



"THE HOOSIER'S NEST"

(From the painting by Marcus Mote, "The Quaker Artist,"
to illustrate Finley's poem)

The Word "HOOSIER"

For well over a century and a quarter the people of Indiana have been called Hoosiers. It is one of the oldest of state nicknames and has had a wider acceptance than most. True there are the Buckeyes of Ohio, the Suckers of Illinois and the Tarheels of North Carolina—but none of these has had the popular usage accorded Hoosier.

The only comparable term in American experience is Yankee. And that started out as a synonym for New Englander. In the Civil War era Southerners applied it indiscriminately to all Northerners. Many a boy from Dixie doubtless felt a sense of shock when he discovered that in the eyes of our British (Limey) allies that all Americans were Yanks!

But where did Hoosier come from? What is its origin? We know that it came into general usage in the 1830's. John Finley of Richmond wrote a poem, "The Hoosier's Nest," which was used as the "Carrier's Address" of the Indianapolis Journal, January 1, 1833. It was widely copied throughout the country and even abroad. Finley originally wrote Hoosier as "Hoosher." Apparently the poet felt that it was sufficiently familiar to be understandable to his readers. A few days later, on January 8, 1833, at the Jackson Day dinner at Indianapolis, John W. Davis offered "The Hoosier State of Indiana" as a toast. And in August, former Indiana governor James B. Ray announced that he intended to publish a newspaper, *The Hoosier*, at Greencastle, Indiana.

A few instances of the earlier written use of Hoosier have been found. The word appears in the

"Carrier's Address" of the *Indiana Democrat* on January 3, 1832. G. L. Murdock wrote on February 11, 1831, in a letter to General John Tipton, "Our Boat will [be] named the Indiana Hoosier." In a publication printed in 1860, *Recollections... of the Wabash Valley*, Sandford Cox quotes a diary which he dates July 14, 1827, "There is a Yankee trick for you—done up by a Hoosier." One can only wonder how long before this Hoosier was used orally.

As soon as our nickname came into general use, speculation began as to its origin. The speculation and argument have gone on ever since. On October 26, 1833, the *Indiana Democrat* reprinted an article published earlier in the *Cincinnati Republican*: "The appellation of Hoosier has been used in many of the Western States, for several years, to designate... an inhabitant of our sister state of Indiana." The Ohio editor then reviews three explanations of the nickname and concludes:

Whatever may have been the original acceptance of Hoosier this we know, that the people to whom it is now applied, are amongst the bravest, most intelligent, most enterprising, most magnanimous, and most democratic of the Great West, and should we ever feel disposed to quit the state in which we are now sojourning, our own noble Ohio, it will be to enroll ourselves as adopted citizens in the land of the "Hoosier."

Am. Chic. Aug 11. 1831

Genl John Taylor

I have seen a prospect for furnishing at Lagansport 1000 lbs of Tatt 3000 lbs of Onan 1500 lbs of sheet Tobacco 2000 lbs. I will furnish at Lagansport 6000 lbs of Tatt at one dollar per bushel 3000 lbs of Onan at 11 cents per lb, 1500 lbs of sheet tobacco manufactured at 15 cents all in good order. There is not a bushel of Onondaga tobacco in this City, but you can be furnished with Muskogee tobacco which is equal to any Tatt made in your State. I have Mr. Lane is here from Vincennes representing a Steam Boat and proposes to

take the whole to Lagansport the first Rise of water he is anxious that I should get the Contract we are both anxious that our Boat should be the first at your place the Boat will be finished in some days and my proposition is intended to be as early an answer as possible is wish. I should be glad to have the privilege of exploring the waters at any time during this and the first of winter. Our Boat will named the Indiana Hoosier

Yours faithfully
G. H. Woodruff

Among the more popular theories:

1. When a visitor hailed a pioneer cabin in Indiana or knocked upon its door, the settler would respond, "Who's yere?" And from this frequent response Indiana became the "Who's yere" or Hoosier State. No one ever explained why this was more typical of Indiana than of Illinois or Ohio.
2. That Indiana rivermen were so spectacularly successful in trouncing or "hushing" their adversaries in the brawling that was then common that they became known as "hushers," eventually Hoosiers.
3. That there was once a contractor named Hoosier employed on the Louisville and Portland Canal who preferred to hire laborers from Indiana. They were called "Hoosier's men" and eventually all Indians were called Hoosiers.
4. A theory attributed to Governor Joseph Wright was to the effect that Hoosier derived from an Indian word for corn, hoosa. Indiana flatboatmen taking corn or maize to New Orleans came to be known as "hoosa men" or Hoosiers. Unfortunately for this theory, a search of Indian vocabularies by a careful student of linguistics failed to reveal any such word for corn.
5. Quite as plausible as these was the facetious explanation offered by James Whitcomb Riley. He claimed that it originated in the pugnacious habits of our early settlers. They were enthusiastic and vicious fighters who gouged, scratched and bit off noses and ears. This was so common an occurrence that a settler coming into a tavern the morning after a fight and seeing an ear on the floor would touch it with his toe and casually ask, "Whose ear?"

The distinguished Hoosier writer, Meredith Nicholson (The Hoosiers) and many others have inquired into the problem. But by all odds the most serious student of the matter was Jacob Piatt Dunn, Indiana historian and long-time secretary of the Indiana Historical Society. Dunn noted that "hoosier" was frequently used in many parts of the South in the 19th century for woodsmen or rough hill people. He traced the word back to "hoozer," in the Cumberland dialect of England. This derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "hoo" meaning high or hill. In the Cumberland dialect, the word "hoozer" meant anything unusually large, presumably like a hill. It is not hard to see how this word was attached to a hill dweller or highlander. Immigrants from Cumberland, England, settled in the southern mountains (Cumberland Mountains, Cumberland River, Cumberland Gap, etc.). Their descendants brought the name with them when they settled in the hills of southern Indiana.

As Meredith Nicholson observed, "The origin of the term 'Hoosier' is not known with certainty." But certain it is that . . . Hoosiers bear their nickname proudly. Five generations of Hoosier achievement have endowed the term with connotations that are strong and friendly. . . .

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