

Flora, fauna abounded for Indian tribes

The Niles area was a veritable wilderness 150 years ago when the first settlers arrived.

It hadn't changed much since 1719 when a French explorer referred to the St. Joseph River valley as:

"Tis a spot the best adapted of any to be seen for the purpose of living. There are pheasants as in France; quails and paroquets; the finest vines in the world which produce a vast quantity of very excellent grapes. It is the richest district in all the country."

At that time there were great forests of oak, hickory, maple, beech, black walnut, elm, ash and basswood which covered the countryside.

It was a wilderness of beauty with flowers of many hues abounding, berries of all kinds for picking, nuts too, and God-planted orchards of apples and cherries, plums and pears and grapes. The happy harvester of all these

Niles Indians knew of trails

The location of Niles merely confirms something that Indians have known for a long time, it's a convenient spot for transportation.

Several age-old Indian trails met at Niles because there was a good ford across the St. Joseph River at where the Broadway bridge now stands.

The main trail that went through Niles was a link in the transcontinental trail used by the Indians in their not infrequent journeys from the great valley of the Mississippi to the headwaters of the Hudson and even to the great salt seas.

The Indians always traveled single file and kept to dry ground but followed as closely as possible the easily-traveled river valleys. Indians didn't like wet moccasins which is why the trail seems to meander but actually it keeps quite closely to its east and west route.

The winding trail has few stretches of straight road but it must have been quite beautiful although the Indians back then probably were more concerned about lurking enemies than they were in being tourists.

Silent and cautious, the Indians used the trail for conquest and for trade.

Along that same trail came the pioneer and his family, destined to change everything with the ax and the rifle.

Patient oxen and horses pulled loads of pitifully meager household goods along the narrow road. Homes sprang up, fertile farms were carved out of the wilderness.

Later came fancy horses pulling shiny buggies and great wagons, loaded with the rich produce of the new land...lumber and cordwood, barrels of flour, grain, bales of furs, maple sugar, barrels of lime, and livestock bound for the slaughterhouse.

The scene shifted again with the passing of years and on the trail there appeared a new mode of transportation, rattling, smoking and snorting to the amazement of natives.

There are modern highways that have replaced the old Indian trails but the best route for these concrete pathways was marked out and beaten smooth long, long ago by red-skinned trailblazers.

sweets, the honey bee, garnered up great troves of honey so that a hundred pounds could be taken from one tree.

Here on our prairies and through our forests roamed the mammoth in a past so remote that the question is raised as to whether in the days of this nearly mythical creature, our had yet echoed or the grasses of our prairies quivered to the footfall of any human being.

At least 28 relics of this huge creature have been found in Berrien County and we may picture him treading ponderously where now stand shops and homes.

To a little south of Niles was the home of the mound-builder, a still-mysterious Stone Age aborigine.

The Indians found this area to be a paradise. The Indians called the plains on the east bank of the St. Joseph River south of Niles "the cow pasture" because it was here that the wild bison came for shelter from the hot prairie sun.

Deer poised gracefully on the bluff, or bounded like spirit creatures through the woods openings. Black bears dozed while wolves howled drearily in the winter night and the shriek of the great panther was heard in the tangled brush.

Beavers built their dams and dug their canals, surrounded by the raccoon, the otter, the mink and the martin.

The partridge drummed through the summer day as the woodcock and turkey strutted in the woods. Coveys of quail whirred upward at the slightest alarm and wild pigeons came in clouds, weighing down the branches of trees.

The sparkling clean inland lands were filled with fish as water-loving birds covered the surface.

The Indian villages of that era were composed for the most part of pole structures covered with rush mats, bark or skins.

Both Indian men and women were kept busy by food-gathering activities. There was no such thing as convenience foods in those days. Everything from meat to eggs had to be wrested from woodland, prairie, river or marsh.

The skins of animals had to be dressed and contrived into articles of clothing. Blankets, baskets and all kinds of containers had to be made with materials gathered from the woods and fields.

The Indians also knew the use of many plants which are still providing comfort to sick persons.

About this edition

This Daily Star Sesquicentennial Celebration is being published to help celebrate the 150th birthday of the City of Niles.

Compiled almost entirely by the advertising and editorial staffs of The Daily Star, the issue looks at the Niles area and its history, famous people, famous places and colorful happenings of the past century and one-half.

Thanks must be given to the local citizens who helped with providing interesting articles, rare old photographs and other assistance.

Souvenir copies of this edition will be available at The Daily Star office in limited quantities and for a limited time for those wishing to purchase extra copies.

We hope you enjoy this Sesquicentennial special.