For the Glory of Old Timbers

How an old stone lodge in Southern Indiana is connected to the military industrial complex, conservation efforts, and American patriotism.

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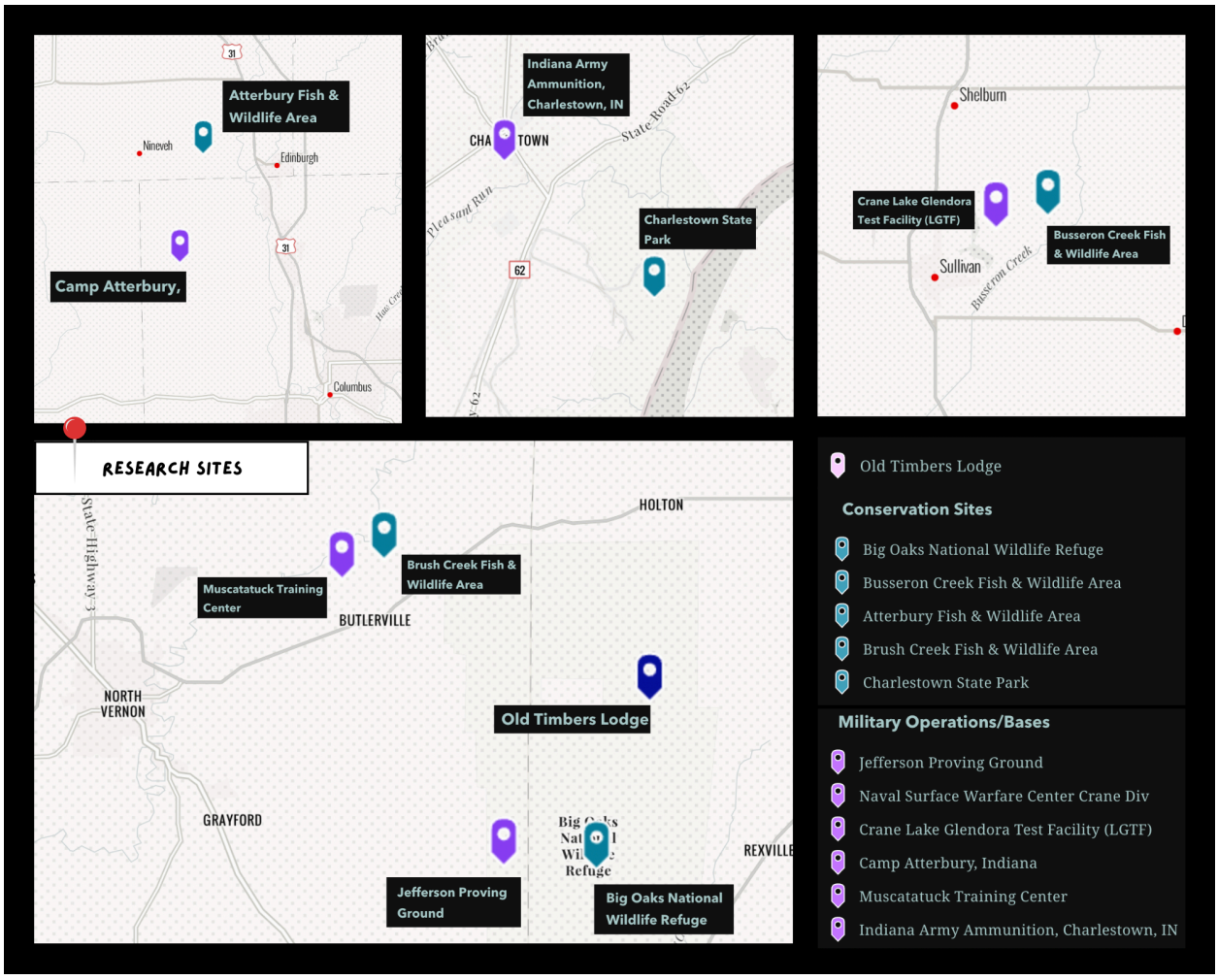

There are many overarching themes that exist in the American consciousness that impact the ways that Americans view themselves and the country as a whole, but three of them seemed intensely personal to my family, embedded in the stories I heard about our history growing up in Southern Indiana. Those themes were *expansionism*, which has historically required a transfer of land ownership, *militarism*, which requires a shift in land use to a form that often causes degradation of the land, and *conservation*, which is often applied when land has no other "productive use", such as mountainous regions that cannot be farmed. These themes most commonly intersect in what some call America's "best idea", our National Parks, where those who lived on the land were disenfranchised in order for us to use, soil, and then attempt to preserve the perceived benefits of, that land.[17] During WWII, the US Government

would go on to purchase around 6.5 million acres from private landowners, displacing around 60,000 rural families.[26] But this theme is not only seen on the national scale, it is embedded in the history of the Hoosier State, and therefore, the Hoosier identity as well, including my family individually. From Camp Atterbury to "Boomtown", Indiana, and to the main focus of this project, the Jefferson Proving Grounds, Indiana has been the home to an aggressive kind of this pattern of expansionism, militarism, and conservation. The removal of residents for military operations, the extensive environmental degradation as a result of those operations, and the shift to conservation areas as a last resort use of the lands can be seen at many sites across the state of Indiana, of which a few are presented in this project. This essay looks at this pattern in the southern part of the state in particular, and how it is symbolically represented in a singular building, the Old Timbers Lodge in the Jefferson Proving Grounds.

By the 1940s, militarism had become a regional theme, with Southern Indiana titled the “Indiana Test Bed” (ITB). This term was created when describing the collaboration between three facilities, Camp Atterbury in Edinburgh, IN, the Muscatatuck Urban Training Center in Butlerville, IN, and the Naval Surface Warfare Center-Crane Division near Odon, IN. Just across the road from the Muscatatuck site is the Jefferson Proving Grounds (JPG) and the Big Oaks Wildlife Refuge, an offshoot of the "triangle" by a few miles. The Indiana Business Resource Center stated that "the prominence of the defense industry in Indiana may be one of the most important untold stories of the past decade".[6] Included in this assessment was the JPG, the Hulman Airfield, and the Grissom Reserve Base. The partnerships between these sites combined National Guard, Army, and Navy assets, all concentrated in southern Indiana.

But why the Midwest? The locations of these operations and the fact that they are consolidated in the midwest is not random, but a carefully planned and executed strategy during wartime in America. A 1941 newspaper article, shown below, described The central US as "present[ing] a difficult target for bomber or other attacks", whose large land mileage barrier from oceanic attacks made it a safe harbor for military industries and operations.[3] They had the space to spread out and simultaneously stay in

connection to one another, with many sites located along state highways and major rivers like the Ohio. Included in the long list of sites are plants in Louisville, KY, in Cincinnati, Middletown, and Dayton in Ohio, and in Charlestown, Madison, Indianapolis, and Burns City in Indiana. There was also a ready and willing workforce, with blue color factory industry already abundant in the midwestern states. It was the logical location for such a mission. The idea that the midwest is a wide, mostly uninhabited land is prevalent today, as it was in 1942, and before that, during the westward expansion. This choosing of "unnecessary" land, comparatively small portions of vast farmland, seemed a safe choice. It also housed some of the poorest people in America, small family farmers. They were bought out relatively easily, and many most likely needed to take jobs at the sites that would have to be filled. Later in the story, much of this same land, that is often overlooked in the conservation conversation, lacking the presence of mountain ranges or pristine beaches, would be altered once again and contribute massive acreage amounts to local, state, and federal environmental organizations. Large amounts of contaminants in the soil and water in these sites made living on them impossible for humans, and this seemingly "unproductive" land was converted for purposes of conservation, the last possible use for land too destroyed to return to its former life as farmland. Additionally, it is well known that many natural ecosystems filter and remove toxins in soil and water, most notably healthy tree roots and wetland areas. It is in the interest of the government, as well as of the people, that these areas be made into natural ecosystems in order to reduce the toxic levels of metals and munition chemicals.

Site 1: Camp Atterbury, Edinburgh, IN

The site most similar in the size of its impact on Hoosier families to the Jefferson Proving Grounds was Camp Atterbury. Over 500 families were forced to leave their farms and relocate before 1942, when the military camp was set to be created. The area included two small towns, fifteen cemeteries, and five schools.[16] It spans across parts of Bartholomew, Brown, and Johnson Counties. A surge of divisions and units arrived from all over the country to train at the facility, and in the post-war period it was the site of medical rehabilitation efforts for soldiers returning home. Like the JPG facilities,

there was a pause between the end of WWII and the Korean Wars, when operations resumed. In 1968, the land was passed to the Indiana National Guard's control, but still saw military involvement during the Vietnam, Desert Shield, and Desert Storm conflicts.[12] Over its lifetime, over 275,000 were trained there, and over 85,000 were patients in the hospital. Around 15,000 of its residents had been Italian and German prisoners of war, some of whom were tasked with carving the stone that marked the camp's location.[13] A folktale from the early 1900s warned of the militaristic takeover:

> "Three traveling ministers, preaching fire and brimstone, came to the little town of Mt. Pisgah, Johnson County, Indiana, in 1902. One member of the congregation recorded this excerpt from a sermon: "The time will come when not a house or farm shall be left standing in these parts and your lands shall be a place of desolation." Forty years later, the site of Mt. Pisgah was the center of Camp Atterbury, and its sister community of Kansas, Indiana, had become a ghost-town before the fast rising yellow structures of an Army Camp."[13]

Construction was swift and rushed, following the intense entry of the United States into WWII.[26] There was little time to organize a fuss around being bought out or relocated when faced with the urgency of a patriotic mission like the second Great War. In August of 1942 the first of many public celebrations was held, attended by 25,000 people.[13] Now it is much like a ghost town, with one site commenting on the fact that it is "hard to visualize the bustling camp as it once was. Movie theaters, restaurants, churches serving all denominations, gymnasiums, service clubs, barber shops, a huge hospital, libraries, laundries, bakeries, a dial telephone system, inter-camp bus lines-all were here".[13] At the end of WWII, the 5,000 civilian employees were diminished to a skeleton staff as buildings were taken apart and soldiers went home, a fact that was protested by the locals who lived and worked nearby or at the facility.[13]

In 1966, 600 acres was allotted as a National Forest, to be managed by the U.S. Forestry Department.[13] Later, in 1969, as a part of the Federal Lands to Parks Program, a total of 5,400 acres sold by Camp to the Indiana Department of National Resources (DNR),[15] and an additional 561 acres deeded to the Johnson County Park & Recreation Department. The Federal Lands to Parks Program was created in 1949, and established recreation and conservation efforts using "surplus federal properties" and lands.

In total, it has transferred around 184,000 acres.[23] In 2010, a deal was reached to exchange 1,250 acres to the National Guard in exchange for 1,900 acres in Putnam Co. to conservation efforts. Hunting recreationally occurs on both the preserved and military owned land, an outcome of what some consider a successful partnership between the military and conservation organizations.[13] The regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service described the process by stating that, “the multi-agency process involving the Indiana National Guard, National Parks Service, Indiana Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been cooperative to date based on mutual respect for each parties interests,".[18] The current conservation area is known as the Atterbury Fish & Wildlife Area and maintains around 4,950 acres of land.[14]

Site 2: Muscatatuck Urban Training Complex (MUTC), Butlerville, IN

In 1920, the Indiana Farm Colony for the Feeble-Minded opened a mental health hospital that would later become the Muscatatuck State Hospital and State Developmental Center (MSDC). In 2005, the center closed and the property was passed to the National Guard. At the peak of its operations, it was the largest employer in Jennings County. A museum on site shares the history. In order to transform the site from historical site to training facility, protections were put in place for the Indiana Army and National Guard to follow state and federal laws on historic structures, culminating in a Memorandum of Agreement with the State Historic Preservation Office.[9] The MUTC is marketed today as a "globally unique, urban and rural, multi-domain operating environment that is recognized as the Department of Defense's largest and most realistic urban training facility".[8] The site includes urban and rural landscapes, 1.5 million square feet of buildings, 1.8 miles of subterranean tunnels, a cave complex, a 180-acre reservoir, and monitored roads, maritime domains, and airspace.[8] The state owns the site, and leases it to the U.S. Army, and the National Guard manages the property as a training facility. A section of the site was set aside as the Brush Creek Fish and Wildlife Area in 1964, including the reservoir in the area, much like the main topic of this essay, the Jefferson Proving Grounds (JPG).[11]

Decades after the closure of the plant, in 2005, an environmental assessment found that "standards or criteria were exceeded by 17 constituent concentrations in 11 environmental samples from 5 of the 7 geographic study areas" and that the standards for safe levels of contamination at the site were exceed by 10 compounds: ammonia, arsenic, benzo(a)pyrene, beryllium, chloride, chloroform, copper, lead, sulfate, and zinc.[31] The study was done as a part of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, or CERCLA, that established the necessity for the cleanup of contaminated sites.[31] The Environmental Working Group (EWG), using data collected from 2014-2019, determined that 6 contaminates exceeded their set health guidelines, and 13 contaminants were found overall. The most prevalent compounds EWG listed were Bromodichloromethane, Chloroform, Haloacetic acids, and Total trihalomethanes, at 105x, 118x, 249x, and 258x times their health guidelines, respectively. All compounds listed have the potential threat of being cancer-causing. EWG also noted that "the legal limits for contaminants in tap water have not been updated in almost 20 years".[32]

Site 3: Indiana Army Ammunition Plant in Charlestown (Boomtown), IN

The Indiana Army Ammunition Plant was chosen to be constructed in 1940 in Charlestown, later known as "Boomtown", Indiana for its proximity to railroads, inexpensive land, ready labor force, water supply in the Ohio River, and lack of invasion threat, like many of its kind.[24] At its inception in 1940, a wartime contract was given to Dupont to establish the smokeless powder plant, and a Government-Owned Contractor-Operated (GOCO) collaboration was implemented. Following the agreement agents arrived to purchase properties including businesses, churches, farms, and private residences, ina move that they claimed was "affording local residents unheard of economic opportunities".[24] The factory's creation required 60 families to move in the first land acquisition, a second following that claimed 5,000 acres and included fifty farmhouses, thirty five summer cottages and 17 cemeteries, and a third in 1944 including several private homes and an amusement park.[25] One depiction in the Louisville Courier-Journal described the scene,

> ". . . farm houses were being wrecked. In that wreckage could be seen bruised and tangled masses of cultivated flowers, some in bloom, and imported shrubbery. The fields which this spring were planted in corn, soybeans and other crops were being subjected to the same treatment as if they had contained ragweed. Ears of golden yellow corn were being trampled underfoot by the workmen or ground under the wheels of motor cars" (Louisville Courier-Journal, September 13, 1940).

The influx of workers coming to the plant eventually led to an overcrowding of local housing, no system for trash or waste disposal, and health issues for those living there. The issue here was not the local individuals being pushed *out*, it was their resistance to the influx of transient workers and residents that overtook the city to power the plant, whose children they labeled as "powder children".[24] The advancement of the highway system led to traffic jams as commuters traveled to Charlestown for work on Highway 62. After its inception, the plant experienced a series of changes. Military governance originally bought the land as a buffer between the plant and the Ohio River. After 1992, the land was leased to private industry and business, and closure followed. In 2004, the Indiana DNR signed a Master Lease for development of Charlestown State Park using most of the plant's land plus an additional 2,156 acres, making it the 3rd largest state park in Indiana.[27] A large area of this State Park is restricted as a nature preserve, due to contamination. It remains largely untouched forest. The Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) notes that the area has a "the likelihood of the source water aquifer becoming contaminated is moderate", including the chemical and radioactive components of the plant operations.[29] The Charlestown Citizens Alliance publications include a description of the ongoing testing:

> "The Army Corps is performing its current "Remedial Investigation process" in areas of Ninigret Park and the National Wildlife Refuge under CERCLA to understand the nature and extent of chemicals of potential concern (COPCs) and munitions and explosives of concern (MEC) relating to former Department of Defense (DOD) operations at the Charlestown Naval Auxiliary Landing Field… The Army Corps recommended that any soil disturbance or construction in Ninigret Park be done in close consultation with RIDEM and the Army Corps and, in addition, that any soil disturbance below the ground surface be performed under the full-time oversight of a munitions professional and with proper soil testing."[30]

Site 4: Crane Naval Operations, Odon, IN

Father Southwest, The Indiana Historical Society describes the operations at the Crane Naval unit in great detail, stating that,

> "The Naval Ammunition Depot at Crane, Indiana, later known as Naval Surface Warfare Center-Crane Division and Naval Support Activity Crane was established in 1941 to test, produce, and store military arms under the Defense Appropriation Act. Crane became one of southern Indiana's largest employers".[7]

The site's workers maintained their own newspaper, *Bursts and Duds*, with its first issue on Feb. 16th, 1943. In this very first edition, a section titled "Civil Service Offers Many Advantages - Stability of Work Gives Security" appears, listing the benefits of working for the US Government and claiming that there is no unjust discharge, injury is covered, and given a pension to live on in retirement. It is a clear advertisement for nearby civilians not involved in the factories yet, with one section in particular providing a call to action and a promise that the industry was there to stay. In some ways, it has, and in some it hasn't, of course, but the wording is patriotically convincing:

> "So - You who say 'I've got to quit and get a job that pays more' - are you looking for a job that pays you more while the boom is on, or have you any obligation to your family for security AFTER the war is over?... Remember, your ammunition depot is NOT a war project. It is here to stay - from this war for many years to come in the future…".[7]

Crane became a town of its own, with schools and churches and cultural offerings for their workers and their families. This included many events to bolster national patriotism and recruitment efforts, like the open houses described as an "invasion"of locals for "honor days", which saw over 15,000 people enter the gates of the site.[10] These events included pyrotechnic displays, and buses left from Bloomington to bring attendees. Items tested at the Crane sites include rockets similar to those used in the advertising events, bombs and their components, grenades, ship guns, aircraft guns, demolition devices, and more.

As of December 10th, 2024, Crane has become the most recent site to make the shift from militarism to conservation, if in a more piecemeal fashion. The Nature Conservancy announced the new Busseron Creek Fish & Wildlife Area will be open to the public in 2025, an area totalling 3,950 acres near the Lake Glendora Test Facility (LGTF).[19] The new conservation area will include forest, marshland, and upland habitats in Sullivan County, known for its historically imperative wetland areas that act as carbon sinks and a flood mitigation tool. While it had once belonged to the Minnehaha Fish & Wildlife Area, the site was closed in 2016 and the land up for tenuous private control and development. The LGTF is a 460 acre section of land 45 miles northwest of the main Crane land site which oversees the the "Crane Army Ammunition Activity's ordnance storage, distribution, demilitarization, and production missions".[20] This includes munitions testing like at the Jefferson Proving Grounds, which they acknowledge "produce significant amounts of noise and vibration", although they did not include that they also contain harsh metals and chemicals.[20] The U.S. Department of Defense includes the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI), which noted the encroaching public presence at the site and the potential for the location to be converted for conservation purposes.[20] The diagnoses of the site included the conclusion that:

> "Given current land uses in the vicinity that are preponderantly agriculture, forest and grasslands, benefits of this project would include addressing potential encroachment concerns before they have substantial impacts to the NSA Crane Main Site and LGTF missions while at the same time benefiting partners who have as their mission conservation of agricultural lands, forest lands and grasslands".[20]

For environmentalists, this is a big win, and a show of commitment that the government, including the military, is willing to acknowledge and address the climate issues in the state and the potential of the land to benefit the people of the state and country. But in this instance they did not donate land. Instead, they provided the funding. The project cost the DNR $10.8 million, with the U.S. Navy contributing $910,000 "to support a conservation easement" on an area of the land adjacent to their Glendora site. The benefits were mutual, with the area providing a land buffer between their testing disruptions and civilians, protecting the land from further development in an area not ideal for people to

live happily given the testing occurring there.[21] The Installation Commanding Officer at Crane announced they were “celebrat[ing] this innovative and collaborative effort by numerous organizations to enable military encroachment protections while providing community enhancement, conservation, and environmental stewardship".[21] He referred to the move as maintaining “conservation partnerships”.[21]

Site 5: The Jefferson Proving Grounds (JPG)

While all of the sites documented above show the same pattern of land use evolution, it is the Jefferson Proving Grounds (JPG) that has the most significance in my personal family history, and is one of the most clearly documented cases of this phenomenon. The Jefferson Proving Grounds was a site chosen by the government prior to World War II to be an ammunition testing site for the U.S. Military. Unlike other areas in the state where fewer people had to be removed and the land was seen as predominantly useless, this tract of land was in an ideal location where many people lived. One academic, Alvin Lee, describes in his writing on land acquisition by the War and Navy Departments during WWII that,

> “Ordnance plants have site location requirements that nearly always placed them on the best land in the community. They had to be located on land that could be excavated deeply and easily for the placement of heavy foundations. Deep soil had another advantage in that it would not carry explosive shocks as far as land with shallow rocky soil. Adequate main line transportation, both railroad and highway, was necessary… The site had to be located in open country for safety yet close enough to population centers to ensure an adequate labor supply”.[26]

The land where the JPG would be built exceeded all of these requirements. The grounds were operated from 1941-1995, and along with testing ammunition, was a storage site for ammunition and calibrated ammunition components using the mode of factory labor. Over its lifetime, over 24 million rounds of “conventional explosive ammunition” were fired.[1] Chosen for its location nearby multiple ammunition factory towns like Cincinnati, Louisville, and Madison, the government bought out over 600 families, seizing their land and offering a small monetary offset to the owners, who were mostly lower-class farmers. In 2000, the site was converted to a wildlife refuge. The Old Timbers Lodge remains

one of the last standing buildings still open to the public, and is the last connection many families have with their history on the land. The buyout that preceded the construction of the grounds was contentious and a grief-laden process. While the propagandistic ideal at the time may have been that being bought out was an act of patriotism, many saw it as a simple case of dispossession.

Controversy abounded as the government deconstructed family homes, dug up and relocated cemeteries, and demolished churches, schools, and farms that had been in families for generations. Given a 30 day notice, many families had nowhere to go, and had lived off of their farmland and local business. Relocation was a messy affair that was rife with grief. My grandmother stated simply, "people died".[3] She described how many had never worked as anything other than a farmer, and when forced by the government to move, were not offered any help finding new lodgings, a new work position, or even simply physically moving all of their belongings. The result was that some, often the least fortunate, lost everything they owned and were forced to start anew, many times just outside the new Proving Ground boundaries. Many families described the impact of the move as having devastating consequences:

> “The move was a sizable economic setback, debt instead of gain, inability to give much financial assistance to my sister during her college years, and higher operating expenses..."
>
> - Excerpt from a letter written to Pam Zehren.[5]

> ″After having lost $10,000 in the Dupont Bank failure in the depression, being uprooted by the US government, and having to locate quite a distance from his home, with a broken spirit Dad resigned himself to never having any part in his home again. All this led to a shortening of his life; he died in 1950 when I was just 14 years old." - Carl Busch. [5]

The cemeteries and churches were of special contention in the community, with many members speaking against the exhumation of human remains. Was leaving them more respectful? When it meant that their families were to be barred from visiting the site and the dead themselves would be at danger of coming under ammunition fire? Locals have spoken out over the decades that they felt that they could never go home, and had lost all connection to their Hoosier pride and their faith in the government and

military.[5] For others, patriotic selflessness was paramount, and while they mourned their homes, they continued contributing to the national war efforts, often working for the military on the land they used to call home.[5] As Wayne Smith describes, time, especially war time, majorly changed people's perceptions on the issue. While his parents worked at JPG, he served in the army, and spoke on the change that occurred during that time:

> "When I came back, everything had been forgotten. The proving ground was still going good with everybody working there. As far as them ever getting their home back there again -- most of the people who lived there have passed away. The government will keep that, I suppose, for something. No one will ever get it back. A lot of them thought that they would, when it was over. I think a lot of people thought they could buy it back. But that will never happen." - Wayne Smith.[5]

Others wrote prose memorializing their lives on the land:

"...our homes used to be
With our friends and neighbors good and true
But a proving ground came along, you see,
They took all these things away from you.
The many scenes that were blotted out
Often our eyes with tears now fill
The fields and woodlands we roamed about
And loved to climb her rolling hills.
Friends and schoolmates we held so dear.
They now have scattered far and wide.
Some of them still linger here;
Yes many have crossed the great divide.
…
We have good friends and neighbors here
But it will never be like home.
…
We still have God; keep your faith in Him."
- W.L. Denny.

The military years were both contentious and prosperous for many Hoosiers. The Grounds would go on to be a main employer of locals in the area, who worked in administration or ammunition testing throughout WWII, the Korean Wars, and the Vietnam War. Many of their homes were used as target practice for flyover testing, which seemed to only rub in the trauma felt by those forced to leave.[4] The Proving Grounds were founded with the purpose of testing "all types of ammunition, projectiles, propellants, cartridge cases, primers, fuses, boosters, bombs, and grenades".[1] Rounds of ammunition notably contained dangerous chemicals such as uranium and chlorine. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) states that the impact area still contains 154,324 pounds of depleted uranium and

around 1.5 million rounds of unexploded ordnance (UXO).[1] The soil, water, and sediment in the affected area has been tested bi-annually since 1984, although there have been efforts to end testing that have been met with resistance from the citizens in the associated counties and watersheds.

Aside from the physical tasks of the site, the military takeover created a new kind of community, one focused on the military operations and one that founded many generations of service members for the US Military. Women were welcomed to work many administrative positions and eventually were integrated on the firing lines. My grandmother became one of those women, while her brother would join the Army and serve in the Korean Wars while she scheduled the testing of the ammunition that was meant for him to use overseas. The Grounds provided hundreds of jobs for locals who had lost everything, and many ended up working for the same department that had bought them out. My family lived inside the area and was one of those relocated into Ripley County, where some still live. Many members of my family went on to enlist in the military and work for the proving grounds, and my grandmother was at one point in charge of scheduling ammunition testing. Our story is one of many identical experiences in Ripley County.

Site 6: Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge

In a somewhat ironic shift, war has been a tool for conservation, as the examples in this project demonstrate. The Jefferson Proving Grounds were one of the last pieces of land, before the Crane acquisition in 2024, to be converted into natural areas once again. As of 2000, much of the JPG's footprint is under the control of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge. Because of the large number of "unexploded ordnance",[4] it was impossible to safely return land to public use or open it to the public as a public land trust. The Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge is just one site that belongs to the National Wildlife Refuge System , which, as described by the Refuge, was created for the purpose of maintaining "the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future

generations of Americans".[4] Their website describes the Refuge's uses as including "promoting the appreciation for the natural and cultural features of the refuge", which is a difficult task when the fact that there are wide areas closed to the public for their safety is taken into account. It was created through an "overlay refuge" agreement, which allows the Army to retain ownership of the land while the Fish and Wildlife Service actually manages the natural aspects of that land. The Indiana Air National Guard still utilizes a "air-to-ground" bombing range that is surrounded by the refuge.[4] The Big Oaks Conservation Society now preserves structures on the property as well as the land itself, including the Old Timbers Lodge. The Refuge's 55,000 acres is home to over 46 endangered plant species and stretches into three counties. It is recognized as a Globally Important Bird Area, and works to preserve a diverse slew of ecosystems including lakes and streams, wetlands, hardwood forests, successional forests, scrublands, grasslands and savannas, and even caves. A small section of the preserve in the upper northeastern corner is open to public use, including the area surrounding Old Timbers Lake. Advertised activities include tours by request, hiking, fishing, hunting, wildlife photography, bird watching, and educational events.[4]

An oral history project by the The Jefferson Proving Ground Heritage Partnership notes that many locals (my family included) still call the property JPG instead of the Refuge's official name. The project states that this will most likely be the case for at least another generation, "given the impact of JPG had on the thousands of people who were affected".[5] The refuge website offers assistance for those who have a family connection to the site and want to find out where their family used to live and potentially visit.[4] This is also offered to those of indigenous backgrounds, who were forced off the same land in 1811 as part of the Grouseland Purchase.[22]

Site 7: Old Timbers Lodge

The Old Timbers Lodge was one of the few buildings that was not deconstructed after the government buy out, and is now the only non-damaged residence that still stands, becoming the last connection many locals had to the land, a symbol of home.[4] Designed by Cincinnati architect Gustav

Eizner, and constructed for $75,000 in 1930-1932 by Alexander Thomos, the president of the Champion Paper Company, it is a stone structure built with the primary use as a "country house", or vacation home of sorts. Its characteristics include oak floors, stone fireplaces and walls constructed from stone quarried from a nearby location, and large wooden timbers that give the building its name that stretch the width of the central great room.[2] After the government buyout, the lodge was used as a recreational building for personnel and their families. Employees of the proving grounds were given one week at the lodge if they claimed it, and the multiple family members who worked there in my family would pool their "lodge time" so everyone could stay at Old Timbers for a month or so in the summers. This building is a key site for its connection to the topics of military land use, outdoor recreation, and social culture for locals and workers. It remains a site for the Big Oaks Conservation Society events and sometimes, like ours, family reunions for families that lived or worked on the land. There are modern concerns about the site as a whole, that the water, soil, and natural materials may have absorbed the chemicals present in ammunition, and could be poisonous or cancer-causing. Families staying at the lodge often swam in the ponds, fished and ate what they caught, and of course, drank the water on site. This raises concerns that not only did workers on site experience negative impacts from the military outputs, but so did their children and other citizens in the watershed as a whole.

One journal acknowledged "the disruption of long-established economic and social activities of the many individuals which give life and meaning to the community" as an effect that war time land acquisition had on many people, including my family.[26] The author, Alvin Lee, lists off affected aspects of society, such as "community organizations, school districts, and other local governmental units".[26] Lee concludes his work on the note that the "relocation of families is the most difficult problem arising from large-scale governmental purchase of land" and that "the necessary social a economic readjustments are difficult for all occupants".[26] One quote from Lee's writing stands out in particular to this project. He states:

> "It is hoped, however, that those projects having land that is not well adapted to agricultural use in private ownership will be retained in public ownership and transferred to other public purposes, such as forestry, wildlife, recreation, and other uses for which the land is best adapted… There is legislative authority also for delegat- ing land management in military projects to such agencies as the Forest Service which are equipped and staffed to handle such work, while at the same time holding the project available for immediate military use. Thus, land in military projects can be used for forestry or other nonmilitary purpose while still being available for use or concurrently used for military training".[26]

All in all, Lee summed up the experience that many Hoosiers had during the war years, one of uncertainty, poverty, and displacement. But he also provides a glimpse at a path forward that may benefit all. The journal article was written in 1947, so he could not have known that his suggestions and hopes would be followed through, but here we stand in 2024, and yet another site has been transferred to the cause of conservation.

Attached with this piece is a supplementary document of images related to the various sites, including my grandmother's archive of family photos and news clippings from JPG & Old Timbers.

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