Recent Looks at the Valley

If he is unfamiliar with local history, one who visits the Maumee Valley may wonder at the numerous reminders of General Anthony Wayne that appear—monuments and memorial parks, dedicated in his honor, as well as highways, streets, schools, and an important city that bear his name. The fact is that the admiration and respect long felt in this region for General Wayne parallel rather closely the high esteem in which General Robert E. Lee is held in Virginia. This dates back to 1792, when President Washington, remembering the general’s demonstrated soldierly qualities—he was widely known as “Mad Anthony” because of his dashing bravery in numerous Revolutionary War engagements—sent him into the Ohio country as commander in chief of the Western army. His assignment was to turn the tide of British-Indian gains against American arms.

The first significant achievement in the decisive success of this mission was his defeat in 1794 of the Indians at Fallen Timbers, just off the Maumee River, between the present towns of Waterville and Maumee. The second, largely the result of the first, was his negotiation the following year of the Treaty of Greenville, which opened the Northwest Territory to white settlement. Not only
did his successes here enhance his reputation as an able military leader but they did much to validate the claim of the valley to historic fame.

We are told that as the general, with his command, advanced northward down the Auglaize River toward its juncture with the Maumee, the Indians, in a large cluster of villages on the shores of both streams, having been warned by their spies, fled precipitantly—they had come to regard Wayne as a formidable antagonist who, they said, never slept. They left behind apple and peach orchards and extensive plantations of corn and squash. The soldiers laid waste the fields and later destroyed corn and other crops growing farther down the Maumee. This brought the red men to the verge of starvation the following winter and, together with the trouncing they got at Fallen Timbers, made them willing to sit about the Greenville council fires and smoke the pipe of peace.

Surveying the fort that his men had built at the mouth of the Auglaize, Wayne exclaimed: "I defy the English, the Indians, and all the devils in hell to take it!" Thus it became Fort Defiance, whose site, with restored earthworks, is now preserved as a memorial. The settlement that grew up about the fort, now a thriving city, was named Defiance, as was the county of which it is the seat. Some twenty miles beyond the Ohio-Indiana line, where the St. Marys and St. Joseph rivers join to form the Maumee (called "Three Rivers" by the Indians), General Wayne built a stronghold that soon got the name Fort Wayne. The hustling Hoosier city now bearing that name surrounds the site of the fort. On the Wabash River in Mercer County stands the town Fort Recovery, named for the fort that Wayne's men erected in 1793 on ground
where American troops under General Arthur St. Clair had suffered a bloody, disastrous defeat by Indian warriors in 1791. Memorials maintained by the state mark both this historic site and the Fallen Timbers battleground.

A few miles downstream from the latter, on the opposite shore of the Maumee, is a third state memorial, on grounds once occupied by Fort Meigs. This stronghold, built by General W. H. Harrison, withstood two sieges by British and Indian forces in the War of 1812.

In addition to General Wayne, there were many other heroes in critical frontier days whose names are honored in the annals of the region. Two among these, Peter Navarre and Peter Manore, resourceful, courageous men of French descent, were prominent figures in northwestern Ohio phases of the War of 1812. Because both had many friends among the Indians, spoke their tongues, and understood Indian nature, they were able to aid the scattered settlements in the lower valley effectively and to preserve many a white man’s scalp intact. Toledo has a Navarre Avenue and a Navarre Park, both named for Peter Navarre. The restored cabin in which he once lived is preserved on a site at the Toledo Zoo.

Whites, befriended signally by Manore, failed to show any substantial appreciation. But the Indians, remembering his kindnness to them, ceded to him a large tract of land in what is now Providence Township, Lucas County. There, on the Maumee opposite the present town, Grand Rapids, he founded the village of Providence. Fire and cholera struck the settlement with devastating effects in the early 1850’s. The ghost town Providence, Providence Park, the township, and its Manore Road now stand as memorials to this stouthearted pioneer.
Peter Manore heard from the Indians a legend that has made a high rocky outcrop on the bank of the Maumee in Waterville famous locally as the scene of an odd incident that antedated the white man's coming. As the story goes, a boy among a band of Ottawas encamped near the spot, known as Roche de Boeuf, fell from the cliff and was killed on rocks below. The father, holding the lad's mother responsible, pushed her off to her death. Her next of kin, following tribal custom, brought the same fate to the father. The kinsman in turn met a like death. And so it went, until chiefs intervened and ended the slaughter. The following day, bodies of the victims, numbering two-thirds of the group, were taken from the river and given ceremonial burial.

General Wayne's troops, en route from Fort Defiance to an expected confrontation with the Indians, hastily erected near Roche de Boeuf a stockade that they named Fort Deposit. According to a tradition that has long persisted, some of the soldiers, aware of the fate that might lie ahead for them (the battle of Fallen Timbers was to come only a short time later), buried money and other valuables at the spot. In ensuing years the field in which the fort stood has been dug over repeatedly by treasure hunters, generally without success.

Several miles above Roche de Boeuf lies Girty's Island, so named because Simon Girty once lived there. Simon was one of four brothers, all of whom, as children, had been adopted into Indian tribes. All became notorious renegades, aiding the Indians in many forays against whites, often proving themselves more brutal and barbarous than the savages. Simon, exceedingly heartless and cruel, was guilty of innumerable atrocities against white men, women, and children, in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and
Kentucky areas. Yes, as in the Westerns now often viewed on movie and television screens, there was a full quota of bad guys in those days, a great many of them white.

Vanquished and outnumbered, a good many of them reduced to vagabondage and chronic drunkenness through the chicanery and greed of unprincipled white traders, the Indians were long since forced to leave the region. Little is left to remind us of them except the names of a few such chiefs as Pontiac, Tecumseh, and Little Turtle, and a handful of geographic names, including Erie, Maumee (a somewhat corrupted form), Ottokee, Ottawa, Sandusky, Seneca, Shawnee, Tontogany, Wapakoneta, Wauseon, and Wyandot.

As Americans in so many other places have done, citizens of Allen County, in the Black Swamp, named a town LaFayette, in honor of the great French general. Other names of French origin and a number of German names, all having in some degree historic significance, are found on maps of the region. The name of Wilshire, the first Van Wert County town, is reminiscent of a singular bit of experience in the life of its founder, Captain James Riley. After shipwreck, attended by great personal distress, off the coast of Africa, Riley was enslaved by Arabs, at whose hands he suffered acutely until a man named Wilshire effected his release. As an expression of gratitude, he gave the name of his benefactor to the town he laid out in the wilderness in 1822. The three Revolutionary War soldiers who captured Major André, the British spy, are memorialized in the names of Paulding, Van Wert, and Williams counties.

The hamlet of Junction, in Paulding County, was so named because at that point the Miami and Erie Canal, extending northward from Cincinnati, joined the Wabash
and Erie Canal, connecting points in Indiana to Lake Erie. The town of Delphos started with the name “Section Ten” because of its position on the Miami and Erie Canal. Seven or eight miles westward lies the little town of Middle Point, named thus because it is midway between Delphos and Van Wert on the line of what is now the Pennsylvania Railroad. For many years a limestone quarry, probably the largest of the many quarries in the region, was operated at Middle Point. The observer finds it difficult to believe that the now abandoned pit, enormous though it is, could have yielded the untold thousands of tons of stone taken out for railroad ballast, for construction, and for macadamizing hundreds of miles of public roads thereabouts.

Toward the end of the last century, Middle Point could boast a normal school where young men and women from the surrounding area were educated as teachers and where prospective doctors and lawyers obtained their pre-college training. In about the same period a similar institution was established at Ada, in Hardin County, and a third, known as Crawfis College, was founded in a rural environment a few miles north of Pandora. The school at Ada expanded from time to time, becoming finally Ohio Northern University. Crawfis College was abandoned as an educational institution years ago. The building that housed it, after a long period of vicissitudes, was finally destroyed by fire.

Traversing the highway built over that portion of the outer beach of ancient Lake Maumee that extends eastward from Fort Wayne, through Van Wert and Delphos and beyond northeastward, the observant traveler will
note in adjacent plowed fields narrow zones of yellow sand, varying in width and sloping gently away from either side of the highway. (Similar expanses of sand occur along roads built over intermediate beaches.) As this is a part of the Lincoln Highway, Ohio-U.S. Route 30, an important east-west road, it is much used, and the pace of most vehicles is rapid. License plates issued by states other than Ohio are common, those from Indiana naturally predominating. Practically every town on the route has one or more towering grain elevators adjacent to rail lines; this is country that produces cereals and soybeans on a large scale. High water-storage tanks are also conspicuous, but tall stacks emitting clouds of black smoke are comparatively rare—electricity now turns many of the wheels of industry. Current may come from local or nearby generators, but all of them are likely to be tied in with the interlocking network of transmission lines that crisscross the country.

At Van Wert the road deviates slightly from the line of the old beach to pass through the heart of the town. At the time when state and federal highways were being projected, many municipal bodies exerted themselves to make sure that the routes would pass over their principal streets. In recent years some of the towns and cities that succeeded in these efforts, now quite disillusioned, have been working with might and main to have outside traffic diverted from their streets. This is being done rather often because, in spite of the high costs involved, highway officials are eager to get away from the congestion caused by narrow streets, with traffic signal systems that not infrequently are so operated that they impede traffic flow.

On the highway at the eastern edge of Van Wert is
the Marsh Foundation, provided by a bequest of a local businessman, for the education and vocational training of boys and girls. A mile eastward is a branch of Starr Commonwealth. Nearby are two or three exceptionally opulent-looking farms, apparently developed as showplace hobbies. A little farther eastward lies the county farm with its large, old-fashioned brick house and commodious barn. Nearby is the burial ground, last resting place of the homeless and the indigent of several generations. To most local people, this establishment for years was the "poorhouse." Now it is known by the more euphemistic name of "County Home" or "County Infirmary."

The Lincoln Highway, bordered right and left by prosperous well-kept farms, has a full quota of automobile service stations, wayside restaurants, drive-in movie theaters, motels, and much-used state parks, now called "roadside rests." Fronting upon it are several rural churches in regular use. One of the oldest of them has an old-fashioned churchyard. Unlike other cemeteries that may be seen from the road, it has been so much neglected that ragged grass and weeds surround the monuments, some of which are broken, some toppling.

As in many other parts of the state and the nation, the construction of interstate highways goes on apace in the region. These roads, with overpasses for grade separation at secondary roads and railroads and with somewhat complicated clover-leaf interchanges at main highways, are extremely costly. It is an impressive fact that they are also taking out of production an enormous aggregate acreage of excellent agricultural land.

Local roads in several counties are identified by numbered or lettered signs at intersections. This system, doubt-
less useful to public officials, does little for the guidance of the stranger. Other counties name roads for pioneer families; the traveler may be unfamiliar with the names or their local historical significance, but the signs are likely to be much more helpful to him. Roads extending from Van Wert are commonly known by the names of the towns to which they lead: Decatur, Mendon, Middle Point, Rockford, and so on. A few miles from our farm on the Mendon Road, the Middle Point Road passes over "Walser’s Hill," a rise so slight that it has no perceptible effect on a car’s motor. Each crossing provokes a chuckle as I recall bicycling days when, to all riders pumping up the incline, it seemed a steep, high hill.

A good many narrow bridges, built in pre-automobile days, are found on rural roads. One of the two known covered bridges in the region was built about 1845 to span a creek some six miles south of Fremont. Not long ago the road there was rebuilt to bypass the bridge, which, closed to traffic and refurbished, with a convenient parking space near it, has become a popular tourist attraction.

Complexities of the megalopolis are seen developing along highways radiating from some of the larger cities. On either side of such roads may be seen good modern dwellings, often in spacious grounds tastefully landscaped. In some cases, commercial or industrial establishments stand cheek by jowl with the houses. Here, obviously, development came before the areas were zoned. Zoning regulations are now in force in many urban areas; they have also been adopted in a number of rural sections.

In and about numerous cities and towns, extensive suburban sprawls are in evidence. Here, quite often, one sees groups of boxlike, one-story houses, covered by low-pitched
roofs, with little to distinguish one from another. To make matters worse, these prefabricated houses in too many instances are crowded closely together on small lots. Unattractive as they usually are, few commercial developers would consider putting up any but such “ranch-type” houses because they sell very readily. It is to be expected that in time the popularity of this style will die out, just as did the overpowering craze for “bungalow” house styles of a generation or more ago.

On almost any moderately long trip in the valley, one or more deserted old houses, standing forlorn and a little ghostly, with appurtenant buildings in a state of acute disrepair, will attract attention. Most of the glass is likely to be missing from windows—hoodlums and thoughtless urchins seem to feel that some unwritten law licenses them to work such destruction once a building has been abandoned. Timbers of the framework may be exposed, reminding the observer of the bleached bones of some great, long-dead animal. To emphasize the desolate aspect, a clutter of wreckage and junk commonly lies about in a jungle of rank weeds, among wild, unkempt trees and shrubs.

Why are houses left thus to decay and ruin? Quite probably answers to this question would show a wide variation. Generally, some hard economic facts, expressed or implied, could be expected to appear among them. Houses dating back a century or more were built of hard native wood fastened in place by cut-iron nails that, though rather brittle, nearly always hold in the old wood with amazing tenacity; however, the heavy frame timbers may be no longer level or plumb. Remodeling and modernization, therefore, would involve so much time-consuming labor that, at prevailing wage rates, the cost might be prohibitive—merely wrecking such a building can be a difficult, costly job. Now
and then a company of local firemen, with the owner's permission, will set fire to an old house considered to be beyond further use, then proceed to try out various fire-fighting techniques.

Bricks for some of the older houses and other buildings were formed and burned at the construction site. At the time, that was a logical procedure because both the clay and the wood for burning it were at hand for the taking; the use of bricks from the nearest brickyard—if there had been any—would have required heavy hauling over roads that were extremely poor. The walls were laid up solidly, their thickness not less than the width of two bricks.

Ditching machines are busy during much of the year, even in a few cases slashing through growing crops in fields. Yet they never catch up with drainage work; clay or concrete tiles, piled in long ranks, are seen awaiting the ditcher on many farms that appear to be already fairly well drained. Giant self-propelled combines and cornpickers play brief but important roles at harvest time. On every hand are tractors, large and small, handling a surprising variety of jobs. I was told of a retired farmer who, having been refused a license to drive an automobile because of his advanced age, blithely took to his tractor for short sightseeing trips and for visits to neighboring farms. Every farm family has at least one automobile. A few keep a saddle horse or two; the majority of riders seen are girls.

The time was when corn shocks dotted many fields in fall and winter and a strawstack stood close to nearly every barn. These have long since vanished from the scene, as have miles of fences. All told, there are a good many well-kept silos, not infrequently two or more on a single farm. Occasionally, one may also note a silage pit with its plastic
cover fastened down securely. The stored silage is fed not only to dairy cows but to herds of feeder steers, shipped in from Western ranges to be fattened through the winter. Here and there are auction barns where, at stated times, livestock is sold to shippers, to local butchers, or to farmers.

A few farms have buildings designed for the commercial production of poultry and eggs, sometimes with facilities for large-scale dressing, freezing, and storing of carcasses of chickens, turkeys, or ducks. At moderately frequent intervals one finds on farms groups of metal bins in which are stored grains as security for government loans. In numerous barnyards are pole-mounted electric lights whose greenish glow illuminates a broad area throughout all or part of the night, facilitating work about the premises and discouraging prowlers. These lights, gleaming from a score or more of farmsteads, near and far, give to a night landscape a strange, fairyland aspect. Many farms enjoy the benefit of protection against fire under contracts between township officials and fire departments in nearby towns.

Although timber is scarce, a trip in any direction is likely to bring into view at least one sawmill with an accumulation of waiting logs, eight to twenty-four inches in diameter. Despite the fact that electric interurban railways, numerous in the region at one time, were long ago abandoned and dismantled, one may now and then come upon a short section of graded roadbed or an idle old bridge spanning a stream. Piles of boulders, collected from fields, are seen on a few farms; no doubt most others have similar collections where they are not visible from the highway.

Hundreds of Black Swamp farms have fields of good alfalfa from which three or four cuttings per year go to nearby mills to be kiln-dried, pulverized, and bagged for
use in feed mixtures. The grass, as it is cut, is blown directly into deep trailer-mounted boxes in which it is hauled to the kilns. Many are convinced that the harvesting equipment used has a more telling effect in keeping the pheasant population low than even the numerous foxes that devour countless eggs and prey upon the birds at all stages of development. It is said that in early summer the bodies of a score or more of incubating females, mangled by the machine, may be blown into a single load of grass.

Several of the country's largest food-processing concerns have plants in the region. At the height of the season each year they operate day and night, converting into canned and bottled products the many thousands of tons of tomatoes brought in from surrounding farms. It appears that the failure of Cuba's communist-directed sugar industry has greatly stimulated the production of Ohio sugar; sugar beets are now grown extensively by Black Swamp farmers and trucked to refineries that hum throughout the fall and much of the winter. Toward Lake Erie, large acreages are planted to cabbage, for conversion into sauerkraut, and to cucumbers, for pickling. Establishments for processing and packing both are maintained at central points. Great quantities of cherries from numerous orchards are packed by commercial canneries in the area. Large-scale production of all these specialized crops requires the help of a small army of migrant workers.

Let us now take leave of the valley by considering briefly its present aspects as a product of glacial action. No one can doubt that the Maumee River, in the course of its long life, has gradually grown larger or that its channel, islands, rocky rapids, and terraces have been subject to many
alterations. Toward its mouth, principally to the westward, occur deposits of sand accumulated in the final basin of dwindling old Lake Maumee and left behind when the last of its water trickled away. No important changes appear to have occurred here except that in some places winds have piled the sand into drifts—it is known locally as “blow sand.”

Traveling southward or southeastward from the river, one crosses the old lake beaches and several glacial moraines, all clearly identifiable. It is evident that the beaches have been modified to some extent by road-builders and farmers. Clearly, the low ridges of the moraines have undergone a great deal of wear and tear; they are destined to become less and less conspicuous because farmers commonly work over them in fields in a manner calculated to level them. Weathering and erosion—active from the beginning—continue, of course, affecting beaches, moraines, and other features, with far-reaching results that can by no means be ignored.

Notwithstanding the observable alterations, all of them together relatively inconsequential in the vast ensemble, it may be said that the valley remains fundamentally unchanged, its immense drift sheet, its characteristic topographic features, and its inherent qualities essentially the same as they have been for thousands of years.