The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Eager Nil
Laborers, Luddites and Lumpen
A Folk History of Evansville, Indiana's Boxtown
Neighborhood
June 7, 2017

https://whereetheriverfrowns.wordpress.com/2017/06/07/
laborers-luddites-and-lumpen-a-folk-history-of-evansvilles-
boxtown-neighborhood/

theanarchistlibrary.org

Laborers, Luddites and Lumpen

A Folk History of Evansville, Indiana's Boxtown Neighborhood

Eager Nil

June 7, 2017

In 1824, prospectors drilled two salt water wells at Maryland Street and Fountain Avenue on the eastern banks of Pigeon Creek in Lamasco, Indiana. They auspiciously intended to open up a salt factory and expand their fortunes but would have no such luck. Despite their ambitious investments into the project, they quickly learned the water was too salty for the primitive desalination equipment of the times and the landscape proved too hostile for their endeavor and were forced to abandon it.

This saltiness and hostility toward the upper class–the "burghers" (literally German for "wealthy out of towners") as they came to be known locally until the mid-1900s––has permeated the neighborhood throughout its history.

The abandoned wells were quickly discovered by local youth, who nicknamed them "the Salts" or the "Old Salt Wells," and their popularity as local swimming holes grew rapidly over the next decade. Word of "the Salts" soon spread to

more affluent corners of the region and it wasn't long before capitalists once again set their sights on the area.

By 1840, two Evansville businessmen, Thomas Gifford and Nathan Rowley, began marketing the area as Pigeon Springs and announced their intentions to build an exclusive resort community for the wealthy citizens of Lamasco and Evansville at the site of the wells.

When the Pigeon Springs Resort Hotel finally opened its doors in 1842, with its carefully manicured gardens and lavish bathhouses, hundreds of wealthy patrons attended the opening ceremonies. Over the next decade, attendance continued to grow and more hotels were constructed in the area. The modest growth of the resorts, however, could outpace neither the rapid industrialization of Pigeon Creek nor the dramatically growing population of German immigrants around them. Almost as quickly as "Pigeon Springs" had come into fashion among the wealthier citizens of Evansville and Lamasco, it had begun to fall out. Between 1820 and 1860, Lamasco saw large influxes of German immigrants, with many of the poorest and most dishevelled of these concentrating themselves around the factories on the eastern banks of Pigeon Creek. An economically precarious and culturally isolated community formed in the midst of this migration.

The presence of lingering smog from nearby factories paired with filthy and often boisterous factory workers and coal miners who began frequenting the salt baths after a long day's work subverted the exclusionary resort into a neighborhood commons. As the workers began to unionize and engage in broader social and labor struggles, the undeveloped land on the northern side of Maryland Street, across from the salt baths, became a popular place for picnics, union meetings, and public soap-boxing. Its close proximity to Lamasco City Hall (now Fulton Park), the factories dotting Pigeon Creek, and Lamasco's working class population made this commons a popular gathering point for marches and pickets.

in the spirit of its residents, who defy the alienating circumstances of this world and embody the spontaneity, collective struggle, and autonomy that far too many of us have forgotten how to engage in.

When the renowned inventor, anarchist and writer Josiah Warren, member of the neighboring utopian community of New Harmony, invented the first printing press capable of continuous page printing in 1839, he fully intended to implement its use among the local lithographers who published his newsweekly, *The Southwestern Sentinel*. The lithographers, however, soon discovered the machine not only reduced production time but also dramatically reduced their wages and increased the monotony of their working conditions.

These local lithographers were so outraged they wrote letters to Warren, a self-avowed egalitarian, calling him a class traitor and demanding he cease use of the machine immediately. When he didn't acknowledge their requests, the workers repeatedly sabotaged the machine with such frequency that a disgruntled Warren found himself returning weekly to repair it. In one particularly fierce dispute, the machine was sabotaged beyond repair, and he reluctantly agreed never to use the machine again. Defeated and disillusioned, Warren returned to New Harmony to re-evaluate his approach to anarchism. As one capitalistic historian wholly unsympathetic to the plight of the Evansville workers wrote, *"Warren's ingenuity was completely destroyed by the angry mob of Evansville unionmen in their violent fit of Luddite rage."* (Brian Doherty, 2009)

Another anarchist writer of the time, Johann Most–himself a German immigrant to the region–observed shortly after his arrival in 1882, *"It makes no difference whether one calls himself an anarchist or communist, anyone who negates present society and seeks social conditions based on the sharing of property is a revolutionary."* (1884) The communization of private space and unremitting resistance to authority and exploitation by the workers of Boxtown continued to have enduring and revolutionizing effects on the social fabric of the neighborhood. By contesting space that was once unequivocally reserved for the wealthy and making it their own, residents had sown seeds of rebellion. Where Boxtown had proven so unfruitful for their

rich predecessors, they found it to be a refuge from the orderly and lawful world around them.

The local working class, when confronted with even the most liberalized subjugation schemes such as Warren's utopian business ventures, opted for creative destruction and self-determination. Many of the defining characteristics of today's Boxtown–including a general distrust of law enforcement, a reverence of the bar/public house as a neighborhood institution, a heightened class consciousness, social integration of workers with people experiencing homelessness/joblessness, and the preservation of a distinct cultural tradition through social clubs and labor unions–can all trace their origins to this early working class immigrant community.

As the Eastern European immigration waves of the mid-1800s dwindled, the banks of Pigeon Creek began brimming with character of their own. The annexation of Lamasco east of Pigeon Creek by Evansville in 1857 brought many English-speaking residents into the area. During this time, Boxtown and other adjacent neighborhoods forged a regional identity distinct from both Evansville and Lamasco.

The construction of the Belt Railroad Bridge in 1881 and the dredging of Pigeon Creek north of Columbia Street in 1885 allowed for new methods of travel into the region and brought an influx of transients, boat dwellers, unemployed workers, and former slaves, all seeking a freer and less stifling way of life into the neighborhood. These transplants, lacking money and property, began to lay the foundation of what would become a large, loosely organized and racially integrated squatters settlement on the banks of Pigeon Creek bounded loosely by the Columbia Street Bridge to the south and Fulton Avenue Bridge to the north. Small cabins were constructed from wooden shipping crates and other materials scavenged from nearby factories and were placed upon barges or on stilts along the creek's winding and flood-prone shores.

One early visitor to these settlements lamented,

target of police harassment. Despite these hardships, a defiant population has continuously maintained its presence here.

Beginning in 2006, Boxtown once again found itself home to radicals, transients, and Luddites, as the neighborhood played host to a global effort to thwart the construction of Interstate 69. Known to many as the NAFTA superhighway, I-69 threatened to destroy small farms, outsource local jobs, increase globalization, erode the regional environment, and cost hundreds of millions of dollars to construct. People from across the country converged on Boxtown, and both locals and visitors formed a commune in the neighborhood that would become a nexus of a group known as Roadblock: Earth First!. The neighborhood's proximity to both urban and rural communities who stood to be displaced by the project made it a critical location in a global struggle that spanned from Ottawa to Panama City. Massive encampments and tree-sits were formed along the route of I-69, counter information was distributed locally, and companies with an interest in the project were frequently attacked and protested.

Although Roadblock: Earth First! eventually succumbed to a coordinated effort of state and federal agencies to suppress the environmental movements of the early 2000s, many of its warnings have proven true, just as the local print shop workers correctly predicted their way of life would succumb to automation and capitalist penny-pinching. As the state of Indiana still struggles to pay for the completion of I-69 and consistently ranks as having some of the worst wages in the country, and while Evansville still ranks as having the most air pollution per capita of any city in the U.S., it becomes clear that Boxtown can only exist as it always has: as a refuge for those poor and marginalized, yet defiant, individuals cast off by society.

In Boxtown, beauty is not a thing to be found in the derelict architecture, in the bitter defeat of its past social movements, in the pipe dreams of real estate developers, or in the futile hopes for a distant utopia as envisioned by Warren–-it is to be found

family, all waiting for their house to come out of water. (Harlan Hubbard, 1946)

The creekside squatter settlements thrived into the early 1960s. When Robert F. Johnson, nicknamed the "Mayor of Pigeon Creek," shot a man in 1956 for demanding the relocation of his boat, it was revealed after his arrest and trial that he had been previously tried and acquitted for three shootings. The ensuing public hysteria brought increased public scrutiny onto the neighborhood, and Johnson was eventually convicted of battery with intent to kill. At local bars like the Hideaway, frequent altercations between regular bar patrons and new visitors to the neighborhood continued to intensify public pressures on the city to "clean up" the neighborhood. In early 1957, city inspectors began going door to door delivering demolition orders and vacate notices to the nearly 100 squatted dwellings of Pigeon Creek. Many squatters stubbornly resisted their displacement, but forceful relocation, criminal charges, threats of demolition, and blatant lies by the city that the move was "temporary" had displaced all of the residents by May. To prevent the return of the squatters, the city burned the remaining dwellings to the ground and relocated vacated barges to a local scrapyard.

In the mid-1960s, the rapid deindustrialization sweeping across the country began to take its toll on Boxtown. Many of the local factories closed, consolidated, or moved overseas, leaving behind mass unemployment and persistent ecological problems. Coincidentally, the closure of the Belt Railroad Bridge in 1969 and the steep decline of hobos nationwide virtually eliminated the populations of itinerant workers and other transients to the area. Smaller groups have continued to pitch tents and sleep along the banks of Pigeon Creek, but strict criminalization of permanent structures and the recent construction of the Pigeon Creek Greenway have made sedentary encampments difficult to maintain and a frequent

The so-called squatter settlements along the river bank and along Pigeon Creek on the West Side are a source of great annoyance both to the police and health departments. Here a large class of poor white people live in squalor and crime. Interned shanty boats, one room shacks, and tents are their dwellings throughout the year. The inhabitants of this district are often the city's chronic wards, and they appear most prominently in the records of the city's police department. (Ray Dyal Casey, 1915)

The area had most commonly been called East Lamasco or Pigeon Springs in times past, but the annexation of the area by Evansville and the shuttering of the resorts in the area meant both terms had begun to fall out of usage. The designation of the area as "Boxtown," a reference to the districts of squatted box dwellings, would enter into regional vernacular in those years–a designation that would be reinforced in coming years by the arrival of several box factories, boxcar-riding hobos, and the construction of box-like shotgun homes in the nothernmost area of Boxtown.

Beyond a new identity, this burgeoning squatters' community became a radial point of neighborhood activity for residents and outsiders alike–a place at once celebrated for its ingenuity and freedom by prideful locals while simultaneously denounced for its lawlessness and unpredictable character by city officials.

This unruliness spread well outside the shantytown and union halls to every corner of the neighborhood. In 1901, a Boxtown man named Robert Walsh made national headlines after he was arrested and sentenced to three months in jail for standing on Fulton Street while burning photographs of President McKinley and shouting *"Czolgosz did a good deed! I'm glad the president is dead!"* (New York Times, 1901) immediately following William McKinley's assassination by

anarchist Leon Czolgosz. And in 1911, resident Molly Weber was arrested for ransacking one of three mansions owned by the Cook Family, the local industrialists who had bought the Old Salt Bath commons and turned them into a private park in 1895. She was quoted by the local paper as saying, *"Why should the Crooks be allowed three mansions, while an honest burglar should have to spend her days in the workhouse?"* (Evansville Press, 1912)

Between the 1900s and 1950s, the Belt Railroad Bridge became a nexus of transient activity in Evansville along the Chicago & Eastern Railroad Line. The low hanging overhead trestles and reduced speeds of trains crossing the single tracked bridge provided an ideal, though unconventional, location for hobos to embark and disembark from coal cars and boxcars. The presence of the squatters settlements and sympathetic union households eager to give handouts to transient workers gave Boxtown a reputation of being a hospitable place for those arriving in town.

For many poor youth from Boxtown and surrounding neighborhoods, riding the rails offered ample experiences that were generally denied to people of their social and economic circumstances in the early 1900s. As one local man, Jerry Riley, recalled, *"I saw more places in my first year of riding trains than I've seen the other years of my life combined."* (Evansville Press, 1943) Another local woman, Ida Mae Barnes, looked back fondly on both the independence and sexual fluidity she experienced on the rails:

> *I started out from Evansville with my cousin and her friend. We got as far as Evansville before they got cold feet. So I sent them back. Fellow hoboes bummed food for me and taught me the ropes of bummin'. The boys set me up with a nice girl. I had no [boy] clothes to wear on my date so some of the fellas bought me some clothes and gave me $20 to spend on my girl. I was so polite. I pulled out her chair for her and ordered in the restaurant for her. I was the perfect gentleman. I even fooled her parents. She told her mother I was the nicest boy she ever went with. By the time I landed at the hobo jungle in Nashville, nobody even knew I was girl.* (Evansville Courier & Press, 1998)

In 1946, a visitor to the now nearly 50-year-old shantyboat settlement observed much the same scene Casey had almost 40 years earlier:

> *We drifted into Shantyboat town and tied up at the head of a line of four boats... below the boats is Pigeon Creek ... Train whistles and switch engines, puffing and banging cars about. A busy street, too, along the bank here, a truck route...The approach to Evansville was something to see...a modern Venice, the land across all flooded...We watch with interest our neighbors on the bank. A black man who lived all winter in a tent now under water, and a white man whose shanty was just emerging near our boat. He was elated to see the door knob today. This morning he appeared carrying a packing box which once contained a refrigerator. This he set up, covered the top with some roofing, extending this for a porch. He made a salamander and all day and tonight he and the black man, apparently by turns, sat in the box with the fire blazing before them.*
>
> *The creek, Pigeon Creek, is a great harbor for shantyboats: I never saw so many of all sizes and designs. At low water they must make a solid line along the bank. [...] People came out who had taken shelter in the rain. The man in the refrigerator box had company. We finally decided that they were his wife and*