

John Muir in Indiana

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John Muir, born April 21, 1838 in Dunbar Scotland, was an active inventor and machine-shop operator, long before he became America's best-known naturalist and conservationist and the "Father of Our National Parks."¹ "Had it not been for an accident instead of a routine repair to a power belt in a factory, the world might never have had John Muir, naturalist, conservationist, and author."²

After leaving the University of Wisconsin, Muir found work in machine shops, but spent his free time botanizing. In 1864-1866 he worked at Trout's Hollow, Meaford, Canada, in a sawmill and rake factory.³ Muir quickly improved the factory's efficiency. He wrote, "I was haunted with inventions that tortured me sleeping or waking until I worked them into visible forms.... It seems as though I should be dragged into machinery whether I would or no."⁴ But in March, 1866, factory were destroyed in fire.⁵

Deciding to return to the United States, Muir chose Indianapolis as the perfect place to settle, because the city had many manufactories, while being surrounded by "one of the richest forests of deciduous hardwood trees on the continent" where he could botanize in his free time.⁶ He found employment at Osgood, Smith & Co., a carriage-material factory located on south Illinois Street between South Street and Pogues Run.⁷ First hired at ten dollars a week, his mechanical skill led to a series of quick pay-raises. He began suggesting improvements to various mechanisms, including the "Sarven patent wheel" which was Osgood's advertised specialty.⁸ But he spent his Sundays in the forests on botanical excursions, and free time dreaming of a botanical excursion to the Amazon.

One of Muir's University of Wisconsin Professors, Professor James D. Butler, wrote to Indianapolis resident Catharine Merrill, one of the first women professors in America, about his former student, telling her that "Solomon could not speak more wisely about plants." Muir soon became a frequent visitor to the family including Catherine Merrill, her sister, and her young nephew, Merrill Moores.⁹

When telling the Merrills about his work at Osgood & Smith, he told them how he had invented a machine there that could "automatically make wooden hubs, spokes and felloes and assemble them into a fully completed wheel." They asked if he had taken out a patent on his device. "No," he replied, "all improvements and inventions should be the property of the human race. No inventor has the right to profit by an invention for which he deserves no credit. The idea of it was really inspired by the Almighty."¹⁰

Merrill Moores, later a prominent lawyer and for 10 years an Indiana congressman, later wrote "This machine was a success, and I am told that all wooden wheels to this day are made by machines following the plan on which Muir's unpatented wheel-making machine was designed."¹¹ As a congressman, Moores asked to be assigned to the national parks committee, so he could carry on Muir's work.¹²

Muir soon found a company of youngsters and adults following him into the forest every weekend on botanical excursions. He taught a Sunday School class, not with Bible study, but with the "Book of Nature" in the woods and fields, which he believed revealed God just as much as the Bible.¹³

Muir had originally told his employers he intended to stay only long enough to earn funds sufficient for a trip to the Amazon. Realizing his value, however, Osgood and Smith induced him to stay by giving him increasing responsibilities and pay. In fall of 1866 he was asked to

make a detailed time-and-motion study of the factory. Thus Muir became a pioneer efficiency expert. He reported the inefficiencies due to temperature variations on the leather belts and worn belt linings. He analyzed the daily work-day, concluding that evening “lamplight labor was not worth very much,” since the men were so tired, anticipating the 8 hour workday. Muir wrote to Jeanne Carr that he liked “the rush and roar and whirl of the factory.”¹⁴ Smith and Osgood hinted at an eventual partnership. Muir later wrote, “I was in great danger of becoming so successful that my botanical and geographical studies might be interrupted.”¹⁵ But then he had an experience resolved his inner conflict between machinery and Nature once and for all.

While at work on March 6, 1867, a file he was using to unlace a belt in the factory slipped and pierced his right eye at the edge of the cornea. Blinded in one eye, his other eye also went dark in sympathetic reaction. Soon after the accident,. Muir wrote: “For weeks I have daily consulted maps in locating a route through the Southern States, the West Indies, South America, and Europe -- a botanical journey studied for years. .. but, alas, I am half blind.”¹⁶

Muir wrote to his mentor, Jeanne Carr on April 3, 1867: “You have, of course, heard of my calamity. The sunshine and the winds are working in all the gardens of God, but I--I am lost.”¹⁷ He stayed in Indianapolis convalescing until June 10, 1867.¹⁸ The Merrill and Moores families read to him, and Judson Osgood and Samuel Smith visited him frequently, promising a promotion to foreman, a substantial raise in salary, and shorter hours if he would return to the factory.¹⁹ Gradually his sight was restored.

Bade relates:

“During the long days of his confinement in a dark room he had opportunity for much reflection. He concluded that life was too brief and uncertain, and time too precious, to waste upon belts and saws; that while he was pottering in a wagon factory, God was making a world; and he determined that, if his eyesight was spared, he would devote the remainder of his life to a study of the process.”²⁰

Muir wrote, “This affliction has driven me to the sweet fields. God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons.”²¹ Firmly turning his back on the world of machines, he wrote "As soon as I got out into heaven's light ... I bade adieu to mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God.”²²

Muir left his inventions, plant press, and botanical specimens in storage with the Merrill family in Indianapolis. After a brief trip home to Wisconsin, Muir embarked on a 1,000 mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico, aiming for the rainforests of the Amazon. A bout with malaria caused him to take a 44-year detour on his intended destination, leading to a career as wilderness explorer and defender in the American West.

But the Indiana connection continued. Samuel Merrill, the child of one of Muir’s Indianapolis friends, spent the summer of 1892 at Muir’s ranch in Martinez, California. It was that year that the Sierra Club was founded, and Muir was made its first president. Merrill was there when Muir related at the supper-table that the Sierra Club had been organized, saying it was the happiest day in his life.²³

After a famous career as naturalist and conservationist, Muir died December 24, 1914, in Los Angeles, California. But through the Sierra Club, his ideals continue forever. Indiana is today home of the Hoosier Chapter of the Sierra Club, continuing Muir’s fight for environmental protection.²⁴

¹ Emmanuel, George, *John Muir, Inventor*, (Fresno, Panorma West Books, 1985).

² *Ibid*, 17.

³ Gisel, Bonnie J., *Kindred and Related Spirits: the Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr*, (Salt Lake City, Utah: 2001), 21.

⁴ Wolfe, Linnie Marsh, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1945, 1978), 96-97.

⁵ Gisel, 22.

⁶ Wilkins, Thurman, *John Muir: Apostle of Nature* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 42;

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁹ Muir, John, in *The Man Shakespeare and other Essays By Catharine Merrill With Impressions And Reminiscences Of The Author By Melville B. Anderson, And With Some Words of Appreciation From John Muir*, (Indianapolis, The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1902), p. 32-33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ Wolfe, Linnie Marsh, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1945, 1978), 99. Merrill Moores spent many weeks with Muir after his injury on a botanical excursion back to Muir's family home in Wisconsin, and five years later, he spent six months with Muir in Yosemite. The Political Graveyard Website reports that Merrill shared the same birthday as Muir: "Born in Indianapolis, Marion County, Ind., April 21, 1856. Republican. U.S. Representative from Indiana 7th District, 1915-25. Died, as the result of an automobile accident, in Indianapolis, Marion County, Ind., October 21, 1929. Interment at Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis, Ind." <http://politicalgraveyard.com/bio/moorehead-morales.html#R9M0J78XE> (accessed March 23, 2003).

¹² Merrill, Samuel, "Personal Recollections of John Muir," in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, XIII, 1, Feb., 1928, 25, excerpted in Gilliam, Ann, *Voices for the Earth: A Treasury of the Sierra Club Bulletin 1893-1977*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ Wolfe, Linnie Marsh, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1945, 1978), 100.

¹⁵ Wolfe, 110.

¹⁶ Badè, William Frederic, Introduction to *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* by John Muir (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916).

¹⁷ Muir, John, *Letters to a Friend* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1915; reprint (Dunwoody Georgia: Norman S. Berg, Publisher, 1873), 15.

¹⁸ Muir, *Letters to a Friend*, June 9, 1867.

¹⁹ Wolfe, 105.

²⁰ Badè, William Frederic, Introduction to *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* by John Muir (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916).

²¹ Wolfe, 105.

²² Badè, William Frederic, Introduction to *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* by John Muir (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916).

²³ Merrill, Samuel, "Personal Recollections of John Muir," in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, XIII, 1, Feb., 1928, 24-30, excerpted in Gilliam, Ann, *Voices for the Earth: A Treasury of the Sierra Club Bulletin 1893-1977*.

²⁴ The Hoosier Chapter was organized in 1975, after starting out as a Group within the former Great Lakes Chapter, which had been first organized in 1959. Hazlett, Lori, Personal Correspondence, April 1, 2003.