

## **Whiting's Pioneers**

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A settler coming to the Whiting area around the year 1860 or before would have found transportation extremely difficult. The difficult trails through the deep soft sand and the long stretch of lakes and sloughs made it almost impossible to keep in touch with the rest of the world. There were no neighborhoods close at hand.

If an early pioneer was able to come by rail, they would have had to depart from the train at Ainsworth, which is now known as South Chicago, and then walk five miles to Whiting. If a settler was traveling on foot or horseback, they were greeted by a lack of roads and bridges. Anyone coming to Whiting from Chicago had to travel south as far as Hegewisch in order to reach the Chittenden Bridge, which ran over the Calumet River. From Hegewisch they would have to travel along the Indian Ridge till they reached the East Side, where they would then have to find a passable trail near Lake Michigan and finally arrive in Whiting. However, none of these harsh burdens ever stopped Whiting's early inhabitants.

Between 1820 and 1860, the men who came first for the deer but stayed for the ducks knew this area to be a hunter's paradise. The deer had disappeared from the ridges by 1860, but the ducks still darkened the sky. Mother nature made the Whiting area an ideal feeding and breeding ground for ducks and other wild game birds. The swamps and marshes were teeming with ducks and geese in unbelievable numbers and wild turkeys were plentiful on the sand ridges. Soon, Chicago sportsmen arrived and shooting lodges started to open.

Henry Eggers' hunting lodge was remembered for having the most beautiful surroundings. The spot was located at Berry Lake. Eggers would often entertain the fisherman and hunters who visited his resort. The area had rich luxuriant wooded banks, with water lilies, and a beautiful group

of sentinel-like birches bordering the northern end of the lake. With these famous hunting clubs also came famous hunters.

Settlements in Whiting were slow to develop, and as late as 1889 there were not more than 50 families in the region. The majority of the early settlers were German immigrants, most of who worked for the railroad companies. Before 1850 the only two people who lived in the Whiting-Robertsdale area were Henry Eggers and George Roberts. Over the course of the next decade thirteen more people settled in this vicinity. They were the Schrage family, Henry Reese, Robert Atchison, Frederick Opperman, John Steiber, Birchler, Daus, German, Gaunitz, William Horlbeck, Conrad and Herman Wuestenfeldt, and John Wanacott.

Between 1860 and 1870 more settlers started calling the Whiting Robertsdale area home. The names are as follows: John Vater, Charles and John Kreuter, Albert Poppen, Jacob Forsythe, John Sparks, Christopher Harms, Robert Klose, and Thomas Moylan. Ten years later, seven more individuals settled in this region. They were: Frank Wenzel, William Fischer, John Witendorf, Henry Ehlers, Conrad Miller, Fred Fuerstenberg, and Nicholas Leinen. The last pioneers to settle in this territory before the arrival of the Standard Oil Company were August Scholz, August Falkenthal, Theodore Harvey, Henry Gehrke, and Frederick Fischrupp.

Most of the early settlers made their living by working as section hands for the railroads, because that really was the only venture where one could make money. Besides working on the railroad, many immigrants occupied their time hunting, fishing, trapping, and cultivating small farms, which produced watermelons, cabbages and potatoes.

According to the book titled *The Calumet Region*, “A sister of John F. K. Vater came from Germany to try farming here. When her potatoes grew no larger than marbles, she tossed handfuls of sand into her brother’s face and moved to Iowa.” Other pioneers tried to sell certain goods at the

Chicago groceries and markets. The 1911 Whiting City Almanac states that once Henry Reese carried a heavy load of butter on foot to Chicago. Once he arrived, Reese was told the best price he could get for his butter was four cents per pound. Reese was so upset by this that it is said that he threw the butter into the street and walked back home to Whiting.

Due to the lack of edible crops, several patches of wild berries supplemented the diet of early settlers. Strawberries grew in most of the area and raspberries grew plentiful around Berry Lake. Likewise, the marshes of early Whiting were filled with cranberries. Many pioneers thought nothing of walking several miles to Tolleston where the finest huckleberries were to be found.

Once the berries were picked these same pioneers traveled by foot to Chicago to sell their harvest. According to the 1911 Whiting City Almanac, "After picking their berries at Tolleston it was necessary to walk to Ainsworth (South Chicago) fifteen miles, and there take the train to Chicago . . . The fare from South Chicago was fifty cents. It was, therefore, necessary besides picking the huckleberries to walk twenty-five miles and pay out seventy-five cents in car-fare in order to get to market."

A few of the early settlers cut timber and firewood for individuals in Chicago. It was said that Henry Eggers paid for his land and house by selling cedar fence posts to neighboring towns. The lumber was attached to rafts and towed by hand through the shallow water of Lake Michigan. In 1870, Jacob Forsythe attempted to ease the transportation of timber with his steamboat.

Life was definitely not easy for Whiting's early pioneers. The settlers went about their daily tasks for the railroads, tending to makeshift gardens, and entertaining groups of hunters from Chicago. The children that were settled in Whiting received only the very basic education. There were no churches, jails, and only a rudimentary structure of a government.

Toward the later part of the 1880s, Whiting started to show some signs of an actual

settlement. This tiny hamlet had its own post office, school and voting place. The schoolhouse was used for church services, as well as, for Sunday school instruction. In addition, train stations had also been established by this time, providing both freight and passenger service.