battle with a 100-pound catamount another of various wildcats. The cat fought fiercely but was finally felled by an ax, he said. Elisha Reddick recalled that incident as his most dangerous pioneer experience.

American Indians were not among Elisha Reddick's life threatening problems in 1823. The Delaware, Miami and Potawatomi Indians who lived in central Indiana were friendly - even helpful - to the new settlers. But time was short for the American Indians in the township. New treaties pushed the American Indians farther west and out of Indiana by 1826.

According to Sulgrove's history, Elisha Reddick, soon after his arrival, prepared the necessary logs and called upon American Indians camped along Indian Creek to assist in a cabin-raising effort. Chief Big Otter Skin readily promised to send help; however, at the appointed time, Reddick said just three squaws appeared.

Larry Helkema, an interpretive naturalist at Fort Harrison State Park, recounted that the female American Indians were probably ready, willing and, most of all, able to complete the task, but white settlers were not ready to cede the task to women. Instead, the women were invited to stay and assist Elizabeth Reddick with meals.

Elisha Reddick found help from three prospective settlers who were scouting locations: Alexander Smith, John McConnell and John Johnson, who was possibly a relative of Elizabeth Reddick.

Also helping was a 17-year-old boy, Charles Johnson, who Sulgrove reported as having helped the Reddicks move to the township.

The cabin was raised in two days. The American Indians stayed through the first evening before returning home.

In 1993, an Indiana University archeological team surveyed a site which was believed to be the location of Elisha Reddick's cabin, deep in the forest of the U.S. Army post Fort Benjamin Harrison. Today the forest is part of Fort Harrison State Park.

Lawrence historical writer Henry Trittipio interviewed the archeologists in 1993. Trittipio said the suspected site was as described in Sulgrove's history: four miles into a rugged

woodland, high on a hill which looks down on a small running stream which would have provided ample water for livestock.

Sulgrove described Elisha Reddick as a 25-year member of the Universalist Church at Oakland, present-day Oaklandon.

Sulgrove wrote about Reddick, "In his early settlement, the latchstring was always hung out at his door, and the weary pilgrim cordially welcomed within. He never refused the hungry food, the weary shelter or the oppressed assistance. He has always been ready to nurse the sick, comfort the dying and help bury the dead. His memory is good, his health fair, though his age is nearly 87 years. He is a ready thinker, and delights to relate the incidents of his early pioneer life."

Elisha and Elizabeth Reddick brought with them to Lawrence Township a young son, but delivered the first white children born here - twin sons, William Peny and John Newton.

In all, the Reddicks did their best to populate the township with 14 children in all.

The family was soon joined in Lawrence Township by Elisha's brother Joshua, who settled in the area along Sargent and Fall Creek roads near Mud Creek. Joshua Reddick farmed in Lawrence Township 23 years before selling out to Thomas P. Silvey. Joshua Reddick moved to Clinton County, Ill., where he died in 1859.