

## **EARLY WEST INDIANAPOLIS**

A group of old timers from the West Indianapolis area met for several weeks just to reminisce. This short oral history of the area brings back memories of earlier times. It is far from complete, but does include names, places and happenings which a few senior citizens remembered. It has been a pleasure to bring back memories of times when life was not so hectic. Families were close knit and material things were not so important. This is not arranged in any specific order, just more or less as notes were taken.

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The name West Indianapolis might be – and often is thought of as a vast area. It is a small community with definite boundaries. It is bounded on the south by Raymond Street, on the west by Eagle Creek, on the north by the Pennsylvania Railroad and on the east by White River.

Jacob Dunn, in his “History of Indianapolis”, said quote, “West Indianapolis was a by-product of the Stockyards and several factories that were located on the line of the Belt Railroad.” The stockyards and the railroad were built in 1877.

Families came from Kentucky, Tennessee and southern Indiana to find employment. They settled north and west of the stockyards. The Village of Belmont soon sprung up and in just a few years the population grew from less than 500 to more than 3500. In 1894 the community was incorporated as the Town of West Indianapolis, one of Indianapolis’ largest suburbs. In 1897 West Indianapolis was annexed to the City of Indianapolis, but as in other neighborhoods, the name West Indianapolis or W.I. lives on.

West Indianapolis was once an area of tree-lined dirt roads, farm lands, and wide open spaces. The soft light from oil lamps could be seen through the windows of very modest homes that housed coal-fed, fat-bellied stoves and wood ranges. Water was pumped from an outside well or cistern and there were other outside conveniences.

The area grew into a close knit community. Neighbors were friends, helpful in sickness, kind and concerned. People were interested in each other, sharing the good times as well as the bad, always working together.

There were several farms in the area in the early years. The Reuter family had 23 acres of ground just north of Oliver Avenue and east from Belmont Avenue. Becker’s farm was located at Tremont Avenue and Morris Street, and the Hommel family owned a farm at Belmont Avenue and Minnesota Street.

Numerous industries started up, over the years there have been too many to remember all of them.

Piel Starch Works and the Indianapolis Abbatoir were two of the first, they were established in 1867.

Another of the earliest industries was the Perry Manufacturing Company known as the world’s largest cart, wagon and carriage company. This company later built the Marion Motor Car. Martin became associated with Perry, and then later it was known as the Perry-Overland Company which was bought by the Chevrolet Company.

Lewitt and Company as well as the Nordyke-Marmon Company were among the early companies.

Nordyke-Marmon Company produced windmill blades and milling machines during the 1896 period. Before and during World War I propeller blades were produced in Plant 1. Plant 2 was built for the production and assembly of Liberty Airplane engines and later, of course, the “V16” and “Straight 8” Marmon cars were added to the production schedule. About 1930 retired Army Captain Herrington and his associated used the west end of the ground floor of Plant 3 where they designed and developed the first four-wheel drives which were later installed on Army tanks and heavy duty Army buses and trucks. The new idea of a machine gun nest was developed and used during World War II. Murray’s Body Shop preceded the Hayes Body Shop which was located on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors of Plant 3, Nordyke-Marmon Company. Later the Federal Government bought the company buildings. During World War II the Curtiss-Wright Company built propeller blades there. On VJ Day the plant was closed.

In 1914 Stewart-Warner built its Power House and Gear Plant. The main plant was built in 1918 with a large addition in 1927.

Robbins Body Corporation, located at the corner of Division and Morris Streets, was the first shop to make bodies from steel and wood, also from wood and leather.

Bixby’s known for Shinola products, was located first on Division Street. Later it was moved to the 1400 block of West Morris Street and was known as “Best Foods” – Now it is “Special Products” an affiliate of CPC.

Other early companies were:

Pathfinder Auto Company

Division Street and Standard Avenue

Tack Factory

Standard Avenue

Liquid Carbonic

Standard Avenue

Handle Factory

Located on Harding Street at McCarty Street

Metal Auto Parts

On Henry Street, between Arbor Avenue and Harding Street

Puritan Bed Springs

Near Riley Park

Skelton’s Tin Shop

Oliver Avenue

Thiesing’s Veneer

Chase and McCarty Streets

United Screw Products

Gottlieb Drum Service

Harper J. Ransburg  
Kitchen Wares

Imperial Drop Forge

American Foundry, and

Ellis Trucking Company started with a one horse dray and grew to be a large trucking concern. It was located on Oliver Avenue for many years.

As the neighborhood grew, churches and schools became a must. First in the W.I. area was School #1, now known as #46 or the Daniel Webster School. It was built at the corner of Reisner and Howard Streets. In very early days it was used as a meeting place for the “Town of Indianapolis.” Later a new school was built at the corner of Reisner and Miller Streets, with old #1 being torn down. School #47 was once #2, having been built in 1896. At one time there were one Catholic and five public schools in the area: Numbers 46, 47, 48, 49, 83 and Assumption. It is hard to believe that School #83 was opened for black children, only to be later closed and the pupils reassigned to their original schools.

Enrollments at several schools were large enough to require portable buildings, placed on the playgrounds and used to house teachers and classes. Children walked many blocks to and from school, only those living a great distance were allowed to bring their lunches. Pupils of School #47 walked to #49 for shop. School #48 pupils had to walk to #45 for some of their classes. For many years W.I. students walked to Washington High School.

Times have changed. In the early 1900’s May Day was observed in many schools by having special programs. Physical education classes gave drills using dumbbells and Indian clubs. Highlight of the day’s program was a May Pole dance.

In this era teachers were respected and the three R’s were most important.

There were several very early churches: Blaine Avenue Methodist, Assumption (1894), Morris Street Christian, located at the corner of Blaine Avenue and Morris Street, now known as Parkview Christian Church on Belmont Avenue. Trinity Methodist on Division Street, originally named

Valley Methodist Church, was sponsored by the Blaine Avenue Methodist. Other early churches were: Ray Street Nazarene, River Avenue Baptist and Westview Baptist. Today there are many different denominations represented.

It was fashionable in these early days for church classes to hold ice cream socials. Many hours were spent in the making of ice cream, cakes, popcorn balls and taffy. Young persons met in homes to make these goodies, it was great fun for all.

### FLOODS

In the early evening in 1913 water from White River crested and came over. It flooded the area east of Harding Street. Water was up as far as Richland Street, and then called McLain Street. Numerous homes were under water. Boats were used to rescue people and animals. Neighbors helped each other. Father Weber, of Assumption Church, will long be remembered for his aid to all. Food, clothing, shelter, everything possible was done by him to help those who were homeless. Animals, farm and domestic, were lost. A black man, living in a shack north of Rhodius Park, was rescued by boat.

In 1916 another flood situation led to the evacuation of the lowland population. Assumption School served as a refugee center for several families. Children liked being at the school so well they didn't want to go home.

In 1936 there was another threat of flooding. Merchants in the "Valley" area tried to hire people to dynamite the Power and Light Company dam where debris had backed up, causing a terrific pressure. The merchants did hire men to sand bag and to dump large objects, such as old car bodies, on the banks of the river. WPA workers helped reinforce banks and walls.

Numerous times Eagle Creek has flooded the low-lying grounds nearby. The area most likely to become flooded is called the "Hollow" (Happy Hollow). It is the section south of Miller Street and west of Belmont Avenue.

These were tragic happenings in the early history of West Indianapolis.

At a later date Army Engineers surveyed the properties of Eagle Creek from Speedway south to Kentucky Avenue. They made recommendations to reconstruct the creek bottoms to prevent further flooding.

A section west of Warman and north of Ray Street is known as the "Bottoms." The section east of the viaduct on Morris Street is called the "Valley." The section west of the same viaduct is called the "Hill."

During the Depression, a community of shanties was built on the banks of White River. This community was called "Hooverville." Tar paper shacks with dirt floors housed several families. Scrap tin and other scrap materials were used to provide shelter.

In the early 1900's numerous men "rode the rails." Since the railroad is north of Rhodius Park, but there were no houses there, they walked to homes just south of Wilkins Street to ask for food. Many a well-filled plate of food was given to the "Hobo." There was no fear, these men ate their food and were on their way.

Crime was not a problem in the earlier times; it was safe to walk the streets at night. People did not have to lock windows and doors.

Even though the infamous John Dillinger was a frequent visitor to W.I. people were not afraid. During prohibition days there were several bootleggers in the area. One house was supposed to have a secret hiding place for liquor.

### SHOPPING

Penny candies could be bought at the corner grocery, drug store or confectionery. On Saturday evenings, usually that was when the weekly grocery bill was paid; Dad brought home a sack of free candies for the children. Stores were interesting, warm and friendly places. No self serve! Sam Blay, who owned Blay's Dry Goods Store at the corner of Lee and Morris Streets, often sent shoes and clothing home for "Mom" to see before they were paid for. The trip from the "Hill" to Holt's Dry Goods Store on Kentucky Avenue was quite a treat, especially if you walked a long way and had to cross the railroad tracks. Trotsky's Dry Goods Store was located at the corner of Richland and Howard Streets. Yaverowitz Dry Goods Store was on Oliver Avenue for years and years. Other dry goods stores included Adeffs, Ramseys, and Hermans.

Drug stores were popular with young people. Updegraff's at the corner of Reisner and Morris Streets had old fashioned ice cream tables (now collector's items) and hand-dipped ice cream, lots of friendly conversation; no rough stuff.

Leroy and Ada Rush owned a drug store at 1621 West Morris Street in 1909. A brother, Clifford Hebble, was one of the pharmacists on duty. Other drug stores included Durbin's at the corner of Reisner and Howard Streets, later sold to Tucker's; Lee Miller's at Morris and Kappes, Fritz's at Sheffield and Morris Streets, Carnefix's at River and Ray Street, Withers, Wolfarths, and Ewings in the "Valley" area. Izers was located at 1227 Oliver Avenue and was followed by W & B.

The Valley area had a business section of its own, serving every need of the residents of the neighborhood. Oliver Avenue was a meeting place for friends. The following is a partial list of the many small businesses there in earlier days:

Yaverowitz Dry Goods

Oliver Avenue

Radcliff's Furniture Store

Later known as Harsins

Duray's

Corner of Division Street and Oliver Avenue

Wolfarth's Drug Store

Oliver Avenue

Fletcher Savings and Trust

Carnefix Drug Store

River Avenue and Ray Street

Beanblossom Mortuary

Ray and Division Streets

Fleming Shoe Repair

Phegley Cleaners

Irwin' Jewelry

Miller's Confectionery

Division Street

Bush's Plumbing

1200 Oliver Avenue

Abie's Shoe Shop

Oliver and Marion Avenues

Henry's Burial Vault Company

560 Warren Avenue

DuPuy Bakery

803 Division Street

L. P. Dunn Standard Station

N/W Corner Division Street and Oliver Avenue

Russell Jewelers

Iselin Furniture

Freeman Hardware

Cy West Barber Shop

George Smith

Barber

Rushton and Muncie

Barbers

### GROCERIES

At one time there was a Standard Grocery at the corner of Morris and Reisner Streets. There was a Kroger Store at the corner of Belmont and Morris Street. Homer Dady owned groceries on Morris Street at Lee, and on Howard Street at Richland. Earnest Dady had a grocery at Morris and Pershing Avenue. Charles Dady had stores on Oliver Avenue, River Avenue, and Ray, Coffey and McCarty Streets. Albertson's Grocery has been at the corner of Belmont and Miller for more than fifty years. Dickey's owned a grocery at the corner of Morris and Blaine Avenue. Biggs' Grocery was located at the corner of Division and McCarty Streets. Other groceries were:

Hale and David

Corner Marion and Birch

Williamson's

Warren and McCarty

Piggly-Wiggly

N/E Corner Warren and Oliver

Manual DeBars

Birch and Marion

Evans and Patterson

1311 Oliver Avenue

Joe Pickett

Birch and McCarty

Monte Wolven

McCarty and Sheffield

Reese

N/W Corner Holly and Oliver Avenue, who also had  
two pumps to sell gasoline

Sims

Division and Henry



Biggs  
    N/W corner Coffey and McCarty  
Middaugh  
    Arbor Avenue  
Gambel's  
    Ray and Division Streets  
Shaw's  
    River Avenue and Ray Street  
Martin's  
    S/E corner Marion and Oliver Avenue  
Thorp's  
    S/E corner Arbor and Oliver Avenue  
Universal's Meat Market  
    1200 block Oliver Avenue  
Brown's Poultry  
    Oliver Avenue  
Jess Burnett  
    Sheffield and Ray Streets  
Al Rupp  
    Oliver and Birch  
Perkinson's  
    Hiatt and Morris  
George Bradywater  
    1100 Oliver Avenue, and  
Handee Grocery  
    Richland Street

These are a few of the many groceries and food markets that have come and gone over the years.

Vegetable wagons, drawn by horses, were seen daily in the area.

### OTHER BUSINESSES

A branch post office was located in the front rooms of a building at the corner of Morris and Reisner Streets. It was later moved to a building in the 1200 block of Reisner Street, then to its present location on Belmont Avenue.

In the rear of that same building Hayden Buchanan operated a funeral parlor. Millard Wills owned a barber shop and cleaning shop on Reisner Street. Stout's Hardware was at Howard and Reisner Streets – Clark and

Wright. Bertram Hardware was at the corner of Reisner and Morris Street for many years. Vick's operated a bakery on Howard Street. There was a nickelodeon on Howard, just east of Blaine Avenue.

Shinn's Confectionery on Howard Street was a favorite stopping place for children. There was also a confectionery in a building which burned that was located where the Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center now stands. Still another confectionery, well remembered for the beautiful chocolate Easter rabbits in the windows, was on Morris, just west of Reisner Street.

United Ice Company was on Harding Street, just north of Morris. Father Weber was instrumental in starting this company. When ice was delivered to the homes, it was a real treat for children to sneak small hunks of ice off the wagon.

Florists in the neighborhood included: Earl Williams on Reisner Street; Lockwood's and Dodd. Ruble's Florists has been a part of the community for a number of years.

Theaters included the Bell on Morris Street; Howard on Howard Street; and the Savoy on Oliver Avenue. Years ago admission was ten cents and on special nights each person was given a dish. If one attended regularly it wasn't long before you had a complete set. Then there were bank nights. If you were lucky you might win and, of course, they had poultry nights.

## HEALTH

The W.I. area now has a Southwest Health Center located at the corner of Sheffield and Morris Streets. It was through community efforts that it came into being.

In early times there were numerous doctors and dentists to serve the needs of the residents. Doctors Leak and Leath were old time family doctors. A favorite remedy for most ills seemed to be soda and calomel tablets, and of course, castor oil. No one had ever heard of or knew about a "virus."

Other early doctors were: Dr. John Salb, Dr. William Arbuckle, Dr. Pebworth, Dr. Brown, Sr., Dr. GeBauer, Dr. Tate, and Dr. Winklepack. Then there was Dr. Hollingsworth on Oliver Avenue, Dr. Fox, Dr. Wier, Dr. Dietz, Dr. Commisky, Dr. Wittenback and Dr. Rosenthal. Somewhat later there was Dr. Garfield, Dr. Freeman, Dr. Fisher and Dr. Archie Brown. There were others too. Doctors came to the homes any time of the day or night, real friends of the family.

Dr. Walter Hemphill, Chiropractor, was a resident of West Indianapolis for many years, and very interested in the community. He served as president of the Enterprise Civic League for sixteen years. The League was a W.I. community organization started in 1917. It was at that time that a group of residents decided to back the movement for the creation of Rhodius Park. The swimming pool, built in 1924, and the community house were realized largely through the efforts of the league members. They also worked for the building of a levee along White River, construction of bridges on Oliver Avenue, Morris Street and Kentucky Avenue, plus lighting, safety and traffic problems. Track elevation at Morris Street and the Belt R.R. was a major project. It was through the efforts of Dr. Hemphill that the underpass was completed, and it was very fitting that it was dedicated in his honor in 1947. At the time of the dedication, Morris Street was closed for dancing, a carnival and general celebration.

Street cars ran on tracks. The old summer car with open air seats was a real treat to ride. The conductor walked along an outside runway the full length of the car to collect fares. During the depression, Jitney buses carried passengers to or from work for a nickel. The busses were called Jitneys because once the nickel was called a "Jitney." If someone was in a hurry to get to or from work, you might have to sit on someone's lap or stand on the running board.

Police drove touring cars, two men to a car, without doors, or one man stood on the running board for quick action.

Fire trucks were pulled by horses, as were all delivery vehicles.

Interurbans came through W.I. on Kentucky Avenue. A trip to Maywood to visit friends or relatives was a high light in a child's life especially a time to remember at Christmas.

Swimming holes were a must for the boys. There was one called "Cottonwood" in Eagle Creek west of Warman Avenue, just north of the railroad, another was just south of the railroad, another was just south of the railroad. No doubt there were others in Eagle Creek. Students of Science classes walked to Eagle Creek in the spring and fall to study nature.

Halloween celebrations were held in the downtown district of Indianapolis. Street cars were crowded with persons in full costume and masks. It was a fun time for those participating and those watching. There was no violence or problems. Of course there were some windows soaped and often the tracks of the street cars were soaped.

Traveling medicine shows were interesting, drawing large crowds on the grounds at the corner of Arbor Avenue and Henry Street.

At an early date the West Indianapolis Branch Library was located at the corner of Division and Morris Streets. It was later moved to a building on the grounds of School #46 at Howard and Reisner Streets. Construction of the present building at 1925 West Morris Street was through monies from the Andrew Carnegie Fund. Much reading was done by persons during the Depression; they formed long lines wanting to borrow books. The library and its services have been and is a very important part of the community.

Forty years ago two storerooms were rented at 1907 West Morris Street by American Settlement House which became the Southwest Social Center. These rooms were soon outgrown and in 1957 a new building was dedicated. Miss Mary Rigg was the director and continued in that capacity until her retirement in 1961. The Center was renamed the "Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center" in her honor. It serves the needs of the community as a multi-service organization.

WE HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED READING ABOUT THE  
EARLIER TIMES IN OUR WEST INDIANAPOLIS