The Blockhouse

David M. Hovde - 2017

Beginning in the 1860s, various groups and individuals worked to locate the site of Fort Ouiatenon. The exact location was lost in local memory since the site itself was burned to the ground, and the French settlers and local Native populations had left decades earlier. Vague references to the site on Indiana maps stopped once surveys were completed in the 1820s, and current boundary lines and place names replaced the historical place names. Various individuals had worked for years to locate the site by reading French documents and digging in areas of artifact concentrations. The 1925 centennial celebrations of the founding of Lafayette helped generate renewed interest in Fort Ouiatenon. Richard B. Wetherill, a Lafayette native, a successful physician, and the president of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association (TCHA), spearheaded this effort.

In 1928, Wetherill purchased 8.91 acres of land where many believed Fort Ouiatenon had been located. Wetherill presented the deed to TCHA with hopes that the site would be preserved from development and opened to the public. One of his goals was to reconstruct the "the old blockhouse and palisades." Wetherill visited Old Fort Harrod at the Kentucky Pioneer Memorial State Park to study costs and construction methods for log buildings and fortifications.

Wetherill's dream of a reproduction fort on the site came into reality in the spring of 1930 with the construction of the present-day Blockhouse. The Monon Railroad donated sixteen carloads of pine logs, and Clark Horlacher built it. The Blockhouse was dedicated on June 14, 1930. The Old Gold and Black Orchestra provided music. The DAR and a local Boy Scout troop performed a flag ceremony, raising the American, French, and British flags.

Over the years, with the Blockhouse as the focal point, the site was used for meetings and programs for TCHA and groups such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and the Indiana Historical Society. In the 1940s, it was one of the sites visited annually by the Hoosier Historical Institutes. The Institute was sponsored by state universities, the Indiana Historical Bureau, and other state agencies. Teachers could receive college credits for participating in the Institute through the Indiana State Teachers College. TCHA held open houses at the Blockhouse every Sunday during the month of October into the 1960s. It was even used as a polling place.

Things changed in 1958 when a fall "members only" event began called the Feast of the Hunters' Moon. This small, single-evening event centered on the Blockhouse with food, singing, and storytelling. Since 1967, the Blockhouse has been the center of activity for one of the largest historical events in the United States.

This iconic building has become one of the symbols of the community, and TCHA and the Tippecanoe County Park and Recreation Department have maintained it over the years. In 1999, a rehabilitation study revealed that the building needed major work. Thanks to a grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, a large restoration project was undertaken. In 2002, the restored Blockhouse and the museum were open to the public for the first time in years. Since that time, the Blockhouse has continued to serve as the centerpiece to the Feast of the Hunters' Moon.

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