

A blue-toned illustration of a horse and a dog in a field. The horse is in the upper half, and the dog is in the lower half. The background is a textured blue with some red speckles.

# The Meanings

175 Years and Counting

STEVE HALLER

# of Hoosier

With 2008 marking the 175th anniversary of the publication of John Finley's poem "The Hoosier's Nest," questions remain about the origins and meanings of the popular moniker as applied to the early people of Indiana prior to Finley's poem and its adoption as the state's nickname. Upon its first appearance in 1833, the poem was soon copied throughout the young United States, and many long-time residents, homesteaders, and travelers also became aware of it. Finley originally wrote "Hoosier" as "Hoosher" (a then common phonetic spelling), and both versions were certainly spoken for several years prior to the 1830s.

An examination of the uses of the words "Hoosher" and "Hoosier" as they were written by or about people living in Indiana during the first generation of statehood and pioneer era offers a glimpse of its connotations preceding its general acceptance by the 1840s. Although more than fifty Indiana-related references had appeared by then and are included below, a comprehensive survey of the subsequent litany of positive, negative, humorous, and serious references is not the subject of this review. Notable authors Meredith Nicholson, Jacob Piatt Dunn Jr., Heath Bowman, R. Carlyle Buley, Walter Havinghurst, Ronald L. Baker, Marvin Carmony, and

many others have searched for this "Holy Grail" to reveal the origin and meaning of Indiana's ubiquitous nickname, delving into the original sources of the word, its meanings, possible linguistic history, and humorous folklore speculations as it was applied to residents of Indiana by both insiders and outsiders.

Meredith Nicholson asserted in *The Hoosiers* (1900) that although the exact origins of the word "Hoosier" were not then known, it was only second to "Yankee" as a sobriquet. He realistically concluded that with the appearance and acceptance of Finley's poem in the 1830s, the local meaning was certainly not then

obscure. Yet Nicholson was also defensive about the linguistic origins of the term and its specific application to Indianans, bemoaning, in part "the assumption being in many quarters that the Hoosier Commonwealth is in some way set apart from her neighbors by reason of the uncouthness and ignorance of the inhabitants; and the word 'Hoosier' has perhaps been unfortunate as applied to Indianans in it has sometimes been taken as a synonym for boorishness and illiteracy."

Nicholson further argued that early Indiana frontier inhabitants were not all that different from those of Ohio and Illinois, but without benefit of a more romanticized view allowed for similar frontier folk of Tennessee and Kentucky. Although noting that the word Hoosier had long been used in Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas to refer to a "rough countryman," he affirmed that Indiana residents surely adopted it without reference to manners or literacy. He also mentioned the common, but doubtful, origins

allegedly contrived from such phonetic corruptions as “Husher” (the victors of riverboat brawls or other demonstrators of personal strength), a Louisville baker named Hoosier (but also noting an 1830 Cincinnati reference to a gingerbread), a local “Who’s here?” expression uttered to hail strangers at a cabin door, and “Hussar” (a light cavalryman common to European armies, not to be confused with shock cavalry; this alleged source also was a man who arrived after Finley’s poem appeared).

It fell to the Indiana Historical Society’s own Dunn, in his *The Word Hoosier* (1907), to provide what remains one of the most extensive studies of this question—and just as importantly many primary sources then available. Referencing Nicholson and other numerous opinions since the 1830s that had created uncertainty about the word with “a notable lack of any satisfactory results,” Dunn examined the popular opinions and actual evidence and effectively concluded that many theories were simply based on false assumptions of fact. He determined that Finley’s poem was drafted well before its publication and that it was a separate “Carrier’s Address” document that accompanied the January 1, 1833, issue of the *Indianapolis Journal* (Dunn could not locate a surviving copy, nor have any surfaced in the past hundred years). He also found that the initial version used the word Hoosher as Finley had heard it spoken for several years and that the poet certainly did not create the word. He reprinted the entire poem from a version then owned by Finley’s daughter, Sarah Wrigley (who later donated it to the Indiana State Library, where it can no longer be found).

Dunn also provided and substantiated a number of primary sources wherein “Hoosher” and “Hoosier” both appeared in the early decades of statehood as it

became generally accepted. Like Nicholson, he considered such fanciful origins as “Husher,” “Hussar,” and “Who’s yere?” to have little or no credibility. After recounting that James Whitcomb Riley (who had designated Finley “The Hoosier Poet”) humorously offered “Who’s ear?” as his own satirical counter to the other outlandish theories of the time, Dunn debunked the similarly unfounded allegations of “Hoosier’s men” (construction workers), a Louisville baker’s “Hoosier” bread, “Hussar,” Native American “Hoosa,” (maize), “Hoosieroon” (apocryphal Spanish derivation; Finley coined the term to refer to a child), “Huzur” (Indian Hindu term by way of England), and the Revolutionary War exclamation “huzzal!”

The Indiana historian concluded by pointing the Indiana origins of the word itself toward the commonly used southern expression for people considered rustic, rough class, backwoods, uncouth, or country. Unlike Nicholson’s bemoaning this appellation, Dunn was quick to point out that its adoption in Indiana was in spite of its prior meanings and taken on with a humorous spirit at a time when westerners (today’s Midwest) were fond of adopting state nicknames, and that the “double-sense” meaning was essentially gone by the late 1830s. Wrigley also affirmed the notion that when her father wrote his famous

poem the word “no longer designated a rough, uncouth backwoodsman, but a self-reliant man who was able to subdue the wilderness, defend his home, and command the respect of his neighbors.” Dunn theorized about the “Southern” version’s probable linguistic roots, tracing it to an Anglo-Saxon “hoo” associated with high ground, and thence morphing into an old Cumberland English dialect term “Hoozer” used to describe something unusually large or even hill dwellers. Its flow from American Colonial southern coastal to hill country as common banter seemed quite logical to him. Moreover, most of Indiana’s initial settlers (especially in southern and southeastern Indiana where the term was most noticed) migrated from or had their own origins in these same southern states.

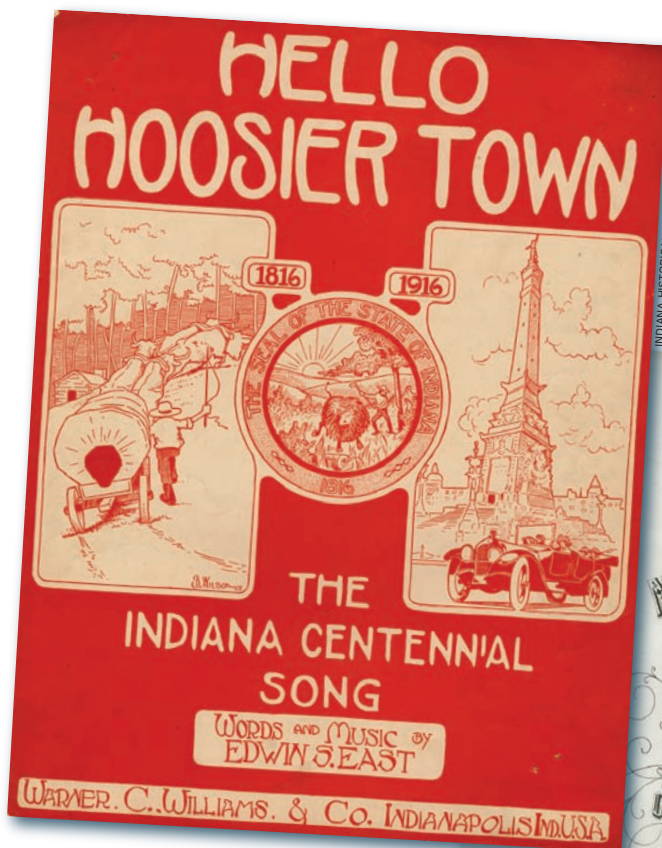
Most authors since Dunn have essentially returned to his thorough study. Ronald Baker’s *From Needmore to Prosperity: Hoosier Place Names in Folklore and History* (1995) remains one of the best recent examples. Baker provided an overview of the past searches by Dunn, Nicholson, and others for the origination and meanings of Hoosier, while also highlighting the folklore and legendary aspects that have been attached to the term. He attributed much of the latter phenomenon (and its attendant double-sense meaning of the word long after its adoption by residents of

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Indiana) to mid- to late- nineteenth-century East Coast hack writers and so-called almanacs more concerned with creating colorful characters to ridicule and contrast with the supposedly culturally superior Yankees. He agreed with most of Dunn's dismissals of the more humorous theories and the term's obvious southern origins, but he considered the Ohio River boatmen and related "husher" appellation in the sense of a ruffian to also have merit. In the June 2007 issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History*, Jonathan Clark Smith examined and updated the boatmen appellation in great detail. A reexamination of many of the original expressions of the words "Hoosher" and "Hoosier," both known and unknown to Dunn and others, is nonetheless illuminating.

One of the earliest known references recorded in private correspondence was reproduced by Sandford Cox in his *Recollections . . . of the Wabash Valley* (1860). A July 14, 1827, incident that was actually a practical joke played on local residents about a (fictional) Indian raid on frontier Indiana was recounted in part as: "The squatter, who fabricated the story and perpetuated the false alarm, took a circuitous route and returned home that evening; and while others were busy building temporary block houses, and rubbing up their guns to meet the Indians, he was quietly gathering up money, and slipped down to Crawfordsville and entered his land, to which he returned again, chuckling in his sleeve and mentally soliloquizing—*There is a Yankee trick for you—done up by a Hoosier.*"

A written reference supposedly dated 1826 that is frequently reported and repeated is an erroneously cited 1846 document—so that alleged earliest date does not apply. The early 1830s witnessed a significant increase in the word's appearance, and no doubt its general acceptance in spoken conversation among Indiana residents and their neighbors had been

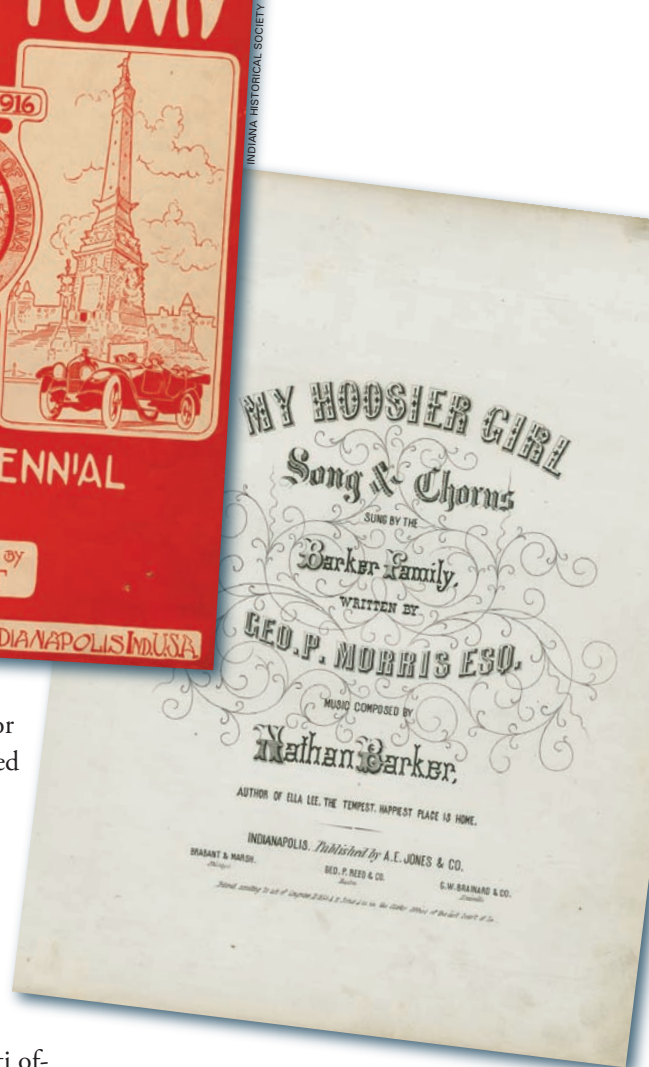


well-established for several years.

Dunn noted the regional fondness for nicknames at this time, often accepted with humor, and he mentioned an 1830 Cincinnati account by a Reverend T. A. Goodwin who described a gingerbread favored by Indiana residents as "Hoosier-bait" (which term would later appear in Finley's poem).

George L. Murdock of Cincinnati offered a complimentary, if honorific, use of the term when he sent a business proposition to General John Tipton at Logansport on February 11, 1831: "John McClure is here from Vincennes Repairing a steam Boat and proposes to take the whole to Logansport the first rise of water . . . we are both anxious that our Boat should be the first at your place . . . I should be glad to have the privilege of Delivering the articles at any time between this and the first of May Our Boat will [be] named the Indiana Hoosier."

Newspaper references to the word Hoosher began with earliest known print appearances in mid-1831. In the June 25



Sheet music for the songs "Hello Hoosier Town," written by Edwin S. East in celebration of the state's centennial, and "My Hoosier Gal," written by George P. Morris and published circa 1854 by A. E. Jones and Company of Indianapolis.

## Travel reminiscences from the 1830s also reported both Hoosher and Hoosier variations of the word at the time Finley was drafting his poem and shortly after its publication.

issue of the *Lawrenceburg Indiana Palladium*, an inquirer with “Hoosher” as a nom de plum voiced concern for “Steam Boat Racing” on the Ohio River and wanted to know the speed and condition of each of four boats. In the July 23 issue of the same newspaper, a writer bemoaned the riotous behavior of a boatload of persons from Cincinnati, noting this was not the first such Sunday incident and that “We hope when the next similar visit is projected, they will be good enough to give a few days’ notice to the ‘Hoosher,’ that they may be prepared to receive them with proper attention.” A week later, a writer from Wabash compared the gubernatorial election among four candidates to a horse race and allowed that Governor Noah Noble “has been corned, littered and kept in Indiana and so may be called a ‘Hoosher.’”

A long, politically inspired poem in the “Address of the Carrier” section of the January 3, 1832, issue of Indianapolis’s *Indiana Democrat* newspaper included an early published use of the word “Hoosier” a year before Finley’s poem:

Protesting in most touching tones,  
Gainst taxes, troubles, debts and loans,  
In favor of much large donations,  
Ask for our “hoosiers” good plantations,  
Urging each scheme of graduation,  
As justice to the common nation.

In April of the same year, the *South Bend Northwestern Pioneer* and *St. Joseph Intelligencer* published this description of a fish coming into Indiana from Michigan: “A Real Hoosier.—A sturgeon, who, no doubt, left Lake Michigan, on a trip

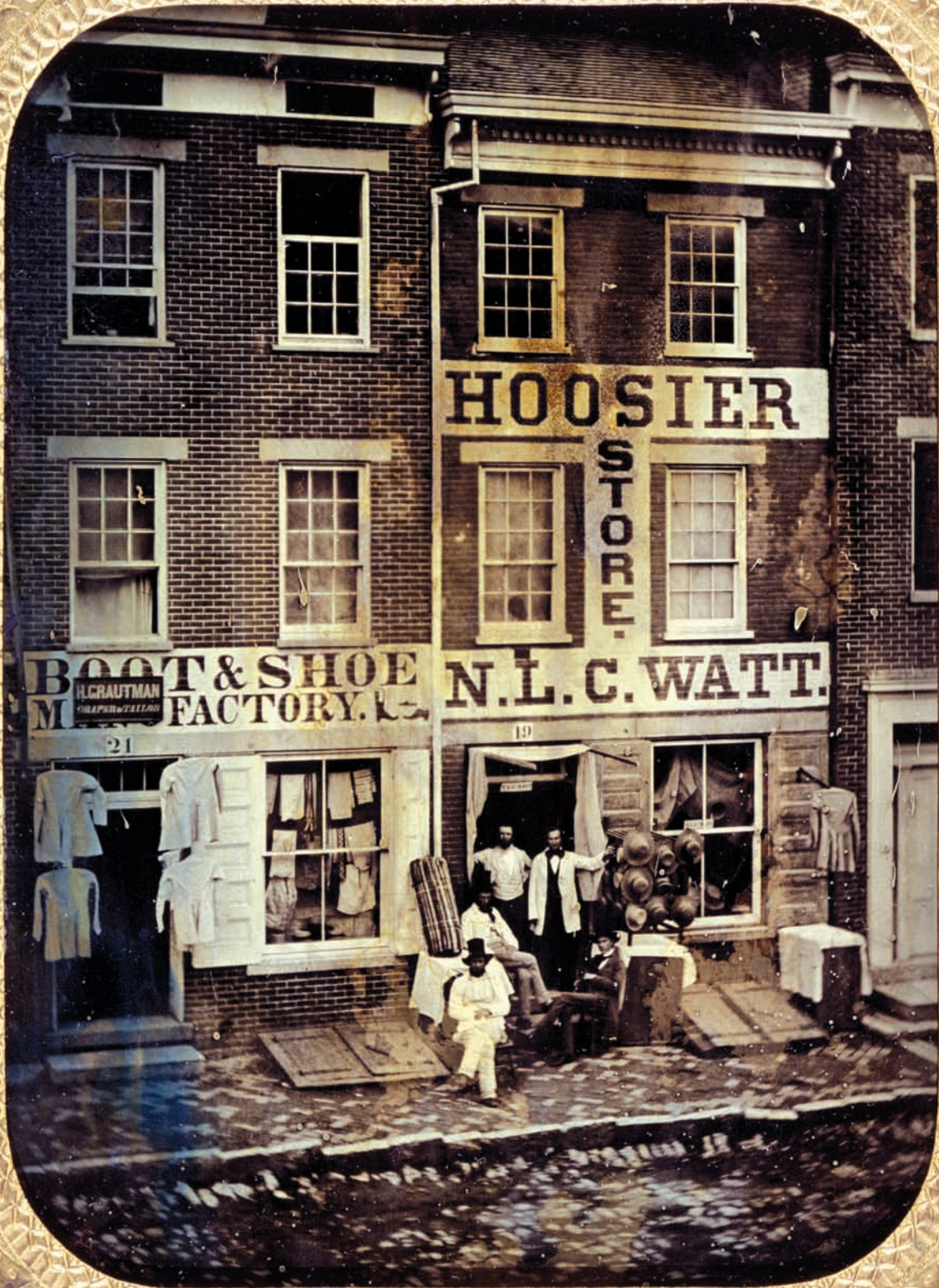
of pleasure and with a view to spending a few days in pure waters of St. Joseph, had his joyous anticipations unexpectedly marred by ‘running afoul’ of a fisherman’s spear, near this place:—being brought on ‘terra firma’ and ‘cast into a balance’ was found to weight 83 pounds.” Nicholson and Dunn noted that the publishers of the *Intelligencer* were southerners also familiar with the southern use of the word “hoosier” to describe a rough, uncouth countryman. Dunn’s contemporary, T. E. Howard considered the reference to have a positive connotation of “vigorous manhood, hearty good feeling, shrewdness and good common sense.” An eighty-three-pound sturgeon was no small fish.

Travel reminiscences from the 1830s also reported both Hoosher and Hoosier variations of the word at the time Finley was drafting his poem and shortly after its publication. While riding between Paoli and what is now French Lick in June 1832, Virtulon Rich recorded three references in his diary later published as *Western Life in the Stirrups*: “I learned it was their ‘grist-mill’—These are the ‘corn crackers’ to supply the wants of the Hoosher, & many a weary traveler too, plies his ivory to the half ground grain with great satisfaction, after worrying through a long day without food. . . . As night grew near I began to make inquiries

where I could get ‘Entertainment’—I knew that any of the Hoosher would keep me if they had corn for my horse which by some casualty had become lame some days before. . . . On arriving at a less cheerful appearing cabin I made the necessary inquiries of a fiery headed middle aged woman—not forgetting to throw in two words for my horse . . . Soon a ‘man’ & a youth came in from their labors—their team was an novel one to me, thinks I, these Hoosher have beat the Yankees this time—They had a fine large bullock, with proud horns, regularly harnessed with a horse to the plough!”

New York traveler Charles Hoffman described these encounters in his *A Winter in the West*, upon traveling from the Michigan Territory into northwestern Indiana’s “rolling prairie” near “the little settlement of Laporte on December 26–29, 1833: ‘Stranger, will you take a cocktail with us?’ called out a tall athletic fellow to me as I was making my way through a group of wild-looking characters assembled an hour since around the fire by which I am now writing. There was a long-haired ‘hoosier’ from Indiana, a couple of smart-looking suckers [so called after the fish of that name] from the southern part of Illinois, a keen-eyed leather-belted ‘badger’ from the mines of Ouisconsin, and a sturdy yeoman-like fellow, whose white capot, Indian moccasins, and red sash proclaimed, while he boasted a three years’ residence, the genuine *wolverine*, or naturalized Michigianian. Could one refuse to drink with such company? The spokesman was evidently a ‘red-horse’ from Kentucky, and nothing was wanting but a ‘buck-eye’ from Ohio to render the assemblage as complete as

*OPPOSITE: An early commercial use of the term “Hoosier.” The circa 1855 ambrotype image shows two storefronts, the general merchandise store of N. L. C. Watt and the tailor shop of Henry Grautman, located just north of the corner of Main and Pearl streets in Richmond, Indiana. Residents gather outside of Watt’s Hoosier Store, surrounded by merchandise.*





it was select. . . . Could I refuse to drink with such company? The warm glass is in my frozen fingers. The most devout temperance man could see no harm in that! It is touched smartly by the rim of the red-horse,—it is brushed by the hoosier,—it rings against the badger,—comes in companionable contact with the wolverine,—‘My respects to you, gentlemen, and luck to all of us.’”

The traveler later offered this evocative description: “I am now in the land of the Hoosiers, and find that long-haired race much more civilized than some of their western neighbors are willing to represent them. The term ‘Hoosier,’ like that of Yankee, or Buck-eye, first applied contemptuously, has now become a soubriquet that bears nothing invidious with it to the ear of an Indianian.”

“The Hoosier’s Nest” was published as the separate “Address of the Carrier” that accompanied the New Year’s Day 1833 issue of the *Indianapolis Journal*, and the poem was soon widely read and copied. Finley originally wrote Hoosier as Hoosher when he began the poem a year or two before, having often heard it after arriving in Indiana from Virginia, by way of Ohio, in 1820. A week after the poem appeared, the January 12, 1833, issue of the *Indiana Democrat* reported that John W. Davis toasted “The Hoosier State of Indiana—through all their divisions, religious and political their motto must and ever will be: ‘their country’” at the Jackson Day dinner in Indianapolis. By August, the same newspaper printed former Governor James B. Ray’s prospectus for “publishing The Hoosier at Greencastle, Indiana . . . a real *Newspaper*. . . . The Hoosier will be

“The term ‘Hoosier,’ like that of Yankee, or Buck-eye, first applied contemptuously, has now become a soubriquet that bears nothing invidious with it to the ear of an Indianian.”

published weekly.” The paper languished and was gone by 1834.

The October 26, 1833, issue of the *Indiana Democrat* reprinted an article from the *Cincinnati Republican* dismissing the still popular first two in a series of improbable origins of the term: the Indiana pioneers’ habit of hailing a cabin with the call “Who’s here?” and the equally dubious Hussars theory. These fanciful explanations came a few months after the publication and wide circulation of Finley’s poem and thus seem too coincidental. Also offered in the same article was a more believable explanation: “The word ‘Hoosier’ is indebted for its existence to that once numerous but now extinct of mortals called the Ohio boatmen. . . . By some caprice . . . the appellation Hoosier became confined solely to such boatmen as had their homes upon the Indiana shore, and from them it was gradually applied to all the Indianans, who acknowledge it as good naturedly as the appellation of Yankee.” This article thus more importantly provides a glimpse of the contemporary meaning of the word as it was by then accepted in the region, continuing: “The appellation ‘Hoosier’ has been used in many of the Western States, for several years, to designate, in a good natural way, an inhabitant of our sister state of Indiana . . . [and] . . . 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.”

References to the word in printed, published, and private writings significantly increased after the 1833 publication of “The Hoosier’s Nest.” The January 4, 1834, issue of the *Indiana Democrat* reprinted a piece from the Kentucky’s *Maysville Monitor* newspaper: “The *Hoosier* State like true democrats have taken the lead in appointing delegates to a National Convention.” Also in the September 9 issue of the *Democrat*, Finley was described as: “The poet-*laureate* of Hoosierland and editor of the Richmond Palladium . . . that was unceremoniously robbed by the Cincinnati Chronicle, of the credit of immortalizing our State in verse, by that justly celebrated epic of the ‘Hoosier’s Nest.’” The November 29, 1834, issue of the *Vincennes Sun* carried a reprint from the *Cincinnati Mirror* describing the arrival of a load of large pumpkins from Indiana as “Hoosier and Mammoth Pumpkins.”

When a couple traveling from western New York crossed into northern Indiana from Michigan in June 1835 needed a place to stay for a night, the wife left this vivid account as reproduced in *Pioneer Women of the West*: “My husband asked if they could tell us where we could find a tavern? They looked at each other and then askance at us. The question was repeated again; they looked bewildered, when my husband thoughtfully changed his phrase and said—‘Where can I stay tonight and have good care taken of my horses?’ The answer came quickly—‘Oh, at Nicholas B—’s, the Hoosier’s, he has a first-rate place, and take in every night a great many folks.’ We made two or three

*OPPOSITE: An 1830 map of Indiana engraved by William Woodruff. The map indicates the growth of the state since its founding fourteen years before. Two-thirds of the state had been settled, and negotiations continued between Native Americans and newcomers in the northern region. Watercolors outline the borders of the counties. County seats and other towns are noted, and Indiana boundaries are shown along with township and range lines.*



further inquiries and passed on, with our expectations considerably raised in the prospect of the promised accommodation.” As they went on searching, the woman finally noted: “A fresh glance of scrutiny, however, enabled us to descry a very small hut jutting into the woods, as uninviting a log house as we had seen in all our wanderings.” There followed a vivid account of their very rustic sojourn with their “Hooshier” hosts.

On August 20, 1835, Quaker mistress Sarah Harvey wrote to her sister-in-law in Pennsylvania about her new life in Indiana. Mailed in Richmond, this newsy three-page letter (currently the oldest manuscript reference to “Hoosher” in the collections of the Indiana Historical Society) used the word five times to describe people and conditions in eastern Indiana, including both similarities to Finley’s poem and some of its common understandings:

*“this 69 acres is for sale at 600 dollars—but mind ye the land is flat—water hard—no barn, and the house a “Hoosher’s nest” staked & ridered. . . . this has been a happy day to me here along with Joseph and Lydia Plummer\_ they are rich in good fruits of mental cultivation, as well as worldly substance\_ dear cousin Lydia has been learning me to comb and spin worsted “Hoosher” fashion. she offers me all I’ll spin for stockings if I winter in the west, but she admires my spinning so much I will spin some for her\_ old settlers in Indiana are called “Hoosher” and the cabins they first live in “Hoosher’s nests”\_ It takes a year to become a Hoosher\_ all our rel[at]ions now live in snug frame or brick houses\_ all in good business who are no[?] to prop back\_ I am at head quarters now\_ this is the place to meet th[?] society in Richmond or hereaway\_ travelers of note often call [?] . . . I love to visit cabins and hear and see and learn how to begin the world with its begining and grow with its growth.”*

## A Google search for “Hoosier” in common online parlance presents results for “about 5,000,000 for Hoosier” and “about 1,170,000” for “Hoosier AND Indiana.”

Recently arriving in “Muncietown” from Pennsylvania, a homesick Samuel Kennedy wrote a colorful letter about his new surroundings in August 1839, noting in part that “Horatio still has his office of County Surveyor \_ and has his ‘very Hoosierist wife’ still \_ Horatio is a thorough Democrat, and went the ‘whole hog’ at the Election which is just over \_ But it wouldn’t avail \_ the Whig candidate for Congress Wm. Rariden is re-elected by a handsome majority.”

In neighboring Dayton, Ohio, the August 28, 1841, issue of the *Dayton Transcript* provided a description of such neighboring state nicknames as Illinois Suckers, Ohio Buckeyes, Michigan Wolverines, and Wisconsin Badgers, and of course Hoosiers:

*“The yankees have long been known, and properly appreciated. Other aliasses [sic] are coming into use among our countrymen, which it will be necessary to understand. The most important belong to the Hoosiers. These are locally the people of Indiana, and generally the emigrants from the Southern States who settle in any of the free States of the Northwest.—They are a class, who like the jews and yankees, can be known by their habits and customs where ever they are. The Hoosiers are found in great numbers in flat boats on the Mississippi. One of their cargoes down the river is corn and pigs. The corn is unshelled*

*and unhusked.—The pigs eat corn, and the Hoosiers eat corn and pig, until they get to New Orleans, when the pigs, the remainder of the corn, and the flat are all sold, and the Hoosiers wend their way up the stream again. Their apparel is much of it made of a peculiar domestic fabric, which they manufacture without the aid of protection called Hoosiers jeans. They are, in almost all respects, a people quite unlike the yankees.”*

As often the case with most historical research, more references will surely be discovered in primary sources for the important years immediately before and after the publication of “The Hoosier’s Nest.” Debate and research continues about the term’s origin and subsequent adaptations, use, and meanings since its Indiana acquisition. For example, an extensive narrative, annotated chronology, and bibliography of the use of the term through time (both historical and in folklore and legend) is available on the Herman Wells Library Web site of Indiana University.

It is no small testimonial that a present-day search for “Hoosier” on the Secretary of State’s Access Indiana Web site for Business Entity Report Filing reveals over 2,600 companies using “Hoosier” in their name, ranging alphabetically from AAA Hoosier Home Healthcare Specialists Inc. to Warthogs MC Hoosier Chapter Inc. A similar online White Pages business listings search produces almost 900 entries for



A W. H. Bartlett engraving, titled “Domestic Architecture in the Backwoods,” depicts the rudimentary accommodations sheltering early Indiana settlers and the rich forests upon which they depended for survival.

“Hoosier in Indiana,” and there are three columns of “Hoosier” entries in just the Indianapolis White Pages. A Google search for “Hoosier” in common online parlance presents results for “about 5,000,000 for Hoosier” and “about 1,170,000” for “Hoosier AND Indiana.” What would the results be of a single day’s tally of how many times throughout Indiana the word “Hoosier” appeared in daily or other print media or is spoken on local television and radio news programs, advertising pitches, etc.? What would the results be of researching for all of the registered or advertised business names that have come and gone since the 1830s?

This review has been intentionally limited to the decades on either side of the

first printing of “The Hoosier’s Nest.” It is safe to conclude the Hoosier and Hoosier nickname adopted by Indiana residents and for them by their nearby neighbors was derived from the dialect term (probably traceable from England) not uncommon among southern immigrants to Indiana and the Ohio Valley several years before Finley arrived and penned his famous poem. Although the term implied a frontier roughness just beyond the most recently settled and “civilized” regions (which of course were always moving west), its subsequent widespread acceptance in the 1830s and 1840s was definitely good-natured, if not independent-minded, in meaning then and thereafter. It is also safe to discount several factually

unsupported theories, thoughts of local immaculate conceptions, and variations thereof as folklore or urban legends: Hoosa; Hoose; Hoosier’s men, food, or customers; Houssieres, Husher (probably the phonetic “Hoosher” pronunciation of Hoosier); Hussar; Huzur; Huzzah; Who’s yer/here; Who’s ear; etc.

Although the old double-sense meaning still occasionally surfaces (usually among newcomers or visitors, linguistic researchers, or those who may enjoy making fun of Indiana residents), it remains embraced in its modern appellation as primarily positive. Moreover, the word is a regional nickname, like many others whose precise origins do not necessarily burden the modern, continued appellations. Perhaps one of the more eloquent conclusions was offered by Walter Havighurst in *The Heartland* (1962) when he observed: “Whatever its origin, the name of Hoosier has had a lasting appeal for Indiana people and has acquired a quite enviable aura. For more than a hundred years it has continued to mean friendliness, neighborliness, an idyllic contentment with Indiana landscape and life.” Most of Dunn’s original research has withstood the test of time after a hundred years, and it appears that George Blakey’s observation still holds that Finley’s creative effort “helped define Indiana identity” and contributed to a “legacy [which] is a stereotype that the state has accepted affectionately, if not realistically—that of a rustic, rugged, individualistic land.”

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