



THE RISING SUN TAVERN

AN OLD INN ON AN OLD ROAD IN FLOYD COUNTY

A Picture of Travel and Toil
in Early Indiana Emigrants from Virginia.

[Correspondence of Indianapolis News.]

NEW ALBANY, Ind., February 20. – It is much to be doubted whether the student of ancient hostelries could find, by searching the United States over, a more picturesque old building than the “Rising Sun Tavern,” now known only as the old Dayton House, which stands still stanch and hearty, on the hill-tops five miles from New Albany. Picturesque in itself, though long ago shorn of its tavern-glory and now only the tidiest of country homes, the stalwart old inn is also notable by reason of its strikingly picturesque environment, and interesting history.

Built on a steep hillside, on top of the Dayton knob, and approached from the east and the west by valley curves of the "old Vincennes road," its high gables, little windows and quaint old "set-in" porches greet the traveler with an old-time dignity of welcome, stimulating at once to the imagination and to admiration. On record and in remembrance are two other old taverns which flourished when the old Vincennes road and its stage coaches were in their prime, but the Rising Sun tavern alone survives.

In the *Microscope and General Advertiser*, a small newspaper published in New Albany in 1824-25, by T. H. Roberts, M.D., this notice appears prefaced by a primitive little square wood cut of a house: "Entertainment. The subscriber respectfully informs his friends and the public in general that he has again taken his old stand at the Sign of the Mermaid, six and one-half miles from New Albany, on the old Vincennes road, where he intends to keep suitable accommodations for genteel travelers, and others who may favor him with a call."

This Hoosier "Mermaid tavern" with its unique and liberal welcome to "genteel travelers and others" – has passed into total oblivion, no one now being able to indicate even its former locality. "The *Microscope*," it may be worth recording, was first published in Louisville; but its editor made such free and fearless comment on the wild, immoral atmosphere of that town, that a Kentucky mob, in which as he notes, "there were fine majors, one magistrate, one deputy sheriff, and one constable" – dragged him from his bed at dead of night, together with his printing office effects, tied a stone to his body, and dumped him, with his offending properties, into the Ohio river. Dr. Roberts was rescued, however, and thereafter published his newspaper on the safe side of the watery grave which he had so narrowly escaped.

Old Taverns and Old Roads.

On the "Shirley knob," about four miles from New Albany, at the same time, stood another house of public entertainment, known as the "Shirley tavern," kept at first by John Shirley, and after his death by the "Widow Shirley." It is remembered as being a long, narrow log-cabin structure, afterward "weather-boarded"; it had six large rooms up-stairs and six large rooms down-stairs. Every other room down-stairs had a front door, the alternate room having a back door, and three large stone chimneys provided a huge "open fire-place" for each room. When the "Rising Sun," "the Mermaid" and the Shirley taverns were in their earliest prosperity, the old Vincennes road was a mere "trace," or bridle path, all travelers arriving at these inns on horse back, and all goods or freight being transported through the wilderness on mules or horses. "Firewater," then as now, was Kentucky's great product and pride, and "Paddy's hill," a point on the old Vincennes road known to travelers of that early day, was so named because "Paddy," a favorite mule, there laid down and

died, loaded with a pack-saddle carrying two kegs of Kentucky whisky, destined for delivery at Vincennes.

In connection with the old taverns, interest attaches to the old roads of early Southern Indiana. East of New Albany is still to be found what was originally called "the George Rogers Clark trace: - or "the Vincennes trace." This "trace" - or early Indian trail, no doubt, bears away from Clarksville at the foot of the Ohio river falls, runs north to Silver creek, crosses Silver creek at what was called "Gut Ford," then runs a little north of west, passing the Floyd county poorhouse, crosses the Slate-Run road, the Charlestown road, the Grant-line road and the Green Valley road. It also passes within 200 yards of the "Lone Star Tavern." Reaching the "Knobs" the "Clark trace" climbs "Sieveking's hill" - a 400-foot climb - then runs almost due west, a mile north of the hamlet of Mooresville; and, losing itself in deep forest, winds away toward "old Vincennes."

Early Industries.

At Clarksville, in the early 20s, a primitive ferry, called a "horse-boat," conveyed man and beast from the Indiana shore across to Shippingsport, whither all grist had to be carried to be ground. A similar ferry plied between New Albany and the other shore, and the unique mechanism of these boats is entitled to attention. The motive-power consisted of a huge wheel, or circular treadmill, probably eighteen by twenty feet in diameter, fixed on the ferry deck at an angle of about forty-five degrees, connecting below with a series of cogs, rods and wheels, which furnished motion to the paddles propelling the boat. From two to four horses were driven around on this treadmill wheel, and these were well trained to start or stop at the captain's whistle. Later, wool-carding mills were operated by horse-power in similar fashion, and were more numerous in this part of the State than sawmills. When the wool was brought to be carded, the miller took his toil in wool.

Domestic industry in early Indiana was a marvel. Dillon's history states that in 1810 Indiana had 1,256 looms and 1,350 spinning-wheels.

Honor was paid to Vincennes in those early days, and the New Albany horse-ferry landed its passengers at Upper Fourth street, leading out over the Pearl street hill on what was called the Middle Vincennes road. From the extreme western part of New Albany, on lower Eighth street, started out the Vincennes road, now called the old Vincennes road, which led to and beyond the Dayton knob. In earlier times this was called the boiling spring road (or bilin' spring road) on account of a large sulphur spring which literally boiled out of the side of Caney knobs, near what is now Senator Josiah Gwin's property. In still another western direction the Corydon road branched away from the town. In the thirties the first toll-gate on that thoroughfare filled the farmers of surrounding counties with deep disgust and resentment. It was their habit to leave the road and drive their teams up the steep, unbroken forest hillsides of

Caney knobs in order to reach New Albany without paying toll. When this was discovered, the toll-keeper and his base minions climbed the hill, too, and felled trees across the faintly traced surreptitious road made by the farmers. The latter, however, managed to jump their horses and wagons over the big logs and pressed on to New Albany, breathing triumph at having outwitted the extortionate toll-gate man and saved the large sum of 15 cents.

The Rising Sun Tavern.

Seventy-five years ago, Caleb Chapell Dayton, born in New London, Conn., migrated from his Yankee home to far Indiana. There was no talk of the "West" in those days; the early settlers from the East and Southeast called this almost unbroken wilderness "the backwoods." Mr. Dayton lived a short time in New Albany, where he is remembered as being "a great Baptist," and then purchased direct from Congress the hill-top farm on which he built the "Rising Sun Tavern." It, too, was originally a log house, hewn with infinite toil from the virgin forest, but was "weather-boarded" about 1834. On the roadside, before the door, as late as 1841, stood a heavy wooden post, holding out on an iron arm a massive square signboard, on which, in compliance with tavern law, was painted a rising sun, the name of the tavern, and that of its landlord. Before the tavern was completed travelers were clamoring for entertainment. New Albany was then larger than Indianapolis or Bloomington, and from Greene and Monroe counties, as well as from intermediate counties, farmers came bringing in produce and taking out goods. A New Albany wagon yard at that time frequently accommodated thirty or forty wagons and teams over night. The hill roads must have been horrible in those pioneer days, and homebound farmers, leaving town at sunset, were probably glad to rest at the "Rising Sun" until morning, after a steep five-mile pull in the heavy mud.

Just beyond the tavern at the foot of the hills was then a famous big spring – the "Raeger Spring" – at which, in the stage-coach period, the stage-horses were always watered. The Vincennes road, in its early history, also bore the title of the "Daniel Boone trace," it being alleged that the Indians once stole Daniel Boone's daughter, in Kentucky, and that the mighty hunter pursued them over this "trail," and visited just and bloody vengeance on the red men in regaining the child.

In addition to local patronage in the earliest time of its existence, before the stage coach era began, the Dayton Inn was frequently called upon to entertain emigrants from Virginia and other far Eastern States; large parties in big, covered wagons, drawn by six or more horses, would descend upon the landlord for a night's entertainment on their way west. At the side of the tavern still stand two huge barns in a vast stable-yard.

Virginia Travelers.

These Virginia emigrants were generally accompanied by retinues of thirty or forty slaves; the owners would travel in heavy, ponderous old plantation carriages, and the slaves in wagons. The former would desire rooms and food in the tavern, but their Negroes camped in sight of the "Rising Sun," after procuring food for themselves and fodder for their horses from the landlord; and slept in their Conestoga wagons. Deer were numerous in the adjoining forests, until 1841, as well as all smaller game. Wolves and panthers made the woods dangerous for children to roam in; a grand-niece of Caleb Dayton remembers seeing the shining eyes of a big panther at the window of the tavern, and hearing its dreadful howling and witnessing its wild leaps against the sash; it was frightened away by a fire-brand seized from the open fire and waved in its face. The "Rising Sun," too, often entertained large hunting parties from Louisville; men in fringed buckskin suits, with hounds and muskets, would come and make merry in Indiana forests for weeks at a time. In a New Albany china and hardware store, only the other day, was found, on a dingy shelf, a bag of flints, such as were kept to sell to hunters and farmers in the days of flint-lock guns. These flints were then sold by the bag entire, and the price was 60 cents.

Within the Tavern.

Now-a-days only a casual passerby would recognize in the "Dayton House" any signs of its old tavern life; but, in the interior, it is still eloquent of busier times. At the right hand of the heavy old front door, which has horizontal colonial panels, the visitor enters a long, low, wide room, once the main room of the tavern. In one corner is still a huge, deep closet, from floor to ceiling, with twelve panes of glass in each of its double doors. Here once was a broad, open fire-place – highly black mantels are still here, and "chair-boards" run around the wall. The stair-railing in the hallways has a colonial simplicity, and the same shapely railing extends around the opening of the stairs into the large attic. Eight big rooms and a monstrous garret constitute the house space; in tavern times two or three beds occupied each upper room. The little rooms at the end of the upper porch were used as store-rooms, and turned into bedrooms only when the inn was over crowded. In a back bedroom is shown a bullet hole in a pane of glass through which some disturbed hunter fired a midnight shot at a wolf howling on the hill behind the house. In the stage coach days, there was a stage each way every day between New Albany and Vincennes; or, more properly between Louisville and St. Louis. This stage-line was owned and operated by Messrs. John and William Wise, of Vincennes; they owned one hundred horses, and were wont to say to their stage drivers: "You furnish crackers to your whips and we will furnish the horses."

These stages made ten miles an hour, and changed horses every ten miles. When "dirt" roads were made into turnpikes, and highways

came in, the glory of the old Vincennes road was gone; the "Rising Sun" faded to a tavern memory; its occupation drifted away, and it ended its public existence as a well-to-do country grocery.

Caleb Chapell Dayton, in due season, sold a portion of the Dayton farm to a French farmer by the name of Bezy, reserving, however, his family burial lot, on the hill behind the "Rising Sun Tavern." He died in Louisville, in 1860, and was buried in the country-side grave, which, with due New England thrift, he had provided for himself. His children live elsewhere, doubtless with their children; and of his wife, also long ago dead, this picturesque recollection survives: "Aunt Lucy always wore a snow-white cap, and she seemed always to be sitting at her spinning wheel, by the corner of the open fire."

- EMMA CARLETON

[Source: VF BUS & IND – HOTELS/TAVERNS]