

## The Indiana Frontier



In the years following the War of 1812, emigration to the Old Northwest, which included Indiana, increased dramatically. With the defeat and relocation of the Indians in the area, who had sided with the British, vast new acreages were opened to settlement. Large numbers of people from other parts of the country, especially the South, began to move in and set about clearing the forests and cultivating the land. Many of these emigrants came from Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. One such pioneer was Thomas Lincoln, who, with his family, settled in present-day Spencer County. Thomas Lincoln was attracted to Indiana by the rich land and the security of the systematic federal land survey, as stipulated in the Land Ordinance of 1785, and by the absence of slavery.

For most folks, the trip west was only the beginning of their new adventure. Once they had reached their destination they had to establish a new home in the middle of an unsettled frontier. The immediate priority was shelter. Often times a temporary structure was put up to protect the family from the elements until a more substantial cabin could be built. This was true for the Lincolns during their first winter in Indiana. But at the first opportunity, the pioneer would begin constructing a permanent home. Given the extensive forests that covered much of the land, the log cabin was a natural choice for their dwellings. Logs, often of tulip poplar and about a foot in diameter, were cut to proper size and notched at the ends so that corners would be level and secure. Doors and windows were cut in the walls and a fireplace and chimney were built at one end. Clay and mud were used as chinking between the logs and the whole was topped by a roof of wooden shingles. Most cabins began with dirt floors; wooden floors were an addition that could wait until later.

The interior of the cabin was generally sparsely furnished. Most furniture had to be fashioned from natural materials nearby. Beds, stools, tables, chairs, and cupboards, were made by the pioneer out of the same trees that he cut to clear his land. Most utensils were also made of wood or of gourds, but there were usually a few items of iron cookware, such as the three-legged spider skillet and a kettle for cooking over the open fire.

Obtaining food to cook over the fire occupied a large amount of the pioneers' time. Hunting was the primary means of obtaining meat for the earliest settlers. Indiana in the early 19th century was rich in natural resources and game was abundant. Deer and bear were plentiful and pigeons were reported in flocks so large that they darkened the sky when they flew over. But as the state became more heavily settled, hunting became more of a challenge and the pioneer came to rely more upon agriculture to feed his family. In order for agriculture to be successful, though, the forests had to be cleared. The woodsman's ax was a tool every bit as important as the rifle on the frontier. Trees were

either felled or girdled by removing the bark all the way around, causing them to die. Girdled trees could be burned later or left to fall. In the meantime, with the leaves dead, sunshine could reach the crops planted amongst the trees. The timber that was cleared was used for fences, buildings, fuel, and other purposes.

Corn was the staple crop for the pioneer because it grew easily in the Indiana soil and climate. Corn was the basic ingredient in the diet, supplemented with some garden vegetables such as cabbage, beans, peas, potatoes, onions, pumpkins, and lettuce. Livestock for the typical frontier farm usually consisted of a dairy cow, a couple of horses, some sheep, chickens, and hogs.

Just as they had to provide their own food and shelter, the pioneers also had to make their own clothing. The most common material in the early years was deerskin, which they fashioned into moccasins, shirts and breeches. Later, they used wool and flax, a plant with a long fiber that could be spun into thread and loomed into linen. Wool yarn and linen thread could be woven together to produce linsey-woolsey, a hard-wearing, coarse cloth from which most clothes were made. Combing, carding, and spinning wool was a continuous chore for the women and girls.

Life on the frontier was hard and sometimes dangerous. Disease took its toll on many a family. There were fevers of various kinds and occasional epidemics of such things as cholera and the milksickness, which killed Abraham Lincoln's mother. There were also any number of accidents that could result in injuries like broken bones, deep cuts, and burns. Sometimes these injuries proved fatal. To combat many of these maladies and to try to survive, the pioneers looked to the resources they had on hand and discovered the medicinal properties of many of the plants that grew around them. In this, as in most other areas of their lives, they were forced to do for themselves.

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