

W.G and G.W. Ewing

The Fur Empire that helped Build Fort Wayne

Presented to Quest Club, February 8, 2013 by Michael Galbraith.

I'm happy to announce that my topic today is the story of the Ewing Brothers. I have looked forward, in common with I suspect most if not all "newbies," with some, no, a great deal of, angst to my first Quest Club paper. So when I received an e-mail last spring informing me that my topic would be the far-ranging and somewhat ineffable subject of "Build Fort Wayne," my blood pressure momentarily spiked. When I enquired further what "Build Fort Wayne" meant, the answer of "Well, as it's your paper you can really take it in any direction you want" eased none of the trepidation. Luckily for me, and hopefully for you as well, the topic was further clarified this summer to the Ewing Brothers.

William Griffith Ewing and George Washington Ewing, sons of Alexander Ewing, were traders. Their business was based on the manipulation of borders; borders between White and Native American, borders between settled and wild, borders between ethical and unethical, and above all the wide-open border between wealth and poverty offered by the relentless and continual pursuit of profit. Hugh McCulloch, Lincoln's Treasury Secretary and a contemporary said of the Ewings;

"Enterprising, laborious, adventurous men they were, but so devoted to business, so persistent in the pursuit of gain, that they had no time to enjoy the fruits of their labor. I have rarely met their equals in business capacity or

general intelligence; very few have I known who have had less real enjoyment of life.”<sup>1</sup>

Along the way they contributed to the building of not only Fort Wayne, but much of the Midwest ranging from Indiana, through Illinois and Missouri, to Minnesota and Kansas. They also contributed much to the debasement of a number of Native American tribes, from Miami and Potawatomi, through Sac and Fox, to Menominee and Sioux. The Ewing brothers’ business interests varied as far as opportunity would permit, from furs to land to goods to influence to human beings. If it could be sold at a profit, the Ewings’ were likely to be interested.

The Ewings’ father, Alexander Ewing exemplified the spirit behind Horace Greeley’s famous exhortation to “Go West, Young Man”, but like that phrase’s history, a bit more is involved in Alexander Ewing. It is directly due to the influence of their father that W.G. and G.W. Ewing pursued the path that they did. Alexander Ewing was born in western Pennsylvania in 1763, the son of Scotch-Irish immigrant Alexander Ewing, Senior. Growing up on the still “uncivilized” frontier, the young Alexander Junior was taught that Indians had little place in an advancing western frontier. After serving in the Revolutionary Army, a restless Alexander mustered out of service and after briefly returning home, moved west to seek his fortune in the Indian trade. Establishing a post in 1787 near what is now Buffalo, Alexander began the family tradition of trading with the Native Americans. Life in the small cabin located in the heart of western New York’s snow belt was difficult, and trade involved risks and physical hardship. Profiting from the trade in fur, Alexander

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<sup>1</sup> Trennert, Robert A., Jr. “Indian Traders on the Middle Border; The House of Ewing 1827-1854.” p. 22.

amassed enough capital within two years for the downpayment on farmland in the Genesee Valley of upper New York. Here the 31-year old Alexander met and wed the 15-year old daughter of Welsh immigrant William Griffith, Charlotte. Alexander by all accounts at this point settled into the life of farming and producing a family. Sophia Charlotte Ewing was born in 1796, Charles Wayne Ewing in 1798 and William Griffith Ewing in 1801. Shortly after the birth of his third child, Alexander lost the mortgage on his farm, was foreclosed upon and evicted. He, and his family, including his father-in-law's and brother-in-law's families moved west to Frenchtown (now Monroe) on the River Raisin, just south of Detroit. Alexander and Charlotte lived at this point with her father and likely worked the farm that he owned for him. No record exists of land purchase in the area in their name. Charlotte and Alexander again continued their family expansion with the birth of Alexander Hamilton Ewing in 1803 and George Washington Ewing in 1804.

Michigan was newly opened territory and once again Alexander was in the center of an area ripe for a trader. Long the territory of French traders and voyageurs based in Montreal, trade, and especially the fur trade, in the Great Lakes had an established pattern. Trade goods and traders spread out from Montreal to Detroit and from there to points west. Depots and warehouses were established along the route, establishing opportunities for middle-men, traders and profit. From Detroit traders traveled by water to Michilimackinac in the north, and Kekionga (the Miami/Delaware word for Fort Wayne) in the south. These two centers acted again as places to establish depots and warehouses; places to collect goods and products, both into Native-American lands and out of them. Frenchtown,

as the only town on the water route between Detroit and the mouth of the Maumee, was a stopping place on the route between Detroit and Fort Wayne. It was further important during the first decade of the 1800s because the land along the Maumee between the Lake Erie and Fort Wayne was the site of the Great Black Swamp.

Fort Wayne is, as is widely known, sits on a continental divide and is the site of one of the great portages between water that flows east to the Atlantic, and water that flows south to the Gulf of Mexico. During the period after the last glaciation, roughly 14,000 years ago, Fort Wayne was at the western end of the ancestor of Lake Erie, a greatly expanded Lake Maumee. Along the edges of the lake were beach ridges that held in the water as the glaciers melted. (One of these is still quite visible as the route of SR37, the Maysville Road through Harlan, known early in it's history as the Ridge Road, another is the Winchester Road.) A catastrophic event released the pent-up waters of Lake Maumee and literally blew out the back door of the lake at Fort Wayne. This torrent created the one-to two-mile wide, and seven- to nine-mile long marshy prairie and portage that determined Fort Wayne's geographic fortune. What it created in northwest Ohio was the Great Black Swamp, an area of rich, poorly-drained alluvial soil teeming with wildlife, yet inhospitable to European-style settlement. Fort Wayne was thus at the crossroads of the portage and the swamp.

Alexander Ewing and his family left Frenchtown in 1807 after the death of William Griffith, Charlotte's father. Her brother claimed the farm and the family was once again homeless. Traveling south, they helped to found the town of Piqua, where Alexander went back into the trading business. Trade was good, divided

between the incoming settlers as Ohio lands were opened to American settlement, and the dwindling remnants of the Shawnee, Wyandot, Seneca and Delaware tribes. When the War of 1812 began, the now 49-year old Alexander joined in and served with William Henry Harrison in lifting the siege of Fort Wayne and further into Canada at the decisive Battle of the Thames. After the war ended, business resumed. Alexander's two oldest sons Charles and William began training for careers in Law, while the two younger sons remained in business with their father. The Ewings' last move west came in 1822 as they moved from Piqua to Fort Wayne. John McCorkle, one of the two founders of Fort Wayne, was a neighbor in Piqua and, much like his sons would later do, Ewing used fore-knowledge of the platting of the town to his advantage. He established a store and tavern named Washington Hall in what is now Freimann Square. Ewing began to speculate in land as well as trade, in another foreshadowing of his sons' business practices, making an fortunate purchase of land, 80 acres in the heart of what is now downtown Fort Wayne, immediately west of the original plat. Modern Ewing and Fairfield Avenues run through the heart of the old Ewing farm.

W.G Ewing and G.W. Ewing were an integral part of their fathers business, and in 1825, in partnership with him began their own trading careers, opening a trading post among the Potawatomi on the Kankakee River. As one Army Captain reported,

“ A traders store is the terrestrial Paradise of the Indians: about it he loves to linger, deriving his happiness from feasting his eyes on the goodly array of trinkets, fantastic saddles, and gay clothes, though certain they can never be

his. Of course the trader - the lord of all these treasures - is the deity of the place, and possesses a despotic sway over the simple mind of the uncultured savage. He can enchain his soul by a very trifling present, cement his friendship by a credit, or punish him by a refusal. Whomsoever the trader favors, must gain influence among his own people. He, the favorite, has admission to the Indian Elysium-the traders store.”<sup>2</sup>

In a little more than a year they would open four more posts spanning much of Indiana north of the Wabash, with two more to follow in 1827. Clerks at the trading post would receive goods from the Ewing warehouse in Fort Wayne and return furs to the same warehouse. The Ewings’ in turn would receive goods from New York, initially from John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company, but later from a competing New York firm, Jackson and Suydam. These goods would be calculated to appeal to the Native Americans and could include not only basic necessities, but fancy clothes, jewelry and luxury goods. They also included likely liquor, even though the sale of liquor was theoretically regulated by the US Government. This regulation was widely and broadly ignored. Goods were provided not only in direct exchange for furs and food, but on credit in anticipation of repaid from the annual annuities treaty payment.

At the heart of Ewing Brothers’ trade were the Myaamia and Potawatomi Nations. Representing a dwindling population, that had shrunk from tens of thousands a generation earlier, to mere thousands in the 1820s, the Native Americans were faced with the loss of land, lifestyle and population in the face of

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<sup>2</sup> Trennert, 115.

onrushing settlement pressure from European-Americans. In 1823, the Myaamia and Potawatomi still controlled all of the land north of the Wabash, and were receiving yearly annuities from the US Government paying for land ceded in earlier treaties. Converted into current dollars, in 1823 the Myaamia received \$438,000 in silver specie delivered to Akima Pinsiwa (Chief Richardville) in a single lump sum. Indian trade at this time was officially controlled by the Indian Agent at Fort Wayne, John Tipton, who disbursed the annuity, and issued licenses to trade in particular areas. This did not stop widespread unlicensed trading. Licensed traders and unlicensed alike would both buy and sell to the Native Americans, most often on credit at exorbitant rates, to be repaid with profits from the fur trade or from the annual annuities.

Backstopping this credit risk for traders was the prospect of a treaty negotiation. These were weeks long affairs that involved the negotiations for the cession of land, as well as elaborate provision of gifts, food and (illegally) alcohol to the assembled tribes. Included in most of the treaties of the time were clauses for the settling of debts for tribes, as well as a host of other clauses providing a variety of good, services, exemptions and settlements. The Native American tribes were communal in their organization so that the land belonged equally to all of the tribe, but after 1825 so did all of the debts of individuals. First used in an 1825 Treaty with the Osage, the concept of communal debt for a tribe would have a profound impact on the tribe, and traders and European-American settlers alike. Initially used as an aide to administer the annuity payments and secure the good will of resident traders in Native American villages, the concept allowed unscrupulous

traders to run up credit without risk, and led to monumental Native American debt.<sup>3</sup>

The Ewings and other large scale trading firms took advantage of this precedent to make enormous profit.

As an example, a major treaty in 1826 with the Myaamia disbursed the modern equivalent of \$713,000 dollars worth of goods, established a further \$600,000 disbursement of goods the next year and a permanent annuity of \$575,000, plus \$177,632 for settlement of Myaamia debts. Figures like these attracting not only legitimate businessmen but the unscrupulous as well. For the Myaamia, and similarly for the Potawatomi, who were less successful in treaty negotiations than Pinsiwa, this meant the loss of millions of acres of land at under a dollar per acre.

Some of the treaty clauses surrendered land to individually named Native Americans who were free to dispose of the property as they wished. The Ewings, and a great many others used the newly-opened public land, as well as the “semi-opened” land held by individual Native Americans to engage in land-speculation. Rumors of the impending Wabash and Erie canal were widespread at this time and fortunes could be made and lost by platting and reselling land along the as yet unfinished route. The Ewings also anticipated profit-making opportunities from other provisions in the treaties that called for the provision of supplies, the building of grist-mills and houses, and the further provision of goods. In this they were only moderately successful, losing out to the superior political connectedness of other traders and the American Fur Company. When the contracts went to others they

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sleeper-Smith, 169



claimed that Tipton was unfairly persecuting them. This combative willingness to do battle with the government marked another of the Ewing Brothers' ongoing traits in business. When in the next year, 1827, John Tipton proposed moving the Indian Agency and its lucrative connections to annuities and licenses to the new town of Logansport, the Ewings led the unsuccessful fight to keep the Agency in Fort Wayne. Despite the Ewings' appeals to Indianapolis and Washington, Tipton was able to move the Agency moved to Logansport (to land that Tipton just happened to be purchasing!) and relationships between the Ewings and Tipton further soured. Tipton surely had the Ewings in mind as he wrote of the Fort Wayne opponents of the move;

“The majority of the Citizens of this village are of the lowest order of society...and have stopped here on account of the quantity of money annually disbursed at this place. Their constant practice is to get money from the Indians by every artifice in their power.”<sup>4</sup>

The Ewing Brothers' business entered into a new phase in 1828. The death of their father, the removal of the Indian Agency from Fort Wayne to Logansport, the marriage and departure of G. W. Ewing to Logansport to follow the Agency, and the concentration of the Myaamia and Potawatomi into ever-smaller Tribal reserves fundamentally changed the business, including reincorporation as “W.G. and G.W. Ewing.” W.G. remained in Fort Wayne with the rest of the Ewing family. For the rest of their trading careers, G.W would concentrate on the monetary, legal and political end of the business, while his older brother W.G. would manage the Fort Wayne

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<sup>4</sup> John Tipton Papers, I:662.

operations and Native American trading posts. G.W. was the more prudent and profit minded of the two, while W.G. was more of a risk-taker. G.W. was brutal and uncompromising, and “both feared and respected by his competitors.”<sup>5</sup> After repairing somewhat their relationship with Indian Agent Tipton, the Ewings’ began to win some of the lucrative contracts to supply the Native Americans, beginning with the 1828 Treaty negotiations with the Potawatomi. This success was counter-balanced by the closing of some of their lucrative Potawatomi trading posts and the exposed position of the firm in regards to land speculation. In anticipation of the Wabash and Erie canals construction and opening, W.G. had acquired some 21,000 acres along the route, mostly from named Native American individuals in the 1826 and 1828 Treaties. The cash-flow problems generated by the holding costs of this land caused the Ewings’ considerable embarrassment, and forced a desperate G.W. to plead with Tipton for more business and special treatment at Treaty negotiations.

As the Ewings’ faced this economic challenge, their fortunes began to improve with three political events. The first was the election of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency in 1830. Jackson was the first “westerner” elected to the Presidency and initiated an aggressive policy of Indian Removal to lands west of the Mississippi. The second was timely death of Senator James Noble of Indiana, and the appointment of Indian Agent Tipton to fill his seat. Tipton now needed the political support of traders like the Ewings’ and began to court that political support with lucrative government contracts. The third was another round of treaties in 1832. Initiated with both the Potawatomi and the Myaamia, the treaty eventually was only

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<sup>5</sup> Trennert, 36.

with the Potawatomi when after failing to reach a good deal, Pinsiwa and the Myaamia walked out. The expenditures at the treaty were again lavish, and the Ewings' provided goods of over a million dollars in modern equivalency. This "righted their financial ship" considerably and allowed them to expand further west with trading posts across the Mississippi, engage in further land speculation, and to increase their political operations, both in Indiana, and in Washington.

The Ewings' had always been aggressive in seeking profit in the Indian trade, but as they were increasingly successful they sought to drive out other competitors through trade wars and back-stabbing in the political realm. They sought to drive out other traders while securing a more favorable position for themselves. G.W. was in charge of this effort nationally, and began to be a more frequent visitor to Washington. All of the Ewing family became more active in Indiana politics, with both G.W. and W.G. serving in the Indiana Senate, and brother Charles W., still in Fort Wayne serving at various times as lawyer, prosecutor and judge. In addition to their Indiana political activities, the Ewings' continued to speculate in Fort Wayne land, maintained the operation of their Fort Wayne trading house, and made numerous other investments such as the purchase as shares in the Lima Plank Road venture.

With Jackson's national policy of Indian Removal, it was only a matter of time until all of the Native American claims to land in Indiana were eliminated, and the annuity payments that undergirded the traders riskier credit schemes would begin to be paid out in Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma. The Potawatomi were the first to consent to leave Indiana, and with treaties in 1834 and 1836 ceded their remaining

land to the United States. This was done in part, at the urging of the traders, who had claims against the annuities that exceeded the amount of the annuities. In 1837, after the ratification of the treaty by the US Congress, G.W. Ewing was appointed, much in the manner of the fox guarding the henhouse, to “investigate the claims against the tribe, and to assist them in counting and distributing their money.” After his ruling that the Ewing claims were valid and would be reimbursed, and the claims of other traders were invalid, and would not be reimbursed, produced a riot among the other traders, a new impartial judge was appointed. The Ewings’ managed well even under the impartial judge, collecting a modern day equivalent of \$850,000 dollars. The Myaamia held out longer, under the exemplary leadership of Pinsiwa, with half of the tribe being shipped west in 1846 and half remaining in Indiana. Pinsiwa also negotiated a bit more for the Myaamia, with a modern day equivalent of 12 million dollars in 1838, a further 14 million dollars in 1840 and an annuity of 6,675,000.00 annually. Of that money, the Ewings’ claimed, in modern day equivalency, 634,300 dollars.

The Ewings’ concentrated not only on the trade of goods with the Native Americans but with fur as well. In this endeavor they ran into one of the legendary businesses of the frontier, the American Fur Company. Built by John Jacob Astor beginning in 1808, the company achieved a vertically integrated monopoly on fur production in the United States. As fashion trends changed away from the use of beaver to the use of silk, Astor left the fur business to concentrate on his other enterprises, particularly real estate and finance. This led to him becoming the “wealthiest man in the world.” His fur empire was sold into parts, with Ramsay

Crooks handling the Midwest from his headquarters in New York, and Pierre Chouteau the Missouri frontier from his base in St. Louis. The Ewings' would eventually pick fights with both.

In the Midwest, economic war broke out over changing fashion in Europe, which suddenly demanded the importation of mink, deer and raccoon skins. Entering a bidding war for pelts with Crooks and the American Fur Company in 1839, the Ewings' and the AFC drove prices for the skins to disastrously high levels. Both sides fought this war for market share to their detriment, with G. W. Ewing attempting to ban the American Fur Company from the state in his role as an Indiana Senator, and Crooks proclaiming,

“ I shall feel more mortification than I ever experienced in my whole Indian career if we do not gain a decisive victory over those faithless Ewings who I shall never forgive to the last hour of my existence.”<sup>6</sup>

As the war continued into 1840, both sides refused to give any ground until both approached bankruptcy. The Ewings eventually proposed a compromise that would split the trade between them, but Crooks bitterly declined to make peace with the Ewings' saying, “ I should consider myself an unfaithful servant of the corporation I represent if I encouraged you to expect we can ever come to mutual understanding with you for the prosecution of the trade in Furs and Skins.”<sup>7</sup> The Ewings were rescued from financial disaster once again by profits from the Miami Treaty of 1840, and the American Fur Company entered bankruptcy a year later.

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<sup>6</sup> Trennert, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Trennert, 82.

As the Miami and Potawatomi moved west, the Ewings' followed the money with the new trading posts west of the Mississippi. G.W. said in 1840 in the aftermath of their fight with the American Fur Company; "I swear I will have nothing to do with white people. I go for Indian skins - Indian specie, Land and Treaty allowances in future - thus my object is singled out."<sup>8</sup> The Ewings' opened new posts in Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas, and began again the process that had been so successful in Indiana. They bought furs from the Native Americans, while selling to them large amounts of goods on credit, and waiting for the annuities and treaty negotiation to settle out their books in a large lump sum. Across the Mississippi, they ran into the other half of the former American Fur Company under St. Louis trader Pierre Chouteau. A descendant of early French traders, much like the French traders that the Ewings' encountered when they first came to Fort Wayne, Chouteau's operation was big enough that the intimidation and trade-war tactics that had worked in Indiana were ineffective. After initial skirmishes with Chouteau, the Ewings entered into collusionary agreements with the firm that divided the Indian trade between them. The Ewings set up trading posts alongside Chouteau amongst the Sac and Fox, the Chippewa, the Winnebago, the Menominee, the Osage and the Sioux, in addition to their posts among the relocated Miami and Potawatomi. Debts amounted amongst the Native Americans, as both firms, as well as numerous other small firms competed for guaranteed profit.

The Ewings' found one further way to profit from Indian Removal - by actually removing the Native Americans. After the cession of their lands, Native

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<sup>8</sup> Trennert, 78.

Americans would be moved to new lands further west. Contractors would be paid to do this, with expenses submitted for reimbursement and a per-head fee upon delivery. For the unscrupulous, this was another way to profit, by over-billing and under-supplying along the sometimes weeks-long journey. The Ewings' removed a portion of both the Potawatomi and Menominee tribe, securing a profit in doing so.

G.W. Ewing continued to be the political and business portion of the brothers' firm, spending much of his time in Washington and New York. As the scale of profiteering and levels became evident in the Indian trade, the federal Government became involved. Already involved at a Congressional level due to the ratification of Native American Treaties, the Indian Office was the center for bureaucratic management of Indian Affairs. Alternating between a more activist, pro-reform Democrat Party and a more laissez faire Whig Party, the response of the Government vacillated according to who was in power. G.W. managed the firm's manipulation of governmental affairs, his response alternating as his governmental counterpart changed with each administration. Profiting from the short-lived Presidency of William Henry Harrison, and his ineffective Whig vice-President John Tyler, the election of 1844 marked another turning point for the Ewings. When the election was over, the Democrats swept into power, bringing the Presidency of James Knox Polk, and the appointment of William Medill as Indian Commissioner. Medill was a dedicated reformer and viewed the widespread corruption in the Indian trade with a crusader's zeal. The resulting new policies of the Department emphasized greater regulation, strict enforcement, and, for the Ewings', four years of headaches. Worst of all was the threat to suspend the practice of lump-sum

annuity payments to the tribes, proposing instead the payment to heads of households, which would have ruined the traders. G.W. Ewing spent much of his time during this period in Washington, in effect functioning as a lobbyist for unrestrained trading on the Indian frontier. He, not surprisingly used all of the tools at his disposal to attempt the downfall of Medill, including direct pressure from Indiana's congressional delegation, incessant letter-writing to officials, and smear campaigns in the newspapers.

Elected in 1848, Zachary Taylor brought the Whigs back into power, and with news of Medill's replacement by a Taylor crony, a jubilant W.G. Ewing said, "We have beat the Rascal Medill!"<sup>9</sup> The next four years marked the highwater mark for the Ewings', as G.W.'s success as a "lobbyist" led to another income stream for the Ewings. Hired by other traders and even by tribes to press their claims, the Ewings took a cut of up to 50% of the successful claim. The Ewings' trading operations rebounded as well, and the old model perfected in Indiana began to work again. Again profits flowed through the firm, from their lobbying activities in Washington, to their trading posts on the frontier.

In 1854, W.G. Ewing, while journeying from Fort Wayne to the frontier to manage their trading empire, contracted cholera and died suddenly, leaving an estate of over twenty million dollars in modern day equivalency. The story of the Ewing brothers firm comes to an end with his death, as his brother G.W. came back to Fort Wayne to settle his brother's complicated estate, withdrew from their Indian and trading businesses, and began to speculate in real estate. Never a genial man,

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<sup>9</sup> Trennert, 151.



G.W. gradually estranged himself from the members of his immediate family. He arranged the divorce of one of his daughters, rejected the two suitors of the other, and drove his son into alcoholism and eventually disinherited him. He suffered a stroke in 1865 and died in 1866. He left an estate valued in modern day equivalency at over fourteen million dollars.