

## EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF AUDUBON IN INDIANA

BY S. E. PERKINS III

## I.

We must ever speculate on the gist of the interesting exchange of experiences that took place at Clarksville, Indiana, opposite Louisville, Kentucky, and in sight of the famous Falls of the Ohio (the site of which town is now mostly washed into the river), when John James Audubon and his family visited Gen. George Rogers Clark in his home there. Neither made any notes upon these social calls that are extant. Each was a collector at first hand of the natural history facts to be observed in the fastnesses and swamps of lower Indiana. They both had much in common for they had each traversed the same regions of the state. It is too bad that no records were made by either about the calls of the traveler-naturalist Audubon upon the soldier Clark, which occurred on some of Audubon's many trips up and down the Ohio River between 1807 and 1818. Gen. Clark died in the last named year.

## II.

After coming across an experience of Audubon in southern Indiana between 1811 and 1817, having to do with a law suit which he brought, I searched several biographies of Mr. Audubon but found no references to it.

It seems that sometime between the above dates John James Audubon desired one hundred raccoon skins, presumably for resale through his store in Henderson, Kentucky, so he crossed the town ferry and entered into a contract with a huntsman and trapper who lived on the Indiana side of the Ohio River across from Henderson, to furnish him these skins by a certain date. When the man failed to fulfill his agreement Audubon sought Jack Anthony, a Justice of the Peace in the Indiana township opposite where Audubon then lived, and brought suit for breach of contract. The defendant appeared on trial day and in his defense alleged that he had proceeded in good faith to carry out his part of the contract but unfortunately in felling a tree he had killed his hunting dog; that without the assistance of his hound he was unable to capture raccoons at the speed required to fulfill the contract. He further answered that he applied to the plaintiff, Audubon, for the use of his dog "Dash", but that Audubon had refused to loan the animal to him, and that therefore he was unable to comply with the terms of his contract.

When these facts came before the Justice, in the characteristic manner of the early courts he decreed, "This case is continued for

three months and the plaintiff herein is to furnish his coon dog to the defendant during that time." The record shows that at the expiration of the time of continuance that one hundred skins had been furnished. The case was then dismissed without costs and in order that good feeling might prevail, Watt Bryant, constable for the court, procured a quart of whiskey from one of the trading boats that was lying nearby in the river. From it a drink was had by the parties all around; whereupon both Audubon and the defendant to the law suit acknowledged their satisfaction.

### III.

The first reference to the American Avocet in this naturalist's works came from an experience of Audubon two miles south of Vincennes, Indiana, at a small pond, in June, 1814. As he traveled on horseback from Henderson, Kentucky, to Vincennes, Indiana, he noticed a number of birds alighting in the pond. He immediately left his horse and crawled towards the water. He found the swamp but a few inches deep but with mud thereunder fully knee deep. As he approached through the tall grasses four birds assailed him, constantly giving harsh cries. They remained upon the wing but dived at him repeatedly. He soon recognized them as Avocets. It was new to him to find them breeding so far from the ocean, so he painstakingly sought out three nests which contained eggs. He then, from a hidden position in the shelter of the grasses, watched the behavior of the birds. He found that they were experts at catching insects; that they ran with partly extended wings; that they waded through the water hunting food often with the whole head and part of the long neck submerged, as he had seen the spoon-bill and the Red-breasted Snipe doing in other parts of the country.

Audubon returned early the next morning from Vincennes for further study and was able to advance on hands and knees to within three feet of a sitting Avocet. He exclaimed as he watched the bird from such a close range: "Lovely bird! How innocent, how unsuspecting, and yet how near their enemy, albeit he be an admirer of thy race." Within a moment after this thought came to his mind, he noted that the bird left the nest and used the well known broken-wing trick, appearing to have been wounded as it flopped along the ground in an effort to distract Audubon's attention from its nest and eggs.

During that morning, Audubon collected five of these birds, three females and two males, which served as specimens from which he

drew his painting of them in the elephant folio called "Birds of America".

#### IV.

Upon a three weeks' visit by Constantine Rafinesque with Audubon at Henderson, Kentucky, in the summer of 1818, together these scientists, who were only a year apart in age, crossed the Ohio River at Henderson into Indiana in order that Audubon might show Rafinesque, on a day's journey, the gigantic trees of our western forests and a cane-brake more than two miles wide, as well as the associated botanical forms. In Indiana they encountered a bear and became drenched in a heavy thunder shower. The area was not new to Audubon as he says he was "well acquainted with it".

Rafinesque made a collection of fungi, lichens, and mosses on this side of the Ohio River but not being familiar with the efforts of cane-brake travel found it strenuous and discarded the botanical specimens one by one in order to go forward lighter. When these men of science reached the Ohio again, late in the day, Audubon sounded his horn whereupon a boat came across from Kentucky for them, which allayed Rafinesque's expressed fear that they should never find their way out of the brake alive.

#### V.

It is recorded by the eminent authority on Indiana history, George B. Lockwood, that Audubon, while residing and maintaining a store at Henderson, Kentucky, was a visitor at New Harmony, Indiana, calling upon the scientific men there assembled. At that time the Robert Owen Communistic experiment was being tried at New Harmony with the aid of such well known scientists on the Staff of Educators as Thomas Say, now called the "Father of American Zoology", Gerard Troost, Charles A. Lesueur, William Maclure, popularly called today the "Father of American Geology", Lucy Sistaire Say, and Josiah Warren. New Harmony is about forty miles northwest from the town of Henderson.

Another statement concerning Audubon in New Harmony appears in *Harper's Magazine* and is by Mrs. Phillip Speed, late of Louisville, Kentucky, daughter of George Keats, brother of the English poet, John Keats. Mrs. Speed states that her father told her when she was a young girl that he and Audubon resided for a time at New Harmony while the Rappites lived there.

The Rapps occupied the town from 1815 to 1825. George Keats came from England in 1818. Audubon lived in Henderson from 1810 to 1818, during which time he visited at New Harmony. Next he resided in Louisville and then in Cincinnati till October 12, 1820. After that for a time he resided in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi. Thereafter he is not known to have lived in Indiana or Kentucky. I find no corroborative evidence of Mrs. Speed's statement. I believe the statement of Mrs. Speed is an error, as the residence of Audubon is accounted for elsewhere.

## VI.

On October 12, 1820, after Audubon had finished his work as taxidermist at the Cincinnati Museum, he left there with two flat boats carrying Capt. Samuel Cummings, Jacob Aumack, Joseph Mason, and others, executing a plan made to explore the Ohio, Mississippi, Red, and Arkansas Rivers and adjacent woodlands in order to study birds and plants and to make drawings of them for his great work.

I find an interesting entry in the journal of Audubon made on board his scow, October 17, 1820, as he scanned the northern or Indiana shore of the Ohio. The item is, "The Turkeys extremely plenty and Crossing the River hourly from the north side. Great number destroyed falling in the Stream for want of strength."

Audubon's fleet of boats made its first recorded stop on the Indiana shore a few hundred yards below Evansville on November 1. While Aumack, acting captain of one of the boats, sought to collect a debt due him there, and Cummings with young Mason went on ahead down the Ohio to Henderson in a skiff. Audubon made note of large flocks of Snow Geese, only one of which birds was, he says, in perfect plumage.

When afloat again and down three miles from Evansville, Audubon observed three birds he considered Brown Pelicans. He and the party landed below them while they were perched in a red maple tree. The artist let it be known that he desired to have one of them. Mr. Aumack stalked them and fired at two that were close together. Neither fell, which Audubon regretted exceedingly. The adventurers spent the night at that place.

The next night, reports Audubon, because of quite a gale they put ashore on the Indiana side opposite Henderson, his former home. While here the painter made what he is pleased to call "a rough drawing" of the place. At this camp Audubon says they saw sea gulls, *Larus argentatus*.

Continuing the journey down the Ohio, they came to Diamond Island, wild and beautiful, the next day, November 3. Audubon and his party landed upon it and found a fine Snow Goose, northern divers, and a few Sandhill Cranes. Our ornithologist spent the whole next day hunting on this immense island with the result that he saw a great many turkeys and "dears", blue cranes, "wood groos", a winter wren, and turkey buzzards. The latter were engaged in feeding on a dead hog.

When Slim Island, a mile below Mt. Vernon, was reached November 5, Capt. Cummings went ashore there but found nothing of interest to him. Of the stretch of the Ohio opposite this island, Audubon reports "this part of the river rather difficult". It has shifted its banks or bottom since that time for the main channel which is between the island and Indiana now presents a magnificent, sweeping bend beside and below the island where I have lately watched flotillas of a half dozen heavily laden barges lashed into a whole, while being pushed by a stern-wheel packet, negotiate the course with the utmost ease.

On down stream, after he left this island, Audubon had a red letter day for he saw geese, loons, red-breasted thrushes (robins), many sparrows, paroquets, a winter hawk, and a woodcock.

When these two barges, proceeding lashed together side by side most of the journey while in the Ohio, arrived at a place nine miles above the mouth of the Wabash River, though the temperature that November 6th was 28° and the weather very disagreeable, Audubon disembarked and with gun on shoulder tramped in Indiana to the confluence of these two streams. His trip was over the open weedy spaces, through forests of pecan, hickory, maple, and tupelo, and vast cane-brakes, all of which characterized the region. While he doubtless enjoyed this trek along shore he says he found nothing new of bird kind which he desired to collect for painting. His crafts, after he was aboard again, soon encountered a gale and were blown to the Illinois shore a mile down.

I have lately journeyed afoot over some of the territory embraced in the nine mile trek along Indiana's southern border, now in Posey County in the southwest corner of the state. There are no brakes of reed or fishing-pole cane today. All one sees is a patch here and there of slim six or eight foot tall stalks. A half dozen forest trees in clumps are to be encountered at intervals along shore, the only reminders of river-bordering woodlands that in days ago were so dense as to be almost impenetrable. They have largely gone to fur-

nish fuel to wood-burning packets, common soon after Audubon's time. Cypress trees then as now, likely grew only in the nearby bayous of both rivers as Audubon makes no mention of encountering any of them along the river border.

Audubon's nine miles afoot constitute the last trip on which he is known to have visited Indiana.

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INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

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#### PERCIVAL BROOKS COFFIN

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Percival Brooks Coffin was born in the small city of Richmond, Indiana, in 1865, the youngest child of a Quaker family that had for two generations strongly influenced the religious, philanthropic, and financial development of its community; he died nearby Richmond in his modest summer home, "The Brooks", on October 7, 1935, after a brief illness. His parents did not send their youngest and somewhat delicate son to public school, but taught him or had him taught at home. One of his closest friends writes: "It always seemed a bit pathetic to think of this active mischief-loving little chap not allowed to play with boys away from home, not allowed to go to public school, always tutored, sitting on the floor forming armies with spools while his parents read aloud Parkman's histories." Although his father, Charles F. Coffin, among his many other notable activities, was one of the founders of Earlham College, the boy was not sent there.

As happens to good minds denied formal school and college training, he felt a vivid sense of his loss which he was constantly alert to repair by his own efforts. In this he was so successful that in full maturity he had become one of the best and most truly educated of men.