

The Saga Drags On—Being a Modest Historical Abstract of The History of Ersatz County Indiana’s Second Century

Ersatz County, Indiana viewed the new century as a non-event. The transition was as simple as writing nineteen rather eighteen. There was no panic about Y2K, no anguish over computer failure, no tweets of fear. ENIAC and UNIVAC were a half century in the future, and high tech was a term unknown.

The Amish and the English were still on common ground, for travel was by foot, horseback or train. Homes were illuminated by candles or oil lamps and entertainment was a family affair except for the occasional traveling show or circus.

That would soon change.

By 1890 Indianapolis had its first telephones, and in less than a decade more than 600 independent telephone companies were serving the Hoosier heartland. Number 618 was the Greater Grindle Independent Telephone Company, initially serving just two customers, physician Horace Hacker and undertaker Morris Dawkins. The first call, July third, 1900 was made by Hacker to Dawkins with the terse message, “Youkliss is yours.” Grant Youkliss had succumbed to the rigors of defending his title as Ersatz County Fair Champion Cow-tipper. Apparently distracted by one of the Kettler girls, Youkliss failed to realize that cow 21 was tottering, eventually fatally tipping onto the tipper. Dawkins’ first call, two weeks later, allegedly informed Hacker that, “This one ain’t dead yet. Want her back or should I keep her?”

While history gives Youkliss credit for besting his own record with that 21st cow, there is no mention of the resolution to Dawkins’ quandary.

By 1902 progress was in full bloom. The new century was already proving to be a century of change. More than one hundred telephones were in service and all the chatter was about electricity. Electric light was imaginary. Electric light was real. Electric light was safe. Electric light was dangerous. Electric light caused blindness. Electric light was poison. Electric light was healing.

The Ersatz and Moot Point Railway was thriving and railway president Roy Lee Roy the third rode his trains to the road’s limits. He saw what was happening in the world beyond Ersatz County and he looked for opportunity. Telephones were an opportunity and electricity was a golden opportunity. Roy Lee Roy knew electric light was money in the bank.

An E&MP flatcar brought the dynamo from Schenectady, a retired Baldwin 4-6-4 supplied the steam and the locomotive backshop crew found themselves learning the craft of electrification, sometimes with shocking results.

Grindle, Indiana’s first public display of electric incandescent illumination came March sixteenth 1902. Promptly at 7:30 pm that night President Roy flipped the switch bathing the E&MP station waiting room in the warm glow of Edison lamps. Originally planned for March fifteenth, Grindle High School English teacher, Gertrude Guildenstern, urged postponement with the admonition, “Beware, the ides of March.”

Grindle embraced the electric light. In the first year of operation three additional dynamos were in place and a large new permanent boiler house was under construction. Naysayers continued to hang crepe, but by Christmas the only commercial enterprise in downtown Grindle lacking incandescent illumination was the Amish National Bank.

The Ersatz and Moot Point Railway was a roaring success. Freight and passenger traffic, aggressive right of way acquisition and construction, and an actual commitment to service made the line a veritable money-machine. Under the direction of the Roy family, E&MP operating-staff were instructed to always do it best—not fastest nor cheapest.

The result was a railroad that ran on time, had few breakdowns and even fewer issues with washouts, bridge failures and unhappy employees.

Roy Lee Roy III was a very modern manager. He had no interest in becoming a robber-baron and had no respect for those he dealt with. Roy made it policy to pay employees not merely adequately, or even fairly. He paid them generously (some would say foolishly). The result was a dedicated staff quite willing to go the literal extra mile, put in the extra hour and look for the potential new procedural efficiency. There was an unintended ripple effect. With the railroad being such a desirable place to work, to attract and retain quality workers, the city's other major employers had to follow suit.

It made for an unusually happy place to live.

Early in the company's history the Roys began a tradition of giving each employee a live turkey for Christmas. This custom was an immediate success, greeted with joy by every man and woman in the road's growing corporate family. While the vast majority of the turkeys became part of the festive holiday table, every year, one or two would become family pets. It was not unusual to see a Grindle resident enjoying a summer evening stroll leading a turkey on a leash.

In 1913 Roy Lee Roy IV decided to add some variety to the yule dinner. Hearing that one of the railroad's clients had a surfeit of out of season lambs, Roy bought the total allotment, loaded them into E&MP stock cars and shipped them to Grindle.

The Friday before Christmas found most of the day-shift engine shop crew celebrating payday at the Rip Track Café. They were tossing back, what else...boilermakers. Through the Rip Track's back window they could see the four lamb-packed stock cars waiting for the holiday distribution.

Through a combination of holiday spirits, youthful enthusiasm, and too many rounds of boilermakers, the engine shop boys left the warmth of the Rip Track, made their way across the familiar tracks of the classification yard, opened the great sliding doors on each side of the four stock cars and had a great laugh as the fluffy white lambs took advantage of freedom and departed, one and all for parts unknown.

Saturday morning dawned bright and chilly. Corny Harnisch, making his rounds snuffing out the kerosene burners in all of the switchstand lamps, was the first to discover the great escape.

Actually, Harnisch was the second. At 2:00 that morning Elmer Frakes, having closed the Rip Track, was slowly making his way home. Seeing a flock of a dozen or more sheep crossing the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Pringle Street, he was convinced that the vision before him was induced by an excess of Schexnaydor Holiday Ale consumed at the Rip Track. He changed course and entered at the District 2 Police Station, and turned himself in to the night-duty officer. This was not an unusual occurrence and his bed was ready.

Harnisch raised the alarm and within the hour search parties were formed and combing the county for errant sheep. The great roundup became the holiday party of the year. Everyone joined in, and by evening all but six of the four car flock were accounted for. Two of the strays made themselves at home in the crèche at Our Lady of Sorrows; there they remained with the plaster Holy Family.

The holiday lambs had unintended consequences. Few railroad employees felt competent to slaughter and dress a lamb and even fewer had families willing to allow the act. Soon nearly every E&MP family had a pet lamb. They were cute. They were cuddly. They were growing. And they did not take kindly to attempts at housebreaking.

By the end of February it was common, nearly every night, after the houses were dark, to see a driver alongside a sheep, in a car or buggy leaving town, returning 45 minutes later with no sheep in sight.

April found the homes of Grindle to be sheep-free. April found the Great Salamander Mound of Ersatz County the new home range of a significant and growing population of sheep. The now feral flock thrived and within 5 years was a major nuisance. Ersatz County became the only Hoosier governance to have a sanctioned Sheep season.

The rest of the world did not share the sunny outlook of Grindle and Ersatz County. In 1914 the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria served as the spark igniting: that European affair, the Great War, or the now preferred World War I. America was not an eager or early participant, and most of the country, like Ersatz County, thought we were best-served by not serving. Gradually the mood of America changed, and eventually even Grindle got the patriotic fever.

While few of the youth of Ersatz County ever left our shores for Europe, There was significant Ersatz participation. More than one hundred young men enlisted, went through basic training at Fort Norbert Pflern and shipped off to Army's School of Anachronistic Warfare in Snit, Arkansas.¹ The Ersatz crew learned the fine points of: battle axe maintenance, portcullis removal, catapult operation, and battlefield surgery with a broadsword. The skills, well-taught and dutifully learned were pointless, but did not surprise the boys who had grown up in the shadow of Moot Point.

Grady Krantz was one of few Ersatz County recruits to escape the School of Anachronistic Warfare. He was sent to the School of Hostelry and assigned to the Mule Division. Krantz had grown up plowing the family farm with a mule team and he was delighted to be doing familiar work. The recruit's joy diminished as it became obvious that motor trucks were displacing mules for military transport. Covington, Kentucky's Stewart Iron Works produced more than

100 trucks for the war effort. Cool heads prevailed and Grady Krantz became a military star of sorts.

It was obvious that the war was winding down, But the army wanted to maintain a spirit of excitement and a public presence. The plan was to assemble a carefully matched twenty mule team, hitched to a spotless olive drab wagon and send the entire rig to participate in parades, festivals and fairs throughout the country. Grady Krantz would be the mule skinner, promoted to the rank of Lieutenant and assigned two hostlers to do the dirty work.

Krantz was ecstatic, embraced the job, loved the crowds and cheers and spent 16 years on tour. Grady Krantz was so invested in his team and its kit that he commissioned a tattoo of the entire thing. Starting at his right wrist, the images of team and wagon ran the full length of his right arm, across his broad shoulders and then down his left arm ending at the left wrist. Robert Ripley was astounded.

It was Grady's ultimate joy to find his grandson watching Death Valley Days on the family's 1952 black and white television. He never tired of taking his shirt off to show the boy his own 20 mule team.

Once again Grindle left its mark on America, Grady Krantz and his twenty mule team hitch along with their wagon, appropriately constructed by the Amish Hostetler brothers in their Ersatz wagon works did not go unnoticed. The advertising people at Budweiser were impressed by the public clamor for the mules, and as the end of prohibition approached they appropriated the concept of brute animal beauty; dressed up a beer wagon, originally built by the Studebaker Brothers of South Bend, Indiana and completed the production with a hitch of eight matched Clydesdales.

Perhaps the saddest day in the first third of America's twentieth century was January 16, 1920. On that date the Volstead Act took effect. With the stroke of a pen thousands of thriving breweries, wineries and distilleries found themselves unable to sell their products. Brewers gathered in desperate meetings trying to find a use for their substantial operations. Skilled employees suddenly found themselves unemployed and without prospect of gainful work using their special skills. Some brewers began bottling soft drinks. Others turned to producing "near beer." Many simply threw in the towel. The Schexnaydors were in a panic. The Schexnaydor brewery was a sprawling affair. The E&MP hauled their porters, ales and stouts throughout Indiana and seventeen additional states. Suddenly they were out of business.

As the family council met in the Schexnaydor board room discussing the dark future, young Dieter Schexnaydor, home from college in Bloomington, posed an idea. Dieter said it was time to think new thoughts—to think outside of the barrel.

Dieter's plan was outrageous—so outrageous it had to work.

The Schexnaydor Brewing Company was located in Grindle, Indiana. Grindle was the seat of Ersatz County. Everyone knew the definition of ersatz was imitation. Schexnaydor would drop their name from all labels and advertising. Everything they made and sold from thence forward

would be renamed -- he called it rebranded -- Ersatz. The product would remain the same, but the label would clearly state Ersatz Beer, imitation beer.

It was crazy, but sometimes crazy is the perfect solution.

Labels were printed. Freight cars were turned into ten foot by forty foot billboards. Calendars, trays, signs and glasses were produced. The universal message; Ersatz Beer.

Amazingly, the plan worked. For two years there was no question of the product and its content. Then in late November of 1923 the dock foreman of the brewery was approached by a gentleman with a badge and identification proving him a government alcohol enforcement officer. He demanded the dock foreman turn over a case of Ersatz Beer for laboratory testing. The foreman fulfilled the request and then forwarded the bad news to the front office.

Schexnaydor management waited tensely, expecting the other shoe to drop—a federal raid of the plant and the demise of a great enterprise. Nothing happened for a week. The agent reappeared, met the same foreman and made the same request. Upon the agent's departure the foreman made the same report to the office. This drama was repeated on a weekly basis until December 5, 1933 when the Blaine amendment took effect ending the Great Experiment.

The Schexnaydors had long since accepted the weekly loss of a case of beer as a very small price for the privilege of doing business, and referred to the delivery as the sample for laboratory tasting.

While electricity was a boon to the Roys it was a bane to the Pringles. The Pringles had turned their small toy shop with its variety of wind powered novelties into a major concern: designing, manufacturing and installing all sorts of wind-powered devices to bring convenience and efficiency to rural America. Pringle windmills pumped water for farmhouse kitchens, remote cattle watering troughs and scattered irrigation projects. They produced wind-powered mills to grind flour and wind powered sawmills to turn trees into planks.

Electricity changed that. The Rural Electrification Act of 1936 was devastating for the Pringle Windworks. Electricity was traveling into the hollers of Kentucky and Tennessee, across the plains of Kansas and Nebraska and into the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming. It was as if the high tension lines were electrocuting the windmills. New orders to Pringle slowed and died. Orders for repair parts dropped to zero and the big manufacturing facility was empty except for a half dozen of the Pringle family steadfastly crafting the toys developed by Grindle founding settler, Klaus Pringle.

Oddly, it was electricity that provided a future for the Pringles, even as it destroyed their present. Windworks CEO Kurt Pringle had faith in the powers of Mona Kettler, carrying on the Kettler tradition of witchcraft. In 1901 she told Pringle that there was an ill wind in his future and that he must embrace the lightning or succumb to the storm clouds. The reading made little sense to Pringle, but when Roy Lee Roy approached him to invest in the new Grindle Electric Power Company he noticed the red lightning bolt in the logo of the firm's prospectus and made a leap of faith. The size of Pringle's investment and the lack of coercion to get it surprised Roy, but the fact that all necessary capital was in hand made it a very good day indeed.

The income from Grindle Electric allowed the Pringles to maintain their social status, but the loss of their firm cut to the quick. The huge manufacturing plant sat derelict, but the family refused to sell or repurpose the buildings, steadfastly believing another Kettler reading, “The smoke will clear — the wind will win.”

There were more ill winds blowing badly across Ersatz County. Beginning in 1939 newspapers and the radio told stories of German aggression in Poland and beyond. In true Grindle fashion the consensus was to butt out. Making the world safe for Pierogis and Kielbasa seemed small compensation for leaving the comforts of Hoosier home. December 7, 1941 dropped the curtain on laissez faire complacency.

Overnight, Grindle was ready for war and itching for a fight. Recruiting was brisk. Car after car of young men rode the E&MP rails out of Ersatz County and to a world they knew little of. Unlike in the previous two wars, many left, and too many failed to return.

With the men off to war the women at home went to work. Women brewed the beer Schexnaydor sent to base canteens and USO clubs. Mothers learned the operation and maintenance of the E&MP’s great locomotives. Some served as engineers and conductors. Grandma Kettler, the crone of that witchy clan, organized scrap metal drives and proved her commitment by donating her favorite cauldron. The Goldsmith daughters took control of the S&M Iron Works, retooled for war production, and changed the company motto to “It’s our business to pleasure Gerry.” Outsiders expressed displeasure at a slogan that seemed to give aid and comfort to the enemy, but usually left smiling after learning that S&M’s line of boudoir accessories: manacles, thumb screws, leg irons and the like were now being turned out three shifts a day to keep German prisoners under control.

It was a happy day in 1945 when the citizens of Grindle saw that the S&M sign had been repainted to the original “Keeping couples together.”

The 1950s were a time of peace and plenty in Ersatz County. The state blessed Grindle with a large new hospital and sanitarium. The Indiana State Home and Hospital for the Terminally Bewildered provided employment for the region and an endless supply of political candidates from its residents. Ersatz County was not the first location considered for the Hospital. In fact it was the ninety-third. Every other county wanted to avoid the stigma attached to the terminally bewildered. Marion County, home to the state legislature was particularly eager to bypass selection.

In 1918 Friederick Wurzelbacher stepped off the 4:15 from Muncie hoping to buy a copy of the Indianapolis Star. The news butcher, a young native American, saw the tension in Wurzelbacher’s face and posture and gave him not only the Star, but a handful of mushrooms. Friederick, in a rare moment of daring, swallowed the entire dose. The effects were immediate. Wurzelbacher relaxed, did not reboard the train and lived out his days in Grindle.

Friederick Wurzelbacher had been on a mission. He was searching for the location to build a fine piano factory. Wurzelbacher came from a long line of piano-builders and distant relatives were known to build, maintain or modify instruments for Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin and most recently,

Rachmaninoff. Now he was in a new country dreaming of following the family tradition, but in a shop of his own.

Ersatz County was the ideal end-of-the-line for Wurzelbacher's quest. The native timber supplied the highest grade stock for cases, soundboards and hammers, and the large Amish population provided a ready-made staff of craftsmen gifted with patience, love of quality, and superb skills with traditional hand tools. S&M Iron gladly provided the cast iron plates.

Wurzelbacher's pianos met with success, providing the Ersatz and Moot Point with another major local shipper.

By 1960 a third generation Wurzelbacher was at the helm, and he was a young man consumed with curiosity and a skeptical view of tradition. Making pianos was a given. Making the same old pianos was not. Wolfgang Wurzelbacher designed the opposite hand grand, a concert grand configured so that the soloist faced stage right rather than stage left while performing. The opposite hand grand was a great favorite of Pierre DeWalt who preferred a position allowing the audience to see his dueling scar.

Other design experiments included the Wurzelbacher Complete, an instrument boasting black, white and gray keys. The gray keys provided the quarter tones. The Complete was an immediate failure. The mass of non-traditional keys resulted in an instrument with a seven-foot keyboard. It was virtually unplayable. Greater success was found with the Wurzelbacher 100. Sporting 6 extra keys for both the treble and bass, the piano was a monster, but playable. Wolfgang regretted that Charles Ives had died in 1954, feeling the daring composer would have used the extended range brilliantly. He took solace when the experimental John Cage enthusiastically embraced the 100, producing a special arrangement of his classic 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence specifically for the incomparable Wurzelbacher 100.

The late sixties and early seventies brought another war. Ersatz County watched her young men leave for basic training not in trains, but in buses. Passenger rail travel was fading. Again too many of those young men did not come back. Or they returned by train, in flag-draped coffins. It was not a good war for Grindle, Ersatz or the country. More than a few residents, and most returning vets turned to mushrooms to heal.

Ersatz county closed its second century with three related civic additions. The Kettlers owned the north side of the county's largest and highest hill. They realized it was ideal territory for a ski slope. Starting small with a bunny slope and a rope tow, the resort was a hit and grew exponentially. In five short years The Witch's Kiss Ski Resort was a popular destination with guests arriving from neighboring states—many by train. The snow was powder and everyone was happy when it was as cold as a witch's kiss.

Second to boost the city and county was the legalization of gambling on Indian lands. The Moxitoxic people may have been mushroom mellow, but they knew agriculture and horticulture. Gambling looked like low-hanging fruit.

The first gambit with gambling was a modest bingo hall. High stakes bingo seemed an easy way to test the waters. The test was short-lived. Within weeks of opening, the hall was running at

capacity, three shifts a day and seven days a week. Tour buses and trains brought geezers in search of action from the four corners of the state. And no matter how large their losses, every single player went home happy, thanks to the complimentary mushrooms.

It took only three years to transition to full Las Vegas style gambling in a massive new Moxitoxic Casino emblazoned with ten-foot neon letters proclaiming ToxMahal. Letters of complaint from a New York legal firm, alleging copyright infringement on the name were met with a gift box of mushrooms, the first in a monthly string. No further threat of action was ever made.

The final leg of the three-legged civic advantage stool was the county's first amusement park. Not just an amusement park, but a theme park. The Amish community, though unable to own televisions, was well aware of what was happening on television. At night dozens of buggies would park in front of Mergler's Appliance store. Mergler left several televisions in the front window turned on each night, an enticing glowing temptation to passers-by. The Amish took advantage of the free entertainment, and especially enjoyed The Wonderful World of Disney.

Weekly references to Disneyland lit the flame of creative endeavor in the simple folk and they soon began the venture eventually named Amish Kingdom.

Used to barn-raising, the Hostetlers, Millers, Yoders and Coblenzes joined forces, and in one amazing weekend created the first phase of Amish Kingdom.

English arrived by car, bus and train and got in line for: The Butter Churn of Death, Silo Jump, Spinning Wheel Whirl and Hurl, and especially the Drive-it-yourself Amish Buggies.

Lines were long and soon the park posted signs reading, "Enjoy yourself. This is the fastest you will move all day. Line-jumping is cause for shunning at Amish Kingdom." The signs proved as popular as the rides and many were liberated, to later reappear in college dorm rooms.

Tourism required promotion, and the Ersatz County Visitor and Tourist Board was formed. Their first project was to brand their long-neglected home. While the sign at Grindle city limits still read, "Grindle, we have to call it home." New billboards were placed on Route 18 boldly stating, "Ersatz County...Keeping it real!"²

As Ersatz approached its third century, the Pringles found truth in the second Kettler prophesy. Coal-fired power plants were in decline. Clean air standards were clearing the clouds away, and there was an obvious opportunity for anyone who understood the wind to take advantage of a nascent wind turbine industry. The once mighty Pringle Windworks would be back in business.

But that is the stuff of another century.

1. The Army created and maintained the School for Anachronistic Warfare as a result of a piece of Pork Barrel legislation sponsored by former Arkansas Senator Pritchard Pike.
2. Paradox is frequently embraced by the marginally creative.

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