The History of Lake Village

In the extreme northern section of Newton County, Indiana lies the Kankakee swamp known to early French voyagers as the Grand Marsh. Few people passed this way as it was known to be the land of crawling reptiles, dreadful varmints, and seething with countless wildlife. This land of untold dangers represents the background of the present Lake Village. Little authentic history is known of the early period, so those traversing the waters and wilds of the Kankakee marshlands were not historians, but were hastening on the other and less formidable destinations. LaSalle and his followers passed through in 1679, but left little history. It is said that the last buffalo was killed in 1790; passenger pigeons disappeared in 1870; deer were still prevalent in 1880; and up to 1891, Thomas Rogers Barker and his son, Alexander Lanier (Ned) Barker had trapped more than 3,000 timber wolves, early menaces of the area.

It is known that several tribes of Indians, the Wyandotte’s, and other Prairie Indian bands roamed this vicinity; the last known group that dwelt here belonged to the Pottawatomie tribe. In days gone by Indian campfires could be seen gleaming in the dark to give some comfort for those travelers daring enough to brave the night in this terrifying wilderness. Old Indian pits and tools are still being uncovered on farms around the community.

The nobility of England travelled to this section to hunt, as the land was truly a hunter’s paradise. In the early days the main occupation was that of the trapper and hunter, and the swan market was very heavy; the beautiful feathers brought good prices for use in decorations for milady’s bonnet.

About 1827 one of the earliest known trading posts in this area was situated east of Lake Village on the Kankakee, and was called Trader’s Point, or the Blue Grass Fur Depot (this spot is known as Blue Grass in the present day). This depot was operated by one Gurdon S. Hubbard, a trader who took his wares to Momence, Illinois, where they were carried on to the Chicago markets.

In the early 1830’s horse thieves and desperadoes abounded in the area close by known as Bogus Island, but operations were carried on throughout the Marsh territory. The country was so desolate; liquor flowed so freely; and crime was so rampant that pioneers hesitated to settle here, but it was a perfect set-up for the renegades who needed a hiding place.

Our pioneer families were not easily daunted, as evidenced by history, and those men with an eye for the future desired to settle here for agricultural purposes. Due to Beaver Lake, only land drainage would make farming a possibility, so a group of men appealed to the state for such a project to be carried out. In 1853 land drainage was begun, and the government of the United States gave swamp land grants or patents under an act earlier granted to the state of Arkansas for reclamation of swamp land. It was later that Lemuel Milk of Kankakee started his drainage work on the land now known as the Conrad territory, and which in later years belonged to his daughter, Jennie Conrad and her husband.
The History of Lake Village

Beaver Lake ditch which runs north and south west of Lake Village, was first dug out by spade, under the supervision of Chris Larson; then it was further opened by Jack O’Connor to let the water through, and in later years teams of horses were used on the higher ground to pull the dirt away.

Old Bill Burton, father of Henry Burton, who lived on the farm now owned by Lloyd Arbuckle, patented a ditching machine to clean the ditches. A cable was used to pull the plow, a long pole was put from bank to bank, and a 4-horse team on either side accomplished the job. Henry Rainford was the town’s main “ditcher” and could be hired on contract.

Down the Beaver Lake ditch to the old Hendryx place where Jim Halleck, dairy owner, and family resided was a water wheel used for power for churning butter, and when the many fish returned from spawning, they were caught in this wheel, and were so thick, they had to be removed with a pitchfork. Old settlers maintain that when the south wind blew, the waters went with it, and when the wind changed, on the banks were deposited countless numbers of fish, chief among them the perch. An entire family’s dinner could be obtained by picking up the fish.

Earliest known settlers included the Dillons and the Wades. Dick and Enoch Wade owned the land where the first school was built, the cemetery ground farm land where the Harry Christensons live, and the Newell property, north of the present Road 10. The Wades gave the first acre of ground that made up the present cemetery. It was later enlarged by the gift of an additional acre by the Marshalls. In this cemetery was buried the renegade (and supposedly well educated) Mike Shafer, who spelt terror to the inhabitants. In early history he figures prominently for his many evil deeds, and upon burial, he was dumped into a hole amidst jesting and hilarity, without benefit of coffin or friends.

In the early 1800’s, a posse made up of the woodsmen of this territory, who pursued and killed a horse thief, who had been harbored by old Mike Shafer. He was buried in a hill across from the Jennie Conrad home, and it was told that this community was so healthy that they had to “kill a man to start a grave yard”. Old time residents like to affirm that this same horse thief was dug up by doctors and now his skeleton graces the science room at Morocco High School.

Some of the earlier settlers include the family names of Halleck, Kite, Stoner, Malone, Bunch, Mott, Dudley, Hess, Barker, Lawbaugh, Burton, DeWolf, Rainford, Brandt, Jenkins, Tommy Christenson, Marshall, Wells, Nichols, Bingham, Hansen and others omitted for lack of information. Later came many others who have aided Lake Village in becoming the thriving community it now is, doing extensive farming and establishing businesses. Among these were the Cools, Davids, Gephardts, Newells and a number of Danish immigrants, Sorenson’s, Julius Christensons, Madisons, Chris Johnsons, and Frandsons. No doubt there were many others, but they also are omitted for lack of adequate information.

In 1887 John Stoner and his wife, Margaret Walker, purchased 40 acres of land from Dillon, which was said to include the best orchards in Lake Twp, and settled in the first log home built by Dillon. This home became known as Stoner’s House, or the Log House Hotel. It is said that in those early days, at meal time, a large dinner bell was rung, and often from 20 – 30 persons, woodsmen, visiting farmers, etc. would respond to the call – meals were 25 cents. This Hotel stood near the present Lawbaugh home, and just west of this was the village blacksmith shop, owned and operated by Mr. Stoner. John Stoner was a pettifog, noted for his “law learnin’ “, and was an advisor for many people among them Hy Gooden, and Lemuel Milk, wealthy Kankakeeians
The History of Lake Village

It may be noted here that Hy Gooden, though a well-to-do man, was noted for his careless attire, and was often mistaken for a tramp. It is said he took great delight in travelling to Chicago and dickering for land and what not to the dismay of the sellers, who unaware of his plentiful currency would reiterate that “this is a cash sale; this is a CASH sale!”

To Margaret and John Stoner were born two girls, Eva (Metcalf), Ella (Bunch) now deceased and one son Henry, who still operates a grocery store in Lake Village, and is one of the older living residents.

Across from the cemetery, on the land owned by the Wades was Lake Village’s first school, built by a man by the name of Cawkins, a community center for everything from church to politics. Other schools in the outlying districts were the North Star, Parsons, and State Line Schools. To the Wade school in 1867, at the age of ten years, came Vietta Snyder, now the Village’s oldest survivor (known as “Grandma” Bryant, age 91 years). Her first teacher was a Meriah Jenkins. The Snyder family had moved from Momence to a farm now known as the Halsey Davis place.

The Courtland County, state of New York, in 1837, was born George C. A. Bryant, one of the early pioneers, and one of Lake Village’s most colorful residents. He was a Confederate prisoner during the Civil War, wounded, and taken prisoner July 1, 1862. His release was effected Sept. 8, 1862 at Trenton, Tennessee with the following provision, “I George C. A. Bryant, Company K, 4th Illinois Regiment, do solemnly promise that I will not bear arms against the Confederate States of America or in any way resist the enemy by word or deed or give any information prejudicial to the interest of the said Confederate States of America during the present war until regularly exchanged under the severe penalty of death.” This document along with a ballot of the Unconditional Union Ticket with Abraham Lincoln of Illinois for President and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee for Vice-President are treasured mementos of the Bryant family.

The lives of Vietta Snyder and George Bryant are romantically intertwined. Vietta married Adelbert Cool, and to this union were born three girls and one boy; to George Bryant and his first wife, Mary, were born three boys and one girl. His home was a log cabin, now owned and occupied by the family. To this home came Vietta Cool and children, she to act as housekeeper, and care for the family. She and George Bryant were later married and to that union were born three girls and one boy, quite prominently in the history of this community.

During the Civil War years a number of families came to Lake Village to settle, and many of the inhabitants were Civil War soldiers. John Bunch, father of Joe Bunch, who lived south of the Mason-Dixon Line, was a northern sympathizer. He received word that he was to be captured, and he fled for his life, landing in Lake Village, without family or property. He sent word back to his son, Joe to go as far as the Natchez River with his oxen and household goods and sell them to the best buyer. When this sale was going on, on the other side of the river was encamped Henry Burton, a Union soldier of Lake Village – the two men were later neighbors and lived close to each other all their lives.

In 1868 a young Dr. John F. Shronts, who often treated the swamp desperadoes, hung out his M.D. sign near the cemetery, which was then known as the Lake Village Cross Roads. In later years Dr. George Rainford, father of Fred Rainford, doctored the ills of the community and the last baby he ever delivered was Lawrence Rainford. The descendents of the Rainfords still make up a good part of Lake Village’s population.
The History of Lake Village

Roads were few, and practically impassable in those early days, the main thoroughfare being a sand road which is now U.S. Hwy. 41. Treacherous quick sands bogged down the wagons on the back roads, and after rains, farmers drove many difficult extra miles to reach the one passable highway to trade, bringing their pails of butter and eggs. Due to the lack of roads and transportation, butter often piled up on the storekeepers and became rancid. It was scraped into barrels and sold for soap grease. The Danish immigrants were a little more cautious with their trading, and it is said that they did not think Lake Village gave very good prices so several family members would pile into a spring wagon and take the long arduous road to Momence, Illinois, some 13 miles away, where butter brought 15 cents a pound. Lake Village stores offered 10 cents for the best.

In the early days the town’s literati consisted of the Jim Hallecks (father of Abram Halleck, who was the father of Charles Halleck, congressman from their district), the John Stoners, and the John Jenkins (who lived west of Lake Village where the Gust Lazaraton family now resides). One of the questions debated in their “Literarys” was whether we’re growing weaker and wiser, or stronger and foolisher”.

Only two Negro families ever lived in Lake Village, but the most interesting were the Harris’s who lived in the present John Ford home. Mrs. Harris was the cook for the Union Army in the same company that George Bryant was a member. This home was later occupied by Richard Malone and family.

Mr. Malone, one of the oldest pioneers, father of Livingston Malone, drew up the first plat of the town in 1876. The place was already known as Lake Village as it was said when the farmers came to trade they stated they were “going up the lake to the village”. It was bounded by Main Street on the north; Second Street on the south; Maple Blvd. on the west; and Lake Street on the east (this street later becoming Highway 41). Afterwards additions to this first plat were known as Stoner’s, Williams, J & C. Hess, Hess and the Bryant Additions.

George Bryant owned the main sawmill business, and with John Guilford, owned the town’s first dance hall, which was located near the site of the present Stanly Jenkin’s home. The ceiling of this hall was decorated with beer bottles plastered in with the open end down, the excuse for this being that it made the music sound better.

Dance halls were quite popular in those early years. One known as Lawbaugh Hall, was situated close to the present J.C. Cates residence. Close to the Halsey Davis farm was a home where dances were often held, and at one of these dances a crowd of ruffians who liked to terrorize the vicinity came in to start a brawl. They were asked to leave, but insisted upon dancing and in the midst of the excitement, vanished taking with them all the beer kegs. A group of the men jumped on their horses and followed them shooting as they ran but in the dark the pursuit was soon over, and the men returned to the dance, minus their drinks. Early next morning, young Jack Jenkins, hunting for his father’s cows, saw a beer keg under a tree by the Burton farm, and when he investigated found a dying man, one of the interlopers of the evening before. The man who shot him was taken before the court, charged with manslaughter, but received a very light sentence, due to the character of the man who was shot.

In the early days, religion was brought to the people by the circuit riders who came and held services in the homes. Later traveling evangelists, mainly Methodists, roomed at the Log House Hotel and conducted services either in the Wade School or some other building. The first established church was the Catholic Church.
The History of Lake Village

The Catholics purchased the school building that used to stand where the present school is, removed the top of the building, and moved it to the north part of town. It was later purchased by the Odd fellows as the Lodge Hall and in recent years was acquired by Clark Shuler who made it into a hatchery and living quarters.

They handled most everything from shoe strings to horse collars in the General Store at Lake Village in the early 1900’s. The business was operated by Jacob Hess and he is the large man near the buggy in the picture. The man at the left of Hess is thought to be Wilbert Davis. Jack Bingham wearing a mustache is standing on the porch and the two men standing near the horse team are Albert and Henry Rainford. The couple in the road wagon were identified as Mr. & Mrs. George C. A. Bryant. The house in the background is part of the Irvy Christenson residence. Frank Manning of Lake Village supplied the picture. Reprinted from The February 11, 1960 Newton County Enterprise.

To go back to 1881, a newspaper, the Star Journal, was published by Charles W. Lee, teacher in the lower grades. Some of the yellow copies of this paper are in the possession of the Bryant family and Henry Stoner.

During this period William Kerney was the village blacksmith; Mrs. M.L. Elijah conducted a milliner and dress goods store; J.B. Hess & Son dealt in dry goods, groceries, boots and shoes; J.A. DeWolf conducted a general store for all. Hess and DeWolf were brothers-in-law, their stores across the street from each other – DeWolf’s on the site of the Claude Rainford filling station and Hess’s stood on the grounds of the Royal Blue Store.

William Cheevers was the owner of the grist mill and was purported to have the best corn meal available. This mill was up on stilts placed in the hollow next to the present home of Cecil Flagg.

Mr. Bryant really owned the first grocery store, located where the creamery building stands, and in it was the first established post-office. This store was later moved on the site of the Christenson garage, but the building burned and all post office records with it. Then the post office was moved into the Hess store.

The first postmistress was Mrs. John Linton – it has been told that people liked to tell her her clock was wrong just to hear her retort, “I go by my own time”. Her husband, who helped her in the post office, sold patent medicine and liked to advertise their wares as follows: “will mail you or pill you with equal pleasure”.

Mail was carried for many years by Lincoln Lawbaugh, who died in 1948 in his late 80’s. His parents lived in the home east of town where the Deusler’s now reside. Mail was transported from here by horse and buggy to the Half-Mile House, otherwise the Dayton Store, located between Lake Village and Momence. In later years a Star Line was installed from Roselawn (quite different from the way Joseph Hendryx, our present rural mail carrier, serves his customers).

Visiting the village was an all-day outing, and the family usually rode to town in a spring wagon, or fancy buggy, bringing their lunch, or for a change, dining at the Log House Hotel. Each year an “After Harvest” festival was held, and from all around the crowds poured in to shop, gossip, eat, drink and dance.

The first and only known drug store was owned by “Hume” Sammons, and he was assisted by young Dave Hess, who boarded and roomed at the Log House Hotel.

Horse trading was quite common, and one of the earliest figures remembered was old Thad Mott, known for miles around. He earlier lived where the Karl Kuster farm is located, southeast of the village, and later dwelt in a small house on the site of the DeVelde Café. He traveled the country driving a hearse like buggy upon which was the inscription, “Tis Bad to Be Deaf but Hell to Be Poor – Dealer in Harness and Horses.”
The History of Lake Village

Many tales are told about one of Lake Village’s best beloved teachers, Maggie Hall, who taught here about 1892. She was “heavy” on the recitations and liked to have her students learn “speakin” pieces, so she picked our verses for them to say.

A number of years later, a real elocution teacher came to the town in the person of Lorraine Jensen Knapp, who is head of the Zoro Nature Park near Roselawn. She gave lessons for several years to the aspiring youth. Home talent sought their own town’s talent. These culminated in later years in the very popular Community Clubs, which brought all the neighborhood families from the baby to grandfather to the schoolhouse, but which were finally abandoned due to lack of available entertainment and other interests.

The first Bar-B-Q put on by J.R. Davis, who ran the Blair Ranch (now known as the Baker Ranch), was held in 1900. This was a very important event, and a huge crowd attended. It was prepared in the Ball Park, where the Pickle Factory now stands. During the festivities a terrific storm, the worst any resident can ever remember, came up and day became as night. Due to the fact that people attended in spring wagons and buggies there was no time to hurry home. Every house in the village was crammed with people, and in the evening they slept on floors or any available spot.

In 1904 three railroad companies surveyed for a track, the Monon, Three I, and New York Central. Warren McCray made it possible for this survey to be made and the New York Central was successful. The deal was closed in 1905, and in 1906 the first steel was laid.

In 1905 Lake Village had its first band, organized by C.L. Brandt (who lived in the present Rufus Robinson tenant house). This band was led by a talented German, Otto Braun of Chicago, and was composed of 22 boys and two girls. The girls were Maud Smart and Lela Cool (Clark). Mr. Brandt was very proud of this musical organization.

The Woodman Lodge was the first organized lodge but the Gleaners, and the Odd Fellows flourished for several years. Years after the Log House Hotel was gone, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Rainford started a rooming house in the west part of town, and a son, Theodore Rainford, resides in this home at the present time.

Sam Martin and Henry Stoner were two Lake Village men who were sheriffs of the country. Henry Stoner was responsible for the first gravel roads in the township, said to be the cheapest ever built, $1,700 a mile. These roads stretched for two miles in every direction from the main crossroad. He was also mainly responsible for the first iron fence around the cemetery. It was erected with the aid of Chris Hansen. In later years he and George Christenson aided greatly in making it the attractive place it now is. It became a township cemetery under the trusteeship of George Brown. The first cemetery trustees were Henry Burton, Enoch Spry, and John Stoner.

Thomas Rogers Barker was the first commissioner of Newton County after its separation from the area which also included Jasper County. Mr. Barker was one of the best known men in the country. He contributed much to the organization of Newton County which of course, included Lake Township. His home was a mecca for travelers and hunters from various states. One of these noted visitors was Alexander Lanier, the son of a big financier and philanthropist from southern Indiana, whose old home is now one of the historical spots in our state. In due respect to this man, whom Mr. Barker felt to be one of his best friends, he promised
The History of Lake Village

that if his wife’s expected child should be a son, he would name him Alexander Lanier Barker, which he did. This son later fondly known as “Ned” became a famous hunter and trapper in a vast area of the Kankakee marshes extending into several counties. His exploits as a trapper and woodsman were known miles around to all who loved wild life. His career was long and colorful and during the latter part of his life he was a much sought speaker for conservation clubs and school programs. Ned Barker lived his lifetime in a small cabin deep in the woods of the Sumava Resorts, on historic “Frenchman’s Slough”. His greatest pleasure was to exhibit, to visitors in his cabin, the many wolf pelts decorating its walls. His tales of wild game growing out of the early days of the marshes were enthralling to all newcomers. He will always live in the minds of people who love outdoor sports.

In 1916 the present Presbyterian Church building became a reality. A number of leading citizens chief among them Henry Stoner and John Hess, resolved to build it no matter what the cost. The two latter men set up a tent to take pledges to finance the building. It was not long until their goal was reached. The Presbyterian Church officials also greatly aided in financing the new building, after they were assured that it would be named after their denomination.

During World War I many young men answered their country’s call, and the majority of them are today active Legion members.

In 1920 George and Ervy Christenson built their modern garage and implement house, adding much to the appearance of Lake Village. In 1927 the Shell American Petroleum Company built its bulk depot with Charles LaCosse as driver.

Highway 41 was also laid that year and Lake Village stationed on one of the busiest and bloodiest highways in the United States, as the road is a direct route from Chicago to Indianapolis, and one of the most dangerous due to the pavement which stretches for miles without curves.

C.M. Ross erected the Standard Garage, now owned and operated by J.B. Jensen. At the dissolution of the partnership of Hess and Stoner, Henry Stoner built his new grocery store on the west side of the main highway. In the last few years Joe DeFrier built three adjoining cement block buildings along 41, in the main business block, and these are now occupied by an IGA Market, Variety Store, and Post Office. Ray and Kate Smith built the Shell Inn and Filling Station in 1947. In 1948 Otto Mayer erected a very attractive paneled building on 41 and it was used as a bakery, but due to slow business this was closed down in 1949, much to the regret of the population.

This is not a full coverage of building projects as many new homes have been built in Lake Village and the immediate surrounding area.

In 1942 Audrey and Bert Hess donated the State of Indiana three acres of land, formerly belonging to “Grandma” Bryant, to be used as a “George Bryant Memorial Park”. This is located on the south edge of town, and on summer evening, one has to get there early to be able to use one of the two outdoor ovens built by the state. It is a very popular resting place for tourists, and its name of “Lake Village Rest Park” is most fitting.

During World War II though practically all young men in this vicinity were in service, none who actually resided here during the war, were killed. Lyle West, who had spent his boyhood southwest of town, but later moved away, and whose family had lived here for a number of years, lost his life, and rests in the Lake Village Cemetery. Lake Village is very proud of the fine record our veterans left behind them.
The History of Lake Village

It is interesting to observe that many of the old settler’s homes still remain as landmarks in this area. Perhaps the oldest is the home west of Lake Village where the Walter Sorenson’s live, and which was built by a man by name of Furth in 1859. The Leonard Parks place is the old Peterson home; Grandma Bryant’s home was the home of the Jim DeWolfe; Ervy Christenson’s home was the abode of the Jake Hesses; the Gust Lazarton home built in 1865 housed the John Jenkins; the farm known as the Cleverinaga farmstead, east of town is the old drug store; the Deusler home is the old Lawbaugh residence; the Adelbert Cool home is the former Jerome Vicory home and was moved from the former site where the Presbyterian Church now stands to its station east of the New York Central tracks; the John Ford home was the home of several old settlers; and as mentioned in the earlier part of this history, the Lewis Earley home is the old Bryant residence; the old Jonah Marshall home is the present Newell residence.

The Baker ranch formerly known as the “Reuben Conger Ranch”, was operated by Lorenzo Cool. The old Dudley home, a log cabin close to the Conger’s was purchased by Mr. Conger. In clearing the sit upon which it stood, he burned the cabin. Old settlers remembered when it was burned the glare of the fire could be seen for miles around.

For a small unincorporated town this village was proven to be most active and has an impressive retinue of clubs and business houses. Many new families have come in to take their places by the sides of the “old-timers”, and help promote the many activities. Outstanding organizations are the boys and girls 4-H clubs, led by Glen Arbuckle and Merna Madison respectively; Home Economics Units I and II (Unit II being a newly reorganized group); the Book Club, KNS Club; American Legion; Auxiliary; Izaak Walton League; the Grange; Boy Scouts; Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts.

Lake Village proper contains the very modern school building and gymnasium; the Porter Madison Trucking Co.; the Ideal Hatchery (operated by Clark Shuler); Post Office (postmistress Louvissa Rainford, assisted by Mrs. Reuben Rainford); Earl Johnson Variety Store; Ketchum IGA Market; Kate and Ray Smith Shell Inn and Service Station; Lake Village Memorial Township Library; Home Appliance Shop (Lloyd Arbuckle, owner); Borden’s Barber Shop; George and Ervy Christenson’s Garage; Neal Sirois & Son Lumber and Coal; New York Central Depot and Freight Office (run by Rufus Robinson); the Shell American Petroleum Co. Bulk Depot (operated by Lloyd Arbuckle, assisted by drivers Lloyd Rainford, Roy Merchant, and Gaylord Brunton); Cecil Hogan and Estol Hall Royal Blue Store; Sam Bigger’s Garage; Claude Rainford Standard Station Garage; E.C. and D. Beckwith Texaco Station; Evelyn Goddard’s Beauty Shop; the Pickle Factory; Henry Stoners Old Reliable Grocery Store; Greyhound Bus Depot; and Mrs. George Sheppard Newspaper Agency. Farther north is Barone’s Shell Station and Café; Beebe’s Mobile Station; Reed’s Café; Stanley Davis Airport and Motorcycles; and Catholic Church now under construction.

This list would not be complete without mention of our florists who have developed very profitable businesses from this sand county; in fact this has become one of the leading industries in this area. Spirois Kocoshis operates a very extensive business. Gust Lazarton, Sam Petratos, Sam Spencer and Adolph Vraniak are others who have made this
business their life work. Just recently a woman from Louisiana wrote that she had heard over the radio of the beautiful flowers raised in and around Lake Village, and she wanted material to prepare a speech for the garden club in her city.

The future for this small place is bright, and with the young people marrying and building permanent homes here, the destiny of Lake Village is imbedded in solid ground.

Lake Village Airport

Hogan’s Market on US 41

The “History of Lake Village” was copied from the “The Brook Reporter” from the March 10, 1939 Edition. Many of the pictures were submitted to and copied from the “Lake Village, Indiana Old Photo Page” and from “old” photos copied from the Boyd, Graefnitz and Merchant families.

Dennis P. Boyd