Buffalo Trace

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On many Indiana maps there's a line cutting across southern Indiana labeled the "Old Buffalo Trace" or the "Vincennes Trace." The trace is a travelway, a road bed as well engineered and more durable than any road built today. Modern roads, such as a portion of Hwy 56 are built along its route. The route appears on even the earliest maps of the area and was the most common route that pioneers used to cross the state.

The route was created by American bison. Countless thousands of these huge beasts once migrated along the route. The trace began on the east at the falls of the Ohio River where the buffalo converged to cross the river at its shallowest point. It stretched northwest all the way to Vincennes and the Wabash where the buffalo dispersed to graze on the open prairies of Illinois.

Early pioneers found the route to be a godsend. The trail varied from 12-20 feet wide and had already been in use for centuries. In some places, it had worn through solid rock to a depth of 12 feet.

In very few other areas of the country did they find comparable travel routes that made passage as easy. Early settlers often booked passage on riverboats as far as the Falls (now the site of Louisville and New Albany) then unloaded and set off to the west along this trail.

The trail is rich in history:

- In 1786, General George Rogers Clark (then Colonel Clark) marched 1,000 men to Fort Sackville at Vincennes over the "Buffalo Trace."
- It was the first "western" mail route, carried weekly, by two men traveling the 130 mile route on foot.
- In 1804 an Indian treaty line was defined along it's length.
- In 1807 a British spy, believed to be conferring with the Indians for the Battle of Tippecanoe, was captured on the trail.
- In 1812, the trail was considered of such political importance that mounted troops of "rangers" began patrolling the trace to protect travelers from Indian attacks and wild animals.
- In 1819, one of several taverns which sprang up along the route documented more than 5,000 travelers coming through enroute to Missouri.
- By 1820, the first stage coach line was set up to run the length of the trace from New Albany to Vincennes.

Today, the Buffalo Trace is fading into obscurity. The line is left off of most modern maps; and on the ground, there are fewer places each year where the trace can still be followed. Once as important to animals and people as the major interstates are today - the Buffalo Trace is a fascinating and important part of our state's history.

Herds of American bison no longer pass through the state enroute to summer pasture, raising clouds of dust that could be seen for miles. The taverns are long closed, and the wagons are gone. Only a line on maps, and the deep scar of millions of hooves and wheels remain.

The Springs Valley Trail System follows the route of the Buffalo Trace for part of its length. If you look carefully, you may be able to visualize the long abandoned trace that played such an important part in our state's history.



For More Information:

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