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Surveyor David Ruckman and a couple of his group dressed up like pioneer surveyors, with old equipment and period clothing, at a November celebration of the state's Buffalo Trace group.

COURTESY PHOTO

Bringing back the Buffalo Trace

Dedicated volunteers explore historic path

By Anna Rochelle
Special to the Hoosier Times

A couple of years ago, a small but diverse group of Hoosiers, from varied backgrounds and locations, were called together to look into an important but not well-known slice of Indiana history. In short order, they set goals, established committees and got to work.

On Nov. 15, these volunteers were honored during a special celebration in French Lick for their impressive accomplishments — preserving locations and finding facts about a piece of our past that stretches across many miles of southern Indiana.

They are the Buffalo Trace Working Group, initially organized by the Hoosier National Forest. Their mission was to research, locate and preserve the location and historical significance of the Buffalo Trace that runs across several of the state's southern counties.



COURTESY PHOTO

This deer hide, tanned and painted with a map of the Buffalo Trace, was brought to the Nov. 15 celebration of the state's Buffalo Trace group by volunteer Tom Mosely. He purchased the hide at the Feast of the Hunters' Moon years ago.

Teena Ligman, a public affairs specialist with the Forest Service, said this project came about after a few stories and columns appeared in various newspapers and the forest service started getting calls from people who wanted more information about the trace.

Angie Doyle, a heritage resources specialist and tribal liaison with the forest service, serves as the coordinator for the Buffalo Trace

Working Group. "We had received so many inquiries on the trace over the years, and knew there was a lot of interest, so decided to pull people together to see where a coalition of interested people might lead," she said.

Ligman said a meeting date was set and they invited all the people they knew were interested.

"About 20 or 25 people showed up, and they were all so enthusi-

More information

For more information on the Buffalo Trace, go to buffalotrace.indianahistoricpathways.org.

Online

See a YouTube video of David Ruckman and other volunteers re-creating early explorations along the Buffalo Trace. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSEBo2a1uU>.

astic," Ligman said. "Several were surveyors, including some retired surveyors and some active surveyors. Many times in their work, they would go back to check old survey notes where they would see a notation about 'crossing the Buffalo Trace.'"

For one reason or another, members of the working group had wanted to find out more about the trace, but little information was available. That is now changing, thanks to the efforts of the working group.

Over the course of just two years, Ligman said, some of these

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volunteers have walked miles and miles of forest land searching for physical evidence of the trace, while others have spent hours and hours digging into old letters and documents in courthouses and libraries. Still more have used their talents to write and document the group's findings and to create educational materials, videos, graphics, a website and more.

Doyle said some amazing things have happened since the group was formed.

"The synergy of enthusiastic people is always amazing to watch," Doyle said. "We haven't completed every task, but we are to the point, where individuals will finish projects in the months ahead. We've come a long way toward accomplishing our mission."

What is the Buffalo Trace?

Doyle explained when the French and British colonists arrived in what is now southern Indiana, thousands of bison traveled back and forth through this area from the grasslands of the Great Plains into Kentucky, crossing into Indiana at the Falls of the Ohio.

The large heavy beasts had created a pathway that was also used for hundreds of years by Native Americans and then the French, who had founded a trading post at Vincennes in the early 1700s.

Known as the Buffalo or Vincennes Trace, it was as durable as any road built today. Modern roads have been built along portions of its route, and early pioneers used the trace to cross



This rendering of what the Buffalo Trace once looked like was drawn by Dave Ruckman, one of the many people who is working to locate the trace across Indiana.

the state. Ligman added that the first postal route in the state traveled on the Buffalo Trace. She said it was like a giant cow path but the Buffalo Trace was 12 to 20 feet wide.

The working group has been documenting the history and location of the main route of the Buffalo Trace from the Vincennes area all the way to the Falls of the Ohio, but Ligman said there are still other undocumented sections that lead off into other areas in southern Indiana.

Ligman said the surveyors and others have been on the ground, asking permission from property owners, in several counties, including Clark, Floyd, Harrison, Crawford, Orange, Dubois, Pike and Knox.

She said the path is so wide to this day, it carves a definite line across the Earth that can be seen in satellite images.

One group member has been working on the creation of a "flyover," an overhead view of the trace using satellite imagery, that will soon be available to view on the group's website.

The surveyors, along with several other group members, have become re-enactors, dressing in period clothing like the earliest surveyors, to re-create the work they performed to map the land. They have recorded a video while on the Buffalo Trace so viewers can see how the early surveyors performed their work and see other early settlers traveling the

trace, all narrated with interesting history and explanations of the importance of the trace. Readers can find a link to that video on the group's website or on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5EBoZaTtU0.

Ligman said the research that went into finding information and documenting the Buffalo Trace was substantial.

"One volunteer spent hours and hours researching in the Lilly Library on the (Indiana University) campus," Ligman said.

For their senior project, two students in the informatics program at the University of Southern Indiana in New Albany developed a professional website for the group.

Ligman said they went above and beyond, spending extra hours on the project, and the group is still adding information to the site and will continue to make additions in the weeks and months to come.

Still on the drawing board is an app for smartphones that will be a guide to the Buffalo Trace with an interactive map that marks locations of the trace as well as attractions along the way such as the location of a historical Indian village and a stagecoach inn.

The group also has adopted a logo which will be used on signage that will eventually mark the location of the trace wherever it crosses a highway or county road.

Another group member, Glenda Ferguson, a fourth-grade teacher, developed an education kit with 15 lesson plans covering the Buffalo Trace, bison, the early Indiana Rangers, surveyors, settlers and more. In addition to teaching history, the lessons utilize math and science activities such as actually surveying a sidewalk using a compass and a chain, and music activities — there's a song to sing and a CD with old-time fiddle music. There's a play to perform, and the kit includes artifacts such as the hoof, a molar and a horn of a bison among other hands-on items to make the history come alive.

The education kits have been placed in every school that has a fourth grade in the counties where the trace is located. Kits have also been placed in libraries and one is available from the forest service. A complete list of locations is available on the group's website, buffalotrace.indianahistoricpathways.org.

