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Let's Walk Vermilion County

Fun History Facts

The villages, cities and towns listed below have identified walking routes within their communities; most paths are one mile or less. A booklet entitled, **Let's Walk Vermilion County** is available that lists these walking routes. This handout is a supplement to that booklet; providing some fun history facts about the participating communities. We encourage you to take a walk and learn more about your county!



- Belgium
- Bismarck
- Danville
- Fairmount
- Fithian
- Georgetown
- Hoopeston
- Muncie
- Oakwood
- Potomac
- Ridge Farm
- Rossville
- Sidell
- Tilton
- Westville



Most of the history information was gleaned from documents found at the Vermilion County Museum and the Danville Public Library. Much of the content comes from Centennial Booklets of the Communities. We apologize for any inadvertent inaccuracies in the history facts.

Walking Can be Fun!

Did you know.....?

- According to the CDC, only 13% of children walk to school today compared with 66% in 1970. We need to find opportunities to get our children out & walking.

Make walking an adventure!

Children model what they see their parents do. Kids are more likely to want to go walking again if they associate it with having fun. Here are a few suggestions to have a walking adventure with your child:

Pack a Bag

A small backpack with a few essentials makes children feel they're heading out into the great unknown, and gives an ordinary walk a sense of adventure. Arm them with a magnifying glass, notebook and pencil, a map and a compass, a bug jar or collecting tin—anything they want, so long as it's light and won't weigh them down.

Record it!

Give your children a digital camera, and ask them to take pictures along the way of anything that takes their fancy.

Try a Check-off List

Make the kids a list that they can check off as you walk. How many street names do they pass beginning with 'A'? How many cats (or squirrels, blackbirds or dogs) can they spot? You can include anything you're likely to see in your area.

Westville

Established: 1873

Named After: William & Elizabeth West

Shares its name with: towns in 8 other states: Florida, Indiana, New York, Oklahoma, Montana, New Jersey and California

- The first post office was established in Westville in 1876. The Post office has been moved at least 8 times.
- Coal mining in the Westville area began about 1880. The shaft of the first big mine was sunk at Himrod in 1895 by Himrod Coal Co. The mine was later sold to Mike Kelly. There were at least 5 Kelly Mines.
- Mike Kelly & John Dickerson operated the first bank in Westville.
- In 1890 the 1st saloon opened in connection with a hotel. At one time there reportedly were more than 28 taverns in Westville.
- Due to mining, Westville became a "melting pot" of immigrants including people from Belgium, Lithuania, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy & other countries.
- Zamberletti Park was named for Louis Zamberletti who was Mayor of Westville for 24 years.

Tilton

Established: platted in 1854 as Bryant; platted in 1858 as Town of Tilton

Named After: Colonel Lucian Tilton

Shares its name with: a town only in 1 other state, New Hampshire

- Tilton was originally named “Bryant” after an assistant to Mr. Catlin. The town was later named after Lucian Tilton. The town was also once called the “Town of Carbon”
- The railroad yards came to Tilton in the late 1800’s.
- The Danville Car Company (located at the former GM plant site) was an early business that made street cars, interurban cars and the Moore Auto.
- The Saginaw Malleable Iron Co once operated in Tilton and was the forerunner of the General Motors plant that once operated here
- A 10 mile stretch of I-74 near Tilton was officially opened in 1964. Tilton Mayor, Elmer Nabors, was on hand for the ribbon cutting ceremony
- The County “Poor Farm” was located on Tilton Road. This later became the building for the County Nursing Home; later the Health Department occupied this building. The building was finally razed due to its deteriorated condition.

Start a Collection

Young children will love it if they can take along a basket or bucket for collecting interesting bits and pieces they come across on their travels. Encourage them to pick up odd-looking pebbles, pinecones, seedpods or leaves, and then use them in craft projects when you get home.

Tell a story

Look up some history about your community i.e., who were the first settlers in this area? What did they do for a living? What Indian tribes lived here—where did they go? Discuss an old building or structure in your community. **OR** Make up a story; “*Once upon a time there was a young boy (or girl) who took a walk and they saw this old building.....*” (be creative). Take turns filling in details or take turns telling stories.

Finish with praise

After your walk, no matter how long or short, don’t forget to congratulate your child. Make walking a positive experience.



Belgium

Established: May 19 1908

Named After: Immigrant settlers from Belgium

Shares its name with: a town in Wisconsin

- Coal Mining began in Vermilion County about 1866. Coal mine developer, William Kirkland and others, began mining in the Grape Creek Area. Labor was so scarce Kirkland imported the first miners. A shipload of Belgian miners was brought in to show the early coal mine developers how to start the slopes and how to best mine profitably
- Immigrant families struggled with the language barrier and families tried to settle near their own people. Belgians settled north of Westville and the area became known as Belgiumtown
- Belgium may have officially organized in 1908 to allow taverns a place to operate in a wet township as nearby townships voted to become dry.

Sidell

Established: incorporated 1892

Named After: John Sidell

Shares its name with: only 1 other town in Florida

- John Sidell came from Ohio and purchased 3,000 acres on the banks of the Little Vermilion River
- The first post office for the community was in the living room of John Sidell. The post office moved outside of his home in 1884
- In 1888 the town's 3 main industries aside from farming was tiles, bricks and ice
- Sidell has had an unfortunate history of many fires: 1893, 1902, 1920, 1926, 1934, 1937, 1967 & 1970
- Sidell once had an Opera House. Cooper's Opera House was a casualty of one of the fires.
- The Tile Factory produced 150,000 tiles annually; it too was lost to fire
- In 1891 street crossings were put in & 18 street lamps were installed. The 1st Lamplighter received \$5.00 a month to turn them on and off
- Sidell has one of the few remaining brick streets in Vermilion County.

Rossville

Established: 1829; incorporated as a village 1859

Named After:

Jacob Ross

Shares its name with: towns in 6 other states: Indiana, Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Kansas & Tennessee

- Originally named Liggett's Grove in honor of John Liggett who built a lodging house in 1829. The cabin was located on Hubbard Trail (now Ill. Rt1) . In 1838 Alvan Gilbert purchased the Liggett farm
- Rossville was once known unofficially as "Henpeck"; but no one knows why
- Rossville had 2 breweries; one where Chrisman Park is today.
- Property for Chrisman Park was donated by Francis & Elsa Chrisman (a total of 19 acres)
- Rossville once had a Wagon Factory on E. Attica St.
- Rossville was known for its baseball teams. One of the team names was Rossville Cyclones. A Rossville team played the Anson's Colts in 1895. The Anson's Colts later became the Chicago Cubs
- Dr. David Fithian (grandson of William Fithian) established a dental practice in Rossville in May 1899 and practiced until his retirement in 1944.

Bismarck

Established: 1837

Named After: Originally called Franklin. Charles Young named the town Bismarck after a German statesman & Chancellor, Otto Van Bismarck, whom he admired.

Shares its name with:

Four other states: North Dakota, Missouri, West Virginia, Arizona

- The original settlement for Bismarck was founded west of its current location at the intersection of Hubbard Trail and the North Fork Vermilion River.
- The settlement gradually moved toward the railroad on land donated by Charles Young & Dr. Holloway.
- The Bismarck Post office was moved from Myersville to Bismarck in the winter of 1871-72. The Post Office was moved 7 times altogether.
- Bismarck once had a creamery, meat market, blacksmith shop, tile factory, stable and lumber yard.
- The Bismarck Bank opened about 1910. Frank Gundy was the first bank president.
- Bismarck has had 3 grade schools. In the early years the average length of a school term was 2 months.

Danville

Established: 1827

Named After: Dan Beckwith, a fur trader & surveyor

Shares its name with: towns in Indiana, Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, New Hampshire and a ghost town in Nevada

- Danville once was the site of a Pottawatomi Indian village
- The first town lots were situated in the area where the Palmer Arena, Public Safety Building and Old National Bank are today
- Danville was one of only 4 cities to be classified as a “Junction” for railroad purposes in the U.S. and averaged 30 or more passenger trains a day passing through the city
- Lincoln spoke from the balcony of the Fithian House (now part of Vermilion County Museum) in 1858
- The War Museum was originally a Carnegie Library. The War Museum opened on Veteran’s Day 1999.
- The Beard Ice Co opened on College St in 1916. The new facility was advertised as “electric germless ice.”
- Joseph Cannon used his political influence to have the Old Soldiers Home (now VA) built in Danville in 1898.

Ridge Farm

Established: Incorporated as a village march 1874

Named After: Abraham Smith’s ridge farm located on a ridge running east to west through Elwood Township

Shares its name with: no other state in the United States has this name

- Abraham Smith built a steam mill 3 stories high, costing \$10,000 which burned in 1863
- Abraham Smith ran an underground railroad during the Civil War
- The Post Office was established on May 17, 1841. Mr. Smith was the first post master.
- The school house was erected in 1875
- The first bank in Ridge Farm opened in 1892
- In the late 1800s a round trip ticket on the railroad cost \$2.75 from Chicago to Ridge Farm.
- Ridge Farm has the smallest operating Carnegie Library. The library was built in 1910. Mr. Carnegie donated \$9,000 for the library
- The Interurban was constructed 1901-1905. A line ran from Danville to Ridge Farm; it was discontinued in 1936.

Potomac

Established: 1840

Named After: Originally named by John Smith and Isaac Meneley

Shares its name with: a town in only one other state, Maryland

- Potomac was originally named Marysville after the wives of the 2 founders, John Smith (a grocer) & Isaac Meneley (a blacksmith) who started businesses here in 1840. The town was confused with Myersville 10 miles east. The name was changed to Potomac although residents resented this and did not accept the name change for decades.
- In the early 1900's Potomac had an excursion train that ran from Potomac to Barlow Park in Alvin on Sundays.
- Colonel Margaret Harper, a former Potomac resident, was the highest decorated woman in the armed forces. She was the Chief of the Army Nurse Corp.

Danville, continued

Danville Parks

Brief histories of the areas where designated walking paths have been identified.

Ellsworth Park

- Site of early harness racing in the early 1900s
- Site of the first municipal golf course in Illinois
- Site of Danville swimming hole with docks, bather's beach and concession stands

Lincoln Park

- Established in 1891
- Site of Joseph G. Cannon's birthday party in 1923 with 50,000 in attendance
- Had a sunken garden and reflecting pool at one time; the pavilion was built in 1915

Espenscheid Park

- Donated to the city in 2005
- Has 61 acres
- Is Home of the Fetch Dog Park

Sunset Memorial Park

- The Swan Pond was built between 1931-1933
- The angels were designed by Walter Mercer of Danville.

Fairmount

Established: 1893

Named By: Frances Dougherty, an early settler

Shares its name with:

Three other states: Indiana, Georgia, New York

- Josiah Hunt originally named the town Salina but the town name had to be changed because of confusion with the existing town in Illinois called Saline.
- In 1832 the Goshen Baptist church was organized. This was one of the first churches organized in Vermilion County.
- Fairmount has been called “Queen of the Prairies” due to its noted grain market in the early days.
- Coal mining was attempted in Fairmount but provided impractical because of water.
- Limestone quarries in the area once employed about 400 people. The quarries, now flooded, provide fishing opportunities.
- The Fairmount Library was initiated by the Fairmount School PTA in 1955. The doors to the library opened in April of 1957.

Oakwood

Established: 1870

Named After: Henry Oakwood

Shares its name with: towns in 3 other states: Ohio, Georgia and Virginia

- Oakwood had a boarding house in 1883 called the Gault House. Oakwood also had a hotel in 1892 run by Mr. & Mrs. William Seal.
- In 1910 Oakwood had 2 railroads and an Interurban serving the village.
- Electricity officially came to Oakwood on November 30, 1912
- In June 1901 the Danville Telephone Company placed an exchange in E.M. Snyder’s Restaurant in Oakwood.
- The Oakwood Christian Church building was erected in 1892. Indoor plumbing didn’t arrive at the church until 1951.
- The trailer court (south of Rt 150) was formerly an Indian Camp Ground.
- Oakwood experienced 2 major fires in 1871 & 1897. The fire in 1897 took out many businesses and the grain elevator.
- In 1943 there were 3 grocery stores in Oakwood: W.D. Rogers & Son, A.B. Casteel and C. J. Oakwood and Son.

Muncie

Established: Platted Sept. 7, 1875

Named after or by: ?

Shares its name with: towns in 2 other states: Indiana and Kansas

- William Lynch is credited for much of the establishment of the town of Muncie. He started the mine, had the first store and was the first station agent at the railroad.
The Muncie IBW-RR depot sat south of the tracks and 1-2 blocks west of Main St.
- Muncie Post office was established on Feb 21, 1876
- Muncie has one of the oldest Baptist Churches in the county. The Baptist Church started as Walker's Point Baptist Church north of the town of Muncie about 1854. The structure moved to its present location in 1881
- Muncie was once a big coal-mining town with 2 saloons.
- Dr. O.J. Michael opened a 2 room office in Muncie. His residence still stands. Dr. Michaels played violin and sang in a barber shop quartet. Prior to WWII, Dr. Michael was the plant doctor at the hemp plant in Muncie.
- Muncie had a hemp plant located north of town at the current seed company site.
- Muncie had its own grade school built circa 1955 but closed in 1986.

Fithian

Established: Platted on April 8 1870

Named After: Dr. William Fithian

Shares its name with: This is the only town in the United States that has this name.

- The original grain elevator was established in 1869. A "new" elevator was built in 1959.
- The Interurban Station (South of Rt. 150) was constructed in 1915. It is now a private residence.
- The bank, called the First Bank of Fithian, was built in 1912. The bank building was later used as a post office. Country Chics now occupies this building.
- The Ford Motor Dealership, adjacent to the old bank building, was the oldest, continuously family-operated Ford dealership in the U.S. On May 30, 2000, Don Stallings was presented a plaque for 75 years of family-owned Ford service.
- Dr. Paul Fithian (grandson of William Fithian) built a brick home & office in the early 1900s. Both of these buildings remain standing on Main St.
- Fithian had its own grade school. The building was built in 1954 and housed 1st – 8th grades. The school was closed when it consolidated with Oakwood Grade School. The former school building is now a private residence.

Georgetown

Established: Platted in 1826; Incorporated in 1873

Named After: Either George Haworth or George Beckwith

Shares its name with: Georgetown is a fairly common town name and shares its name with towns in 15 other states.

- From 1890 – 1920 Georgetown grew from 600 to 4000 residents
- When Georgetown was first laid out there were only 2 streets: State Street and West Street.
- The first building in Georgetown was a doctors' office (Dr. Smith); followed by a blacksmith shop.
- The Post Office was established in 1828
- The face of Capt. George Washington Holloway appears in the windows of the Methodist Church on the main road.
- Georgetown had a unique Interurban station; the train went through the middle of the station
- Georgetown Library was founded in 1938 as a WPA Project (formerly known as Works Progress Administration). The WPA was established by Pres. Franklin Roosevelt to provide jobs for millions left unemployed by the Great Depression.

Hoopeston

Established: Incorporated as a village 1871; incorporated as a city 1877

Named After: Thomas Hoopes

Shares its name with: No other state in the U.S. shares the name of Hoopeston

- Thomas Hoopes owned 7000-8000 acres. He farmed and raised sheep and cattle on this land.
- Two well-known names in Hoopeston are McFerren and Honeywell. Jacob McFerren was the 1st Mayor of Hoopeston; Alba Honeywell was the 2nd Mayor of Hoopeston. Jacob McFerren was elected on the temperance ticket.
- Jacob McFerren donated the land for the park.
- Alba Honeywell donated the land for the library; the library opened in Jan 1905 and was a Carnegie Library. The library received \$12,500 from Andrew Carnegie.
- Hoopeston grew so fast that it once was called the "Metropolis of the Prairie"
- The first electric lights were installed in Hoopeston in 1890 at the Hoopeston Canning Company.