

Indiana History 57
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The Buffalo Jumps for Indiana . . . Officially

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UNTIL LAST year, if a Governor or Secretary of State of Indiana had wanted to use a picture of his wife's French poodle as the official seal of the State of Indiana, he could have done so legally, since no definite description of the seal had ever been adopted by the Indiana legislature.

However, this oversight was remedied by the 1963 General Assembly which adopted the following definition:

"A perfect circle, two and five-eighths inches in diameter, enclosed by a plain line. Another circle within the first, two and three-eighths inches in diameter enclosed by a beaded line, leaving a margin of one-quarter of an inch. In the top half of this margin are the words 'Seal of the State of Indiana.'

"At the bottom center, 1816, flanked on either side by a diamond, with two dots and a leaf of the tulip tree (*liriodendron tulipifera*), at both sides of the diamond. The inner circle has two trees in the left background, three hills in the center background with nearly a full sun setting behind and between the first and second hills from the left.

"There are fourteen rays from the sun, starting with two short ones on the left, the third being longer and then alternating, short and long. There are two sycamore trees on the

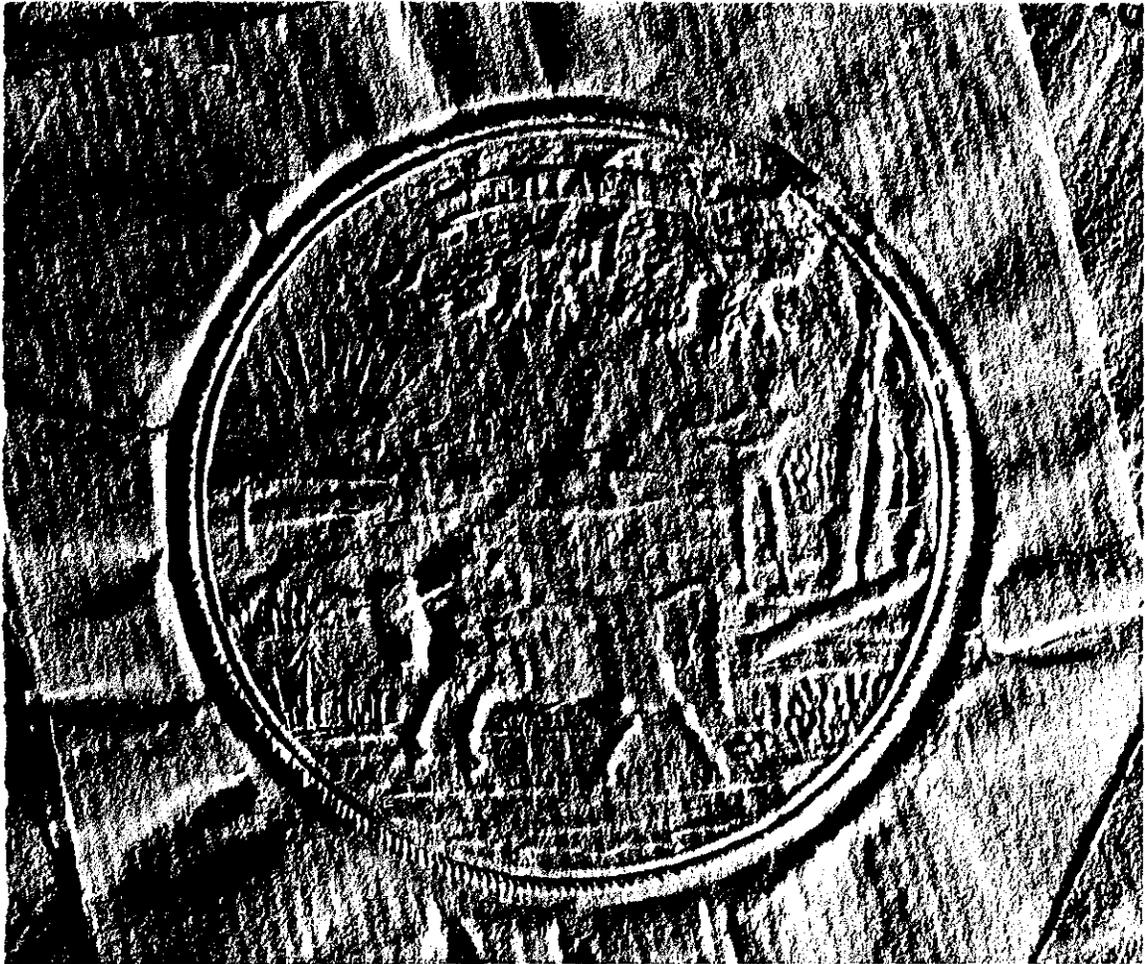
right, the larger one being nearer the center and having a notch cut nearly half way through, from the left side, a short distance above the ground. The woodsman is wearing a hat and holding his ax nearly perpendicular on his right. The ax blade is turned away from him and is even with his hat.

"The buffalo is in the foreground, facing to the left of the front. His tail is up, front feet on the ground with back feet in the air — as he jumps over a log.

"The ground has shoots of blue grass, in the area of the buffalo and woodsman."

Although even this official description of the state seal leaves the clothes of the woodsman to the imagination, it is the most detailed that has been attempted in the 148 years of Indiana's existence as a state and it is the only one that has been legally adopted by the state legislature. Before last year, the various designs of the more than 200 different seals that have been used in the state's history were "dreamed up" by the secretaries of state or by the governors, who stuck loosely to the original idea, but let their imaginations run wild on the finer details.

The territorial seal used for the Northwest Territory at the turn of the nineteenth century seems to have

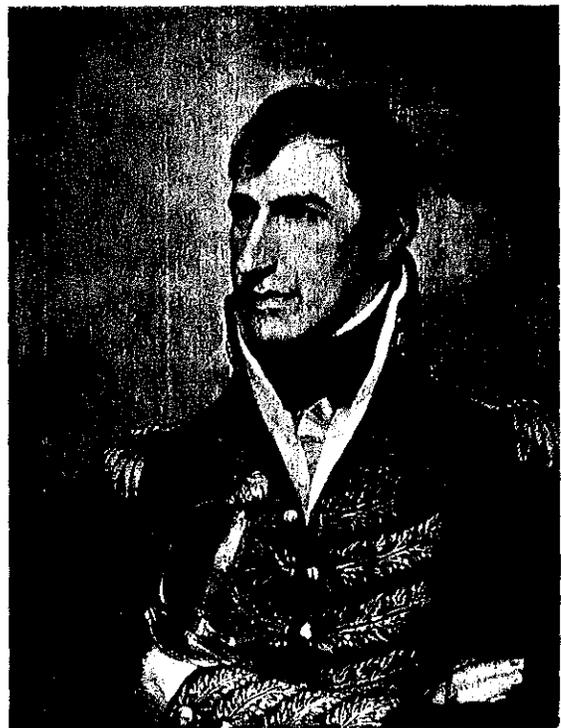


Introduced by William Henry Harrison, (right), first governor of the Indiana Territory, this seal was attached to official papers by means of hot wax, covered with a paper wafer on which the impression was made with a metal die.

supplied the basic design for the Indiana seal, which was introduced into the territory either by its first governor, William Henry Harrison, or the territorial secretary, John Gibson.

First use of the seal has been traced back by Charles Brown, of Montezuma, Indiana, to 1801, when Harrison arrived in the territory. Mr. Brown, who has done extensive research on the history of the state seal, thinks that Harrison had the seal made in Philadelphia after he

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was appointed governor and on his way here.

This is where the mystery begins.

Although Mr. Brown has been in touch with all those in Washington, D. C., and in this state who might have information about the seal's history, he has not been able to come up with any definite answers as to its origin, the exact symbolism of its design, or even if the design is supposed to have a particular meaning.

A resolution was introduced into, but was not adopted by the 1816 legislature, describing the seal as: "A forest and a woodsman felling a tree, a buffalo leaving the forest and fleeing through the plain to a distant forest and the sun setting in the west, with the word Indiana."

There was no mention of any symbolism; there were no details, no mention of hills or mountains in the background. In fact, this first resolution described the seal then in use in the most general terms. The constitution of Indiana (1851) provides that "There shall be a Seal of State, kept by the Governor for official purposes, which shall be called the Seal of the State of Indiana." Other than that there was no constitutional or legislative description of the seal.

Because of this lack of legislative action, Indiana state seals have varied with each change of administration and many different designs

have also been used within administrative periods.

Variations of the seal include designs with one, two, three and four buffaloes; some with a tailless animal and others with a long, flapping tail; some with hills in the background and some without; some with a fat, shaggy buffalo and others with a thin, sleek one; some with a river and some with grassy plains.

Even the woodsman hasn't escaped variation. On some seals he seems to be wearing shorts, on others he wears long, tight pants . . . sometimes he is hatless, at other times he wears a hat square on his head . . . sometimes he swings an ax as though he really means it and then again, at other times he holds it so near the ax head that he'd have broken his knuckles if he had really hit a log with it.

Needless to say, the trees also appear in many different versions. Many of them look like sycamores or maples, but occasionally the designer of a seal seems to have preferred the sleeker lines of something like a poplar.

The original seal used by Governor Harrison shows one buffalo in the foreground, with a woodsman in the right background, felling trees. The animal doesn't seem to be fleeing from anything and it is certainly not jumping over a log as it is on most later versions of the seal. There are no



Representative of more than 200 different seals that have been used throughout the state's history, these seals show the variety of designs. On the far left is the seal of the Northwest Territory, followed by an adaptation of the original state seal. The third one, with four buffaloes, was one of several painted on glass for the old Senate Building in Washington, D.C., and the last two have been used most frequently in this century on official documents.

mountains in the background and no lakes or rivers any place. There is no date and the word "Indiana" appears in a scroll in the tree branches at the top.

Rather than conveying a symbolic meaning about westward expansion, the seal is reminiscent of a typical pioneer scene, a mental picture which Governor Harrison, or even his wife, might have had of the Indiana territory. But the Harrison seal without mountains was more realistic about the Indiana landscape, since the state is certainly not known for its mountain ranges.

Attempts have been made throughout the state's history to trace the origin of the seal, to determine its meaning and to describe its design. In the early 1900's, the humoristic editor of the *Rushville Republican* gave this version of it:

"It exhibits a woodman, in short pants and G.A.R. hat, hacking at a tree, one of his hands grasping the end of the ax-handle while the other clutches it close to the butt, in the way a weak woman splits kindling. A hornless Poland-China buffalo is fleeing from the awful sight with a despairing gesture from a tail nearly as long as its body, having previously shed one of its horns beside the stump, upon which leans a small but graceful black-handled mop. In the background old Sol, with his hair on

end, sinks back behind a sway-back hill to rest."

There is plenty of evidence that the Indiana state seal has aroused the curiosity of many people throughout the years, but even though its definition has finally been legally adopted by the state legislature, its origin is still cloaked in obscurity. Mr. Brown has done about as much research on the subject as anyone, but even he has now reached an impasse. If anyone does have information, documented or otherwise, regarding the seal, Mr. Charles Brown, of Montezuma, Indiana, is the man to get in touch with.

Who knows, we might at some time be able to supplement the seal's legal definition with an explanation of how it came to be that way in the first place. Δ

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