

Two Bits, Four Bits, Six bits, A Dollar

by Lynne Belluscio

I just returned from a meeting of the Midwest Open Air Museums held at the Spring Mill Pioneer Village a couple of hours south of Indianapolis (and just north of French Lick). The region is known for its limestone which is sometimes called Indiana marble or Bedford stone. Having spent so much time researching the limestone business in LeRoy, I thought it would be interesting to learn about the quarries in Indiana.

Twenty seven state capital buildings are constructed with Indiana limestone as well as buildings at Ellis Island, the Library of Congress, the Vanderbilt Mansion, "Biltmore House", in North Carolina, many buildings in Chicago and New York City and most recently, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

The quarries in Indiana were begun in the early 1800s. In 1817, fifty men built the three story mill at Spring Mill. It took them six months. The stones were dressed with straight chisels and the technique is different than the limestone quarried in LeRoy at that time. The limestone in LeRoy comes from the Onondaga deposit but the Indiana stone comes from the Salem deposit and it is very light in color.

I sat in on a lecture by Ron Bell, the Lawrence County historian, who had a lot of information about the limestone business in and around Bedford. The early stone cutters in that area were French, later followed by the Germans. Much later the Italians came to the area.

In the early years, the stone was hand drilled and blasted with black powder into blocks no larger than 3 tons, which measured 2 foot by 3 foot by 6 foot. This was the size that could be pulled out of the quarry by a team of oxen. Until the railroad came through the area in 1852, the stone was hauled to the White River. Some was shipped down the Mississippi as far as New Orleans. But unlike LeRoy limestone, which eventually was used for crushed stone, the Indiana limestone remained building stone. It was sawn into slabs by huge parallel saws. What

I learned was that the stone has to be sawn as soon as it is removed from the quarry because it hardens as it ages, making it difficult to saw.

The day before the limestone lecture, a couple of us ventured up to Conner Prairie, which is a large outdoor museum, much like Genesee Country Museum. Since the recent series of *Pennysaver* articles about financial issues in the 1800s, I have been asking a lot of questions about how people did business when no one had any money. So we walked into the mercantile store at the museum and chatted with the storekeeper. (At Conner Prairie, the guides use first person interpretation, which means they are in the year 1836, and the conversation has to be in their time, not 2009, so you don't ask what did they do then, but what do you do now.)

He told us that most everyone bought on credit. He would not take anything on trade that he didn't sell in his store, so he would not take eggs, butter, cheese, corn or wheat in payment. He would take nails, cloth, iron pots, tinware, etc. for payment.

Most farmers would buy on credit and at the end of the year, after they had sold their crops, they would pay him in specie, which more than likely was a Spanish milled dollar. He wouldn't take bank notes, even from the nearby bank of Vincennes. And he never took United States money. (Probably because it could be counterfeited too easily and he had no way of exchanging it even if it wasn't.)

The Spanish milled dollar was officially sanctioned for use in the United States until the 1850s. It was called a "milled" dollar because the edges were milled or patterned to prevent dishonest



traders from shaving the silver from the edges unnoticed. The Spanish dollar was also known as a "piece of eight." They were actually cut into pieces. Although they could be cut in half or in quarters, many were cut into eight pieces – like pieces of a pie. Each piece was called a "real" or a "bit", so the slang expression "two bits" meant a quarter of a dollar.

The storekeeper also told us

that the price for everything in the store was based on the Spanish dollar, half dollar, two bits, or a real. When we left the museum and headed out through the gift shop, I noticed that they had reproduction Spanish milled dollars, so I thought I'd buy some for the Historical Society and maybe we'll try to work them into a program for the school group next year. I'm just not sure how to chop up the dollars.



Bank Teller

Full-time position for Batavia office.

Includes some Saturdays. Previous banking experience preferred, but will train.

Sales and cash handling experience required, plus superior customer service skills. Full benefits including health & dental insurance, 401(k) and employee profit sharing.

Send resume to: **Ann Shearing**
Human Resources Dept.

The Bank of Castile
90 Main Street, Batavia, NY 14020.

Equal Opportunity Employer

