

# Sidelights on Living in Pioneer Whitestown Given in Old Ledger



If you were to see in a current newspaper's classified column, the following ad: "FOR SALE" 400 Ft. 3/4" walnut planks, \$3.00; 400 Ft. 5/8" weatherboards, \$2.50; 120 Ft. 1" plank, \$1.20. See John Goodwin," and if you knew something about lumber prices in these modern times, you would say to yourself, "Now there's a bargain if there ever was one."

It certainly would be a good buy, and just as certainly be unavailable because the offer would be one hundred and twenty-six years too late to be true. But Dr. Samuel Ross credited Mr. Goodwin's account for the materials listed and in the amounts given, on October 11, 1852, as set forth in an old account book once in the possession of Clyde O. Laughner, now deceased, who retired in the late 1840's after many years of operating a drugstore in Whitestown.

Laughner's store was in the brick building which still stands on the northwest corner of the intersection of Barnes street and the old Big Four railroad, now the Penn-Central. What became of the account book after Mr. Laughner's death is not known to this writer.

Dr. Ross practiced medicine and ran a general store, which included a drug department, for several years beginning in the early 1850's in New Germantown, later to be renamed Whitestown in 1853, the year in which it got a post office. The doctor's ledger of accounts covering a four-year-period beginning in 1851, securely wedged as it was between the back of a cabinet of shelving and a wall in Mr. Laughner's store, had been hidden from prying eyes for many decades, coming to light only when the cabinet was moved a few years prior to Mr. Laughner's retirement.

When viewed and examined by this writer some twenty-five years ago, the venerable tome was in fair condition; the paper was not too yellowed with age; the ink still was quite dark, and the entries made in the doctor's rather cramped style of writing were very legible.

From the number of individual accounts in the ledger, it was evident that Dr. Ross enjoyed a lucrative medical practice and a profitable mercantile business. He was very meticulous in making entries for medicine and drugs given, and services

by Ralph W. Stark

rendered, as well as setting down the fees charged. Just as carefully, he credited the various accounts, payments being shown in commodities, or in cash.

Incidentally, Dr. Ross was Whitestown's second postmaster, with the post office located in his store. An 1874 Boone County directory states: "Ross, S.; druggist and postmaster; Whitestown. Born in Ohio in 1811; settled in Boone County in 1850. Republican and Methodist." It is known that when Dr. Ross came to Boone County, he settled in Royalton, but was not there too long before moving to New Germantown. When he succeeded Henry Lucas as Whitestown's postmaster is not known.

Scanning the accounts in Dr. Ross' old ledger revealed one very interesting fact pertinent to the economy of those times -- little money changed hands in that pioneer Boone County

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## Pioneer Whitestown Cont'd.

village of nearly four generations ago. It was mostly trade and barter with Dr. Ross accepting as payments on accounts practically every kind of commodity grown or produced in the community. In addition, various items of merchandise imported into the village, and services rendered to the doctor, were also credited in payment on accounts.

In giving credit for a commodity applied on account, Dr. Ross wrote down the item, in what quantity, and its value. So, by checking through the credit side of the ledger, one could get a good idea of the "cost of living index" in a Boone County neighborhood in the mid-eighteen hundreds. Looking on the debit side, one could learn much concerning pioneer medicine, the fees charged, medicines and drugs given, and something of the general health of the community in that early day.

Running the credit side of the ledger, and grouping the items in similar categories, it was found that whisky was 10 cents per quart, or 35 cents by the gallon; gin was 50 cents a quart; wine was 15 cents a pint, or \$1.20 a gallon; molasses was 60 cents a gallon; honey was 12.5 cents a pound; and pumpkin butter, whatever that was, was 40 cents a gallon.

Eggs were five to six cents per dozen; hens were eight and one-third cents each; and a turkey could be bought for a quarter. By the pound, butter was eight and one-third cents; sugar was nine cents; coffee, 17 cents; and tea, one dollar. A hundred pounds of flour could be bought for \$1.25; and by the bushel, potatoes were 25 cents; sweet potatoes, 50 cents;

corn, 20 cents; wheat, 45 cents; oats, 12.5 cents; and apples, 60 cents.

Hay was \$6.00 a ton; a sheep was worth \$1.50; a calf, \$1.20; a hog, \$4.50; a shoat, \$1.00; and a milk cow could be bought for \$15.00. Dressed fresh pork was worth four cents a pound, but pickled pork was a little higher at six and one-fourth cents a pound.

In adding a kitchen to his home and building an office room, Dr. Ross accepted materials on accounts in addition to those listed at the beginning of this article as follows: 325 feet of weatherboarding and 85 feet of sheeting, \$3.25; 3,000 shingles, \$6.00; 1,310 feet of weatherboarding, \$13.50; and allowed \$15.07 for four posts, 4" x 4" x 10'; 51 studs, 2" x 4" x 10'; 660 feet of 1" plank; 10 joists, 2" x 7" x 15'; and 302 feet of sheeting. He also got 600 feet of narrow boards for \$1.00, and 250 fence rails for \$1.50. He credited the carpenter for his labor at one dollar per day.

A miscellany of other items include: one pair of shoes on horse, 50 cents; milling 10 bushels of wheat, \$1.00; 10.75 yards of carpet, \$1.00; eight yards of jeans, \$4.80; 28 heads of cabbage at three cents each, 84 cents; 10 bushels of wood ashes for making soap, 83 cents; two and one-half bushels of corn meal, \$1.00; cutting ten and three-fourths cords of wood, \$2.68; two squirrels, 75 cents; two and three-fourths pounds of hackled flax, 69 cents; four dozen green pickles, 20 cents; and a shotgun, \$3.00.

There was much of interest to be found on the debit side of the ledger. A blessed event in the Whitestown community back in Dr. Ross' day did not entail the expense that it does



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today, for found in a number of accounts was the item, "Accouching wife, \$3.00," and in one instance, the good doctor charged the same fee for delivering twins. The ailments of Dr. Ross' patients were not given other than he occasionally noted that he gave medicine "for ague," or "to prevent ague." The doctor practiced some dentistry, too, for one entry read, "For drawing tooth, 25¢." House calls were from 50 cents to one dollar, depending on the amount of medicine left.

Some of the medicines and drugs Dr. Ross used in treating his patients' ailments included tonic powders, bitters, castor oil, Epsom salts, quinine, sulphur, paregoric, morphine, Jayne's pills and Jayne's vermifuge, silver nitrate, sanative pills, Bateman's drops, calomel, sulphate of zinc, saltpeter, essence of peppermint, camphor, turpentine, blue mass, aloes, carminative balsam, expectorants, sweet oil, corrosive sublimate, extract of lobelia, oil of cloves, brandy, and whisky.

Under one patient's name was this rather amusing entry: "1853 -- June 18, Medicine and attention, 75 cents; June 19, 1 box of pills, 25 cents; June 20, 1 quart of whisky. Paid: \$1.50."

Apparently, the patient's condition became such that



heroic treatment was required, and the quart of whisky was prescribed. The fact that no further entries were made and that the bill was paid, lent evidence that the ailing gentleman fully recovered his health.

Yes, it does look like the cost of living in pioneer Whites-town was quite low, but it must be remembered that a skilled carpenter put in a long day, almost from sunup to sundown, to earn one dollar, and unskilled labor was paid much, much less; so it must have been just about as hard to make both ends meet in the early 1850's as it is in these waning years of the 1970's. There are those who may yearn for the good old days, but as for the writer of this article, he much prefers living in this modern age, despite the energy shortage, runaway inflation, and the continuing threat of annihilation in an atomic war.



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