

A HUCKLEBERRY HOOSIER



By Steve Kash

Hoosier author-general Lew Wallace is best remembered for his novel, *Ben Hur*. Since the turn of the century, the novel has been made into a play and three movies. The latest movie version, filmed in 1959, won academy awards for best picture and best actor, Charlton Heston. Scenes from its spectacular chariot race between Ben Hur and the Roman, Messala, who lash and claw at each other as their chariots battle wheel to wheel, still thrill television and VCR viewers.

Wallace was also a Huckleberry Hoosier if ever one lived. When he was 16, Wallace and a friend ran away from their Indianapolis homes, floating a raft down the White River in hopes of making it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. If they had not been caught, the boys intended to join the Texas navy and get even with the Mexicans for what they had done to Americans in places such as the Alamo.



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The Photographs

Andrew Johnston captured icicle-rimmed canyons along Trail 3 through Rocky Hollow at Turkey Run State Park for this month's front cover. Inside the front cover, snow and ice dominate the winter landscape at Tippecanoe River State Park. Richard Fields photographed the scene near the canoe campground area. For the back cover, Fields photographed the restored Metamora Grist Mill, a popular attraction at the Whitewater Canal State Historic Site.

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Steve Kash

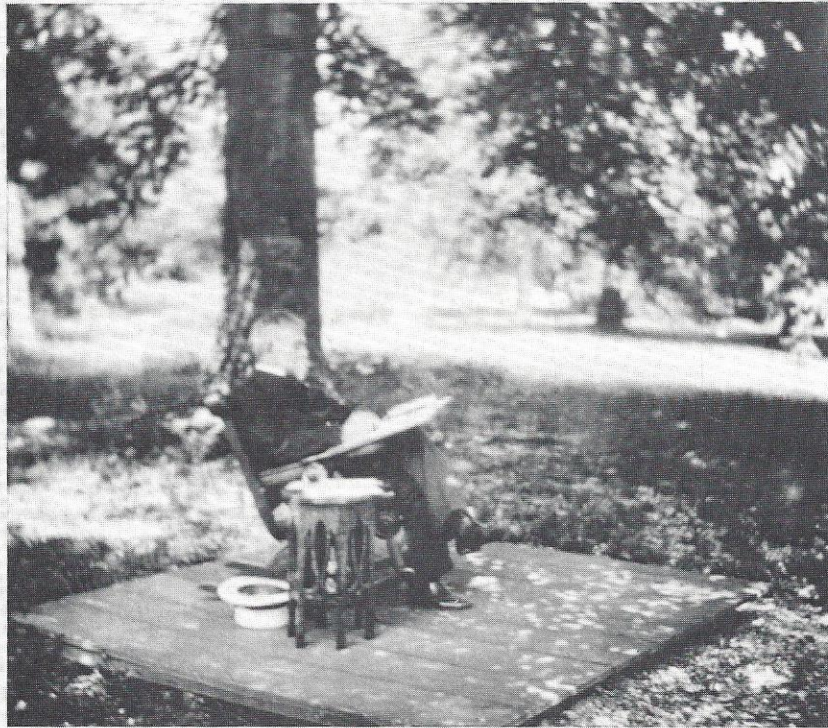
The General Lew Wallace Study was built in 1894 on the grounds of Wallace's Crawfordsville home.

Sixty years later, after Wallace had won acclaim for *Ben Hur* and two other novels, and had been a major-general in the Union army during the Civil War, governor of the New Mexico Territory and ambassador to the Turkish Empire, he still loved running away from it all. One of his favorite escape spots was the Kankakee River basin, near Kouts, where he anchored a 28-foot, canvas-topped houseboat called "The Thing." In a nutshell, the grand old man of Hoosier literature was a nature enthusiast.

As recorded in his autobiography, Wallace's first affair with lady nature took place when he was six. His father had just moved the family to Covington from Brookville. Young Lew went head over heels for the Wabash, feeling it imbued with the storied splendor of the Nile, the Rhine or the giant Mississippi. He began playing along its banks almost daily. Eventually, he charmed a Covington area ferryman named Nebeker into allowing him to ride along as his assistant. Wallace was able to enjoy the Wabash's many pleasures until he was 10, at which time his father became the state's governor and moved the family to Indianapolis.

Three years after his unsuccessful attempt to raft to the Gulf of Mexico, Wallace successfully raised a company of Indiana soldiers. They elected him their second lieutenant. Then, he led them by train, steamboat and clipper brig to Mexico. At the time, Mexico was in a formal state of war with the United States; however, Wallace and his men never saw combat.

Upon returning home, he studied law, passed the bar and took a wife. Chafing at being a lawyer, which he considered tedious, Wallace eventually moved



Courtesy of General Lew Wallace Study

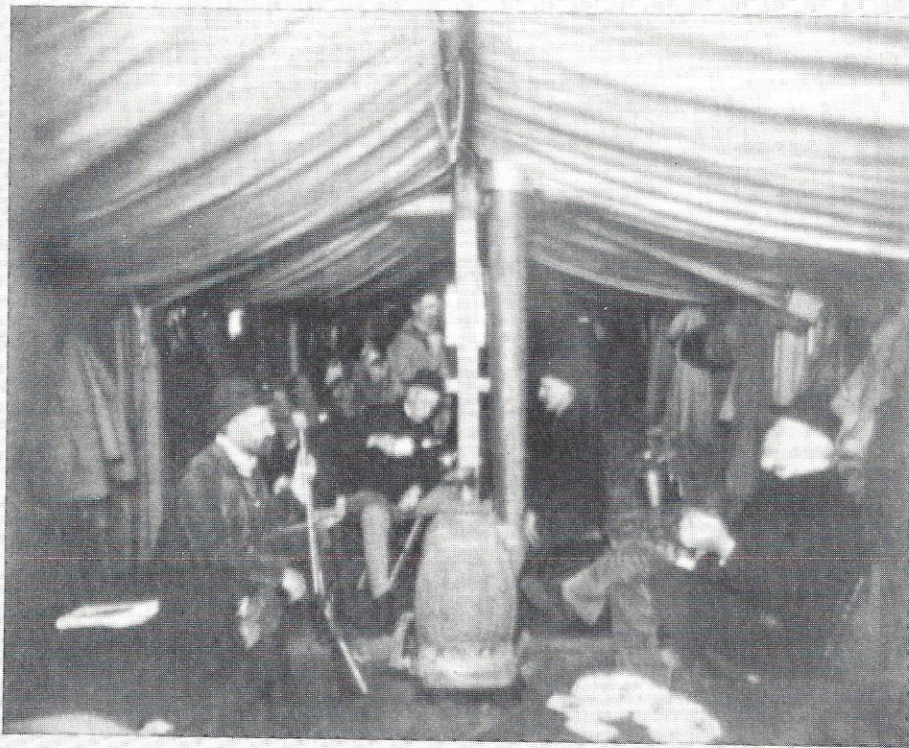
General Wallace writes on the grounds of his study. A statue of Wallace now sits on this spot where he spent many hours, in the shade of a beech tree, writing his novels.

to Crawfordsville where he became a state senator. For all appearances, he had put behind the life of a dashing adventurer in exchange for the satisfactions of career and family.

It was in 1858, at the beginning of the duck season, that State Senator Lewis Wallace began his next love affair with an Indiana river. Riding north by train from Crawfordsville, he came to the twisting, convoluted Kankakee — a river that until it was dredged and straightened in the early 1900s, was noted as having more bends per mile than a family of coiled rattlesnakes. For 20 miles on either side of the river the sweeping oxbows it formed wrenching itself across northern Indiana's flatlands made the land too swampy for raising anything but hordes of waterfowl, wild game and fish. The duck troves were immense. Accounts were frequently heard of men taking 500 to 1,000 in a few weeks — or days! Kankakee tales reached south toward Crawfordsville and Indianapolis, north to Chicago, east to the Atlantic Coast and from there on to Europe where noblemen were attracted to the northern Indiana river marshes.

In later years, after he made dozens more trips to the Kankakee, Wallace would say of the river, "Never in all my world travels have I found a more perfect spot, or a more tantalizing river." His wife Susan came to call the Kankakee, "his happy hunting grounds."

Wallace and his companion during the inaugural trip to the Kankakee, Samuel Wilson, set up their tents near Baum's Bridge, southwest of Kouts. While they hunted, fished and camped, the men argued the burning issue of the day, slavery.



Courtesy of General Lew Wallace Study

Lew Wallace entertaining friends aboard his houseboat "The Thing" on the Kankakee River. Wallace spent many duck seasons hunting in the northern Indiana marshes.

Wallace was supposedly somewhat in doubt as to what position he should take regarding slavery before the trip. By the time he went home he was against it.

At least once, and perhaps several times before the Civil War, Wallace ventured back to the Kankakee on hunting and fishing trips. When the war came, Wallace's military brilliance, sense of command and adventuresome streak enabled him, at 35, to become the youngest major-general in the Union army. He is credited with preventing the Confederates from capturing both Cincinnati and Washington, D.C.

After his only major setback, when he met with near disaster at the Battle of Shiloh, Wallace sought a respite from the trials of war. In early July 1862, he returned to, as he said in his autobiography, ". . . the one friend I was sure of — the Kankakee River, pitching a Heiman tent on its bank, in the royal festoonery of its vines, the shade of its birch and maples. . . ." He told men in the hunting clubs near Baum's Bridge, "Been laid up on the shelf, militarily." In late August, he got a message from Governor Morton calling him back into action.

In post-Civil War years, Wallace visited the Kankakee at least three times a year when he was in Indiana, normally going during the two duck seasons and while the pickerel were running. He was camped at Baum's Bridge when a telegram arrived in 1880 telling him that *Ben Hur* had been accepted for publication.

When he returned to Indiana in 1885, after his term of ambassadorship to the Turkish Empire, Wallace made one of his most notable river rafting

accomplishments. He bought The Thing, which has also been called The White Elephant.

The Thing was 10 feet wide and 28 feet long. According to histories of Wallace along the Kankakee, the boat had been a steam-powered barge used by the White Star Lumbering Company to take wood downriver to Momence, Illinois. But, after the lumber company took it on a few trial runs, they found it unsuitable. Wallace redecked the boat with good flooring fitted with iron pipe floor flanges and put up a framework of iron piping to support a canvas top.

The Thing was divided into three canvassed cabins. At one end of the houseboat was a galley and a berth for an elderly black man who served as boat's cook and Wallace's all-purpose helper. The other end of the boat was Wallace's cabin and berth. The middle area was where he wrote, loafed or entertained guests. Fishing was done from the front and back decks.

For the first few years he had The Thing, Wallace anchored it near Baum's Bridge. The opening page of his final novel, *The Prince of India*, says, "Begun, Sept. 1886 on the Kankakee." He later told acquaintances he wrote 13 chapters of *The Prince of India* while camped near Baum's Bridge on his houseboat.

Then, he began moving the boat away from its Baum's Bridge mooring, taking it to anchorages along the Kankakee's remote back bends so he could get away from a continual stream of unwanted visitors. People may have come because of *Ben Hur*'s astonishing success. By 1887, it was selling 4,500 copies a week. *Ben Hur* eventually became the most acclaimed biblical novel of all time.

When he wanted human contact, Wallace would return The Thing to a dock at Deep Elbow. This was an anchoring point at the base of a high sand bank leading up to The Pittsburgh Gun Club, a famous hunting club near Baum's Bridge.

Wallace had a variety of friends visit The Thing. They ranged from president-elect Benjamin J. Harrison — who once borrowed the craft to get away for a few days — to regular Hoosier pals like Kouts' druggist, John Benkie. Benkie liked to join Wallace on his houseboat for an evening pipe.

After the turn of the century, Wallace's visits to the Kankakee became infrequent. The most historically important visit he made after 1900 was a 1901 stay on The Thing while recuperating from surgery. During this trip, he learned of President McKinley's assassination. Thereupon he wrote an article, "Preventing Presidential Assassinations," which received nationwide news coverage and has been credited with stimulating the present-day Secret Service.

In 1904, Wallace made his last visit to the Kankakee. He passed away on Feb. 14, 1905. A New York paper reported the event by saying, "The world has sent St. Peter a wonderful valentine."

Mrs. Wallace requested that her husband's boat be allowed to gradually deteriorate into the riverbank after his death. But, his son Henry allowed its steam engine to be purchased. When Henry sold off property his father had



Courtesy of General Lew Wallace Study

The General and one of his grandsons fish in the moat around his study.

next to the Pittsburgh Gun Club, he gave permission for the houseboat to be dismantled so that its wood might be put to good use.

Portions of The Thing became an old riverman's cabin, which is still situated on property which had been Wallace's. The cabin sits at the top of a ramp Wallace constructed so the boat could be taken from the Kankakee in wintertime.

Two years after Wallace's death, the Kankakee's classic oxbow channels began being changed by man. By 1917, connecting ditches had transformed the once luxuriant Kankakee marshes into farmland.

Pictures of Wallace on his houseboat and a variety of other momentos related to his life can be seen at the General Lew Wallace Study. The Study, located in Crawfordsville, is now a National Historic Landmark.

The Study was built on the grounds of Wallace's Crawfordsville home in 1894. Wallace attached such importance to work being done properly on the building that he did not visit the Kankakee for the year it was being built.

A statue of Wallace was put up on the Study's grounds after he passed away. The statue stands in the place where he used to sit outside his house and write novels in the shade of a tall beech tree.

Inside the Study visitors can see Wallace's fishing lures, one of his shot guns, and a collection of his extra-long cane poles. He did not like fishing with standard length cane poles because he did not feel they enabled the fish to give him enough fight. Therefore, he connected two, three, or more poles together with small metal ferrules he screwed on at their joining points.

Wallace liked fishing so much that after the Study was finished he had a moat dug around it, stocked the water with fish, and enjoyed afternoons of angling for them from the Study's steps with his grandchildren.

One living man still remembers seeing Wallace taking off and returning from one of his fishing trips in the Crawfordsville area. John Clements, a 92-year-old, was interviewed in 1986 by Martha Cantrell, a Crawfordsville area historian, concerning, in part, his memories of Lew Wallace.

The scene Clements recollects happened along the road between Wallace's winter home, near his Study in Crawfordsville, and his summer home a few miles west of Crawfordsville. This house was up the hill from another of his favorite fishing places, Sugar Creek. The site of Wallace's summer home was in an area called Water Babble because of the number of interconnected spring-fed ponds terracing the hill above this stretch of Sugar Creek.

"I used to see General Lew Wallace come by in his little electric buggy when he was going out to Water Babble," Clements said. "And you could see that fishing bucket there on the seat beside him. It (the car) just looked like a buggy if I can remember it. The top was always up; he never had the top down. He would steer it with a little stick instead of a steering wheel. I think I could run as fast as it went. But he would come by, and I would see him going out and coming back. I suppose he had his fish."

"Did you wave to him?"

"Well, no, I don't remember that I did, 'cause I'd be nine years old when he died, so I wasn't very big."

"Was he dignified acting?"

"Not when he went by there because he had on his old clothes."

Steve Kash is a free-lance writer interested in Indiana history. Kash lives in Terre Haute.

Stream Of History



DNR file photo

By Gary Eldridge and
Lisa Hoffman

Rex and Tony's leisurely day begins at noon and ends at 3:30 p.m. For "work," they tow the passenger canal boat Ben Franklin at the Whitewater Canal State Historic Site in Metamora. Their 25-minute stroll covers a mile, roundtrip, through the Duck Creek Aqueduct to Gordon's lock, #24 at Millville, and back. On a weekday they make three trips; on a weekend, they make eight trips from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. It may sound like a lot, but it is nothing for Rex and Tony.

Big and brawny, these two Belgian draft horses stand 6 feet high at the shoulder and weigh in at 2,000 pounds each. Their foot-wide hooves are ideal for pulling heavy loads. Nose to tail, they walk down the towpath at a two-mile per hour pace.

Next season they will be hauling a new Ben Franklin. The red, white and blue canal boat's new design is in the style of the impressive "line" boats that carried cargo and travelers. The boat's superstructure, or top, will be wooden, in keeping with the design popular in the 1800s. The hull of the 74-foot-long boat will be fiberglass to improve durability. The new Ben Franklin will hold 80 people.

A banjo player will entertain passengers while an interpreter explains what living conditions were like in a typical cabin. Special seasonal and evening programs are in the works for dinner and corporate party cruises. Voyagers will also have the unique opportunity to ride through a canal lock. Few of these historic structures are still operating. The next closest "lock-through" is in Pennsylvania.

In the old canal days, from the 1840s

The original Metamora Grist Mill (above) was built in 1845 next to lock #25 by Jonathon Banes. It burned in 1899 and was replaced in 1900 by the mill which stands in Metamora today.

to the 1860s, the horses did not have it as easy as Rex and Tony. The boats they towed then were huge, big enough to carry dry goods, cattle, people and their possessions. Truly beasts of burden, horses plodded along at the canal speed limit — as fast as a man could walk or four miles per hour.

The boats couldn't go any faster or the higher speeds made waves, eroding away the dirt embankments. "High" speeds caused the boats to nose down into the mud, dragging the bottom and forcing the horses to strain harder.