

Early Monroe Countians established local government in 1818

By ROSE WOERTZ

Special to the H-T

Monroe County was established by an act of the Indiana Legislature in the winter of 1818, two years after the state was admitted to the union. Before 1818 Monroe County was a part of Orange and Jackson counties, established earlier.

THE STATE LEGISLATURE meeting at Indiana's first capitol, Corydon, decided that there was enough population in this area to set up a separate county government, which they named after President James Monroe. The act passed by the legislators contained provisions for a temporary government. The act named John Penicks and Jonathan Jones of Orange County, Daniel Connor of Daviess County, David Fouts of Washington County and Samuel Burcham of Jackson County, to get the job done.

The act also stated specifically that those men were to meet at the home of Abner Blair (an early local settler) on the "first Monday in April next" to start the process. The sheriff, John W. Lee, was to tell the temporary commissioners either in writing or in person when and where to be in this area for their deliberations. One can imagine them coming by horse or wagon to meet at Abner Blair's

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THE TEMPORARY commissioners were to decide what local men were to serve as officers until a date could be set for an election. At the Blair house the temporary commissioners from other counties also had to decide where the courthouse should be located and shop around for land.

One of the earliest settlers in the county was a David Rogers, who had bought his land in 1816. The temporary commissioners bought some of his land for \$1,200 and spent \$900 to buy other acres from Robertson Graham. They then reported to the governor that their task was basically completed.

The sheriff had an election in the county in 1818, but the statistics cannot be found today. It is known, however, that Bartlett Woodward, Michael Buskirk and James Parks were elected

as the new commissioners. Voters also chose a William Love, who doubled as county clerk and auditor, Chester Bailey as recorder, and Joseph Berry and Lewis Noel as "associate judges."

SINCE BY STATE law counties must be divided into townships as sub-units of government, the newly elected commissioners had to decide which areas of the county had enough population to support themselves as separate tax units and what their names should be.

Not all of our present-day townships were named or set up then. The early commissioners came up with Bloomington, Bean Blossom, Indian Creek and Clear Creek townships. Several years later they named a separate area Lamb Township, after a man who lived there. However, that area was later attached to Morgan County.

The commissioners also named an adjoining township Walnut Creek, but that name was dropped, too, after subsequent commissioners juggled the township lines around again.

Settlers were pouring into this area rapidly. They came in wagons, along the Old National Road across Pennsylvania and Ohio to Indianapolis. They also arrived from Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky to buy land at the federal land office in Vincennes. Like any other

state in the then relatively new country, the new Monroe County settlers spoke with all kinds of accents and some in broken English.

IN ORDER TO KEEP pace with the growing population of the county and the changes decreed by the State Legislature, the commissioners complied with the law as they understood it. Many of the early state legislators were lawyers, while a majority of our commissioners probably had only a one-room, log-schoolhouse education. But they managed to understand each other enough to get Monroe County established and stabilized as a government unit.

The last change in townships made by the commissioners was around 1929, when Marion Township was merged with Benton. Actually, it was technically a re-merger since Marion Township's land came from Benton in the first place.

The early commissioners undoubtedly had to take time out from their crops or their businesses to meet and make decisions for the new County of Monroe. It would be naive to completely idealize them for their work, since they were paid. But at moments they may have wondered if juggling township lines and figuring out annual budgets was worth their time and effort.