

Short-lived enterprise

County had steel industry

One frustration of local-historian-types is the kind of oft-repeated story that leaves a lot of unanswered questions.

A case in point is the Monroe County enterprise, which showed some

real promise as a major industry in the late 1830s. A Randolph Ross from Virginia bought some land in the northeast quarter of Section 7 of Indian Creek Township. In time he owned some 166 acres.

Looking Back

By Rose H. McIlveen

The purchase of land, in itself, was not particularly unusual, since the county economy was largely agrarian in that time period. But Ross had other plans for the land.

BY 1839 HE HAD not only had an "iron works" in operation there, but he also had some employees busily engaged in digging ore from a nearby hillside. Accounts of Ross' enterprise can be found in Blanchard's *Counties of Morgan, Monroe and Brown, Indiana*, *History of Lawrence and Monroe Counties, Indiana* and Pop Hall's *Historic Treasures*. The accounts differ only in length and the number of details.

Ross apparently constructed his iron furnace with the help of "a few experienced men" he had imported from Virginia and began to transform the crude ore to bars that were shipped by wagon to Louisville and Vincennes. According to the histories, Ross' works also started making castings of such domestic wares as machine castings, kettles, and irons, crude hoes and "a few mold-boards for plows."

THERE IS ALSO an article about the business in the Sesquicentennial edition of the *Bloomington Courier-Tribune*. According to some additional research done by its author, the ore mined in Indian Creek was considered good, since it "assayed at 20 percent."

The Ross enterprise — called Randolph Ross & Son's Virginia Iron Works — had been incorporated in the State of Indiana with assets of \$20,000. It had also been authorized to engage in business for 10 years with the option of renewal.

Actually, the county records indicate that the assets of Ross were valued for tax purposes at \$8,428 — land, \$468, improvements, \$6,360 and personal property, \$1,600. Though the amounts seem unimpressive by our standards, by 1841 Ross was the county's highest taxpayer, paying \$52.25 more than his nearest competitor for that distinction. By 1842 Ross' margin had nearly doubled at \$100.49.

WHAT, THEN, WENT WRONG with the works? The highly-capitalized business lasted for only five years, and the surviving accounts of it only speculate about the reason why the Virginia Iron Works went out of business.

The Lawrence and Monroe county history suggests that Ross had "financial difficulties elsewhere," but does not offer any evidence to that effect. The Blanchard history

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