Chronicling Hoosier, by Kristi Palmer

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Introduction

The origin of the word hoosier has been long sought by historians and native Indianans alike. In 2016 two colleagues, Ted Polley and Caitlin Pollock and I conducted a research project which began as a technology supported, big data hunt for the earliest appearance and original meaning of the word. Ultimately the most intriguing discoveries were the variety of meanings hoosier has encompassed through time and by geography. Today’s presentation is based on that research originally shared via a website in 2017 but with significant revisions and additions for a Fortnightly audience.

Refer to map slide by state. I’m curious to know how many of you have used Chronicling America? It’s a database of digitized newspapers from 1789-1963. The full text of all the newspapers have been OCR-ed, optical character recognition, or that a computer has pulled the text of the paper from the image and puts in a form that can be searched word by word or phrase. My colleague Caitlin Pollock, a digital humanities librarian created a programmatic script that pulled all the pages within this immense Chronicling America database that contained the word hoosier. Social Sciences librarian Ted Polley wrote additional scripts to ask questions of the data and turn it into comprehensible visualizations. Here is one such visualization demonstrating the saturation of appearance of the word hoosier in newspapers by geography. The darker the blue the more often the word appears in newspapers published in that state. Indiana not surprisingly has the highest percentage of pages containing the term hoosier, followed by Arkansas, Kentucky, Iowa, Minnesota, and Connecticut. We did control for the number of papers by state that were a part of the database as a whole. Therefore the high concentration in Connecticut is not simply because there are more Connecticut newspapers in the database.

Refer to map slide over time. This map animation demonstrates the proliferation of the word over time and across geography. Not surprising you can see the movement of hoosier follows migration patterns towards the west. One of our research findings is a confirmation of many hoosier origin theories that connect the word to canalboat or flatboat culture with Indianans toting supplies, wares, and harvests from the West to New Orleans. Indeed many appearances of hoosier within newspapers reference this journey and layovers in New Orleans. As the map pages through the years you can see the higher number of instances of the word in states that border the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi Rivers.

Today using digital historic newspapers, magazines, and correspondence as exemplars I will share early text appearances of the word hoosier, follow theories of the word’s origin, and highlight positive and negative uses of the word over time.

Refer to Oral history slide. I believe as many before that the origin of hoosier lies in an oral tradition. Those continuing to search for the earliest textual appearance should spend time with diaries, travelogues, and correspondence. Early 20th century historian Jacob Dunn who published many works on the origin collects this remembrance from a Winchester, Indiana resident, “My recollection is that the word began to be used in this country in the fall of 1824, but it might have been as late as 1826 or 1827, when the Louisville & Portland canal was being made. I first hear it at a corn-husking. It was used in the sense of ‘rip-roaring,’ half horse’ and ‘half alligator,’ and such backwoods coinages.” Here we see a connection to flatboatmen
culture, a nod to early pronunciation, and a connection to rough, pioneer culture. From historian Michael Allen, in his 1990 book, *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861*, half alligator, half horse “was a key figure in the mythology of Jacksonian and pre-Civil War America used to describe the wild and woolly frontiersman of the trans-Appalachian West.” They were hunters, Indian fighters, soldiers, rivermen, and squatters. “They were hard-drinking, straight-shooting, lawless, crude, and ferocious fighters, but in some mysterious way, compelling and romantic” (Allen, 4, 7, and 8). Early on half-horse, half-alligator was synonymous with Kentuckians. Yet this characterization closely aligns with that of early hoosiers. Throughout the 19th century the hoosier was used both to describe a general character of people as well as specifically individuals from Indiana. At the start of the word’s usage it appears Indiana residence was often linked but not required.

**Refer to Nickname slide.** Nicknames for groups of people were beginning to develop during this time period and would take off as more and more states entered the union. These two clippings, one from 1837 and another from 1838 demonstrate the developing monikers. “Indiana hoosiers, suckers of Illinois, pukes of Missouri, Buckeyes of Ohio, red horses of Kentucky, mudheads of Tennessee, Wolverines of Michigan, eels of New England, and corn crackers of Virginia.” You can see that some nicknames stuck and, luckily for the Missourian pukes, some did not. It makes sense that groups began forming identities along state/community lines. Though the second clipping from a Wisconsin man, lumps all the ruffians into a single group, warning squatters to vacate his land or he’ll, “grease and gridiron you, and knock you into the middle of next week.” The need to carve out unique identities in the frontier makes sense and I suspect is part of the enduring nature of hoosier. The identity was claimed early on despite negative connotations particularly in some parts of the country. From historian William Piersen in his *Indiana Magazine of History* article, “The Origin of the Word, ‘Hoosier’: A New Interpretation,” “Early usage of the word ‘hoosier’ in the North and West was less derisive than it was in the Southeast. ‘Hoosier’ was considered far more disparaging in the areas of its heaviest use-West Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, and the upper piedmont of Virginia. In fact, in the upper South the term ‘hoosier’ quickly displaced the earlier condescending appellation ‘cracker,’ which survived as a derogatory term of choice for poor whites in the lower South regions of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida” (Piersen 195). In St. Louis, hoosier remains a derogatory slur to this day.

**Refer to Travelogue slide.** An 1841-42 travelogue depicts the traveler’s encounter with an encampment of hoosiers. The traveler indicates that he’s already heard stories of hoosiers and it appears those tales match his own experience. “Having heard the word Hoosier pronounced with respect mingled with fear, in the eastern states, I was happy to fall in with those respectable ogres. . .The gaunt uncouth figures of the hoosiers, as they strode about their wagons, puffing clouds of smoke from pipes, and even cigars, reminded me of the tall cavaliers and muleteers lounging about a Spanish bivouac.” This combination of positive and negative characteristics wrapped into one, “a respectable ogre,” is one of the primary findings of my colleagues’ and I’s research. It’s rarely all good or all bad though we certainly see instances of those lines as well.

**Refer to Nebraska family letters slide.** Recall the map shown earlier demonstrating the move of hoosier westward. These letters from the Uriah Oblinger family moving from Indiana to Nebraska in 1873 give first hand accounts of this trek. As Mattie Oblinger unpacks she uses hoosier to describe a type of butter. We’ll see more examples of hoosier food when we review origin stories. Mattie describes neighbors from Indiana as fellow hoosiers, quote, “I know she will be a clean house keeper and a fine woman and by the way she
was formerly a **hoosier** I tell you us **hoosiers** are a **leettle** partial to each other.” Mattie then speaks of the robustness of her toddler daughter, “Maggie runs evry where she could run evey where when only 9 1/2 months old she is the wildest chap I ever seen she is in all the mischief there is agoing she climbs on to the chairs and on the beds & is in to every thing and only weighs 18 pounds and only eleven months old have you a **hoosier** that can beat that...” Another insight we see here is hoosier being claimed. This is not just a term used to describe another but a point of pride.

*Refer to nun letter slide.* This letter from Sister Blandina to Sister Justina as she travels to Colorado employs hoosier as a fearful descriptor for a cowboy type. It lacks a clear Indiana connection and is instead simply an adjective for rough, unknown, uncouth man. Her opinion changes as the cowboy offers to share his buffalo blanket with her and they go on to have a conversation about her chosen life station and his lack of sending letters home to his mother. By the end of the ride, at the sister’s urging he promises to write to his mother, exclaiming, “I will, so help me God! I was mighty feared to speak to you when I got in, because the mule driver said you was more particular than any lady he ever seen. I allow I am powerful glad I spoke to you.” The hoosier appears to be as fearful of her as she was of him. This encounter would be a good entrée for Sister Blandina’s work in Trinidad as she will become most well-known for providing similar “write to your mother” instruction to Billy the Kid.

*Refer to Hoosier Nest Slide.* Regularly cited as the earliest print appearance of hoosier is a poem by John Finley of Richmond, Indiana, affectionately dedicated to the lot. Published in the *Indianapolis Journal* in 1833, it includes an alternative, likely original spelling and perhaps pronunciation of hoosier as hoosher, **H O O S H E R**. Indeed the earliest print appearances of hoosher appear with this spelling. Hoosier with an **I E R** appears as early as 1933. Both **H E R** and **I E R** spelling are used throughout the 19th century with **I E R** the clear front runner once introduced in print. Notice we also see hoosheroon (or hoosier children) and hoosier bait.

*Refer to Earliest appearance slide.* The earliest published reference I’ve been able to find is from the Richmond Palladium, April 9, 1831, using the **H E R** spelling. Here Old Hoosher writes a letter to the editor scolding politicians for holding up the development of the canal system in Indiana. This small bit of text confirms several assumptions hoosier etymologists make about the word’s development. It references canal culture, there is a politic connectedness, and reflects the notion that Hoosher has been around a while as the individual refers to himself as Old Hoosher.

*Refer to Hoosher slide.*

Another couple of early **H E R** references. This trio of clips to the right details a trip of the African Committee of the Society of Friends to locate a kidnapped boy. The group comes across an aged hoosher and shares fond recollections of travelling in Indiana. The hand script in the margins of this paper suggests an earlier hoosier etymologist.

In this clip a young girl refers to herself as a hoosher. As she shares the value in reading novels in response to an earlier letter to the editor referring to the rotting brains of youth, exclaiming, “If though wilt excuse a little Hoosher girl for her boldness, I will attempt to express a different opinion.”

*Refer to Jo Hoosier slide.*
We see another early political hoosier usage with this satire published in 1833. It demonstrates several usages of hoosier all wrapped up into one. The correspondences is between two fictional characters Jo Hoosier and Major Jack Downing. Major Jack Downing was created by American humorist Seba Smith with Smith being described by Jacksonian historian Mark R. Cheatham (https://jacksonianamerica.com/category/major-jack-downing) as “The Forrest Gump of the Jacksonian Era, whose writings reflected the fears of rural readers that urbanization would destroy the national character.” One certainly sees that reflected in this conversation. The letter’s fictional author Jo Hoosier is lamenting the Bank Wars between President Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle the President of the 2nd Bank of the US where for a time much of the US federal funds were kept. The satire reflects Hoosier as a noun referencing a person from Indiana, hoosier as descriptor of a country bumpkin demonstrating practical intelligence and a willingness to brawl, note the closing line, “You had better keep your eye skinned.” One sees hoosier as a dialectical form, note: “Now if you stop that money, how are the folks in old Connecticut and all them fur off states, to git their money here.” And finally the early appearance of hoosier as a politically astute individual. This is one of earlier appearances of a hoosier as a satirical character. Throughout the remainder of the 1800s newspapers, popular magazines, and anthologies regularly conjure hoosier for both smart and not so smart humor.

ORIGIN THEORIES

The origin stories I share here are by no means an exhaustive list but a few of some I find intriguing or supported by evidence from historic newspapers.

Refer to Who’s There? slide. My fascination with the word hoosier began in grade school hearing the explanation that early settlers yelling “whose there?” upon approaching a cabin in the deep woods. Squatting was a regular phenomenon in the Old West Territories and hoosiers were often equated with squatting. This theory regularly appears as an explanation in historic newspapers. As early as 1833 folks are already beginning to question the word’s origin which also suggests that its actual origin is significantly earlier than the first text appearance in 1831. Published sources such as newspapers, books, literature, and pamphlets likely come well after the word enters the vocabulary of pioneering Americans. Evidence to support this includes a Nile’s Register article from 1833 already pondering hoosier’s origin.

‘Hoosier’-The Hoosier State.- The good citizens of our sister State (Indiana,) have been called Hoosiers for some time past at home and abroad, sometimes honorably and sometimes the reverse-as the term has become general it is high time that its origin and definition should be as generally know[n] before that section of the public lands were regularly surveyed-many families located and were called squatters-the surveyors on finding one of those would ask who's here, and place the name on their map-the question became so familiar, that on the first view of the smoke of a cabin, the exclamation often then ‘who's here’ became equally so until it eventuated in the general term Hoosier.

Most of these origin stories are wrapped up in the characteristics of hoosier both positive and negative. It often depends on who is telling the story.

Refer to Hoosier as Peddler slide. There are several theories that account for Hoosier as a person’s name. This 1893 recollection combines hoosier bait with canalboat culture suggesting Hoosier was a bread peddler that Indiana canal workers could not resist. From the story, “The men from Indiana, however, were his best
patrons, and the novel sight of a large number of them, each munching a roll of Hoosier’ bread, was too much for the humor of the Kentuckians, who applied to them indiscriminately the nickname Hoosiers.” I am less inclined to believe this story as it is wrapped up in many of the jovial fictional characterizations seen through the century. But it’s not the first time we see the connection between hoosier and bread. The 1859 Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms defines Hoosier Cake as a, “Western name for a sort of course gingerbread which, say the Kentuckians, is the best bait to catch a hoosier with, the bi-ped being fond of it.” Hoosier bait is referenced throughout the 19th century and shows up in another origin story similar in character but with a different result for the word’s origin.

Refer to Husher, hoosier bait slide. This theory is represented in Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms in 1848 defining Hoosier as, “A nickname given... to a native of Indiana but also generally to a bully throughout the West able to hush his opponents at log rollings and barn raisings. The boatmen of Indiana were equally rude...and were often in habit of displaying their pugilistic accomplishments upon the Levee at New Orleans” (Bartlett 180).

In this clip is a similar origin story with men from Indiana being teased about their proclivity for a certain bread, here ginger bread. Their rival Kentuckians put the bread on the end of fishing pole, turning it into Hoosier bait only to hushed by the Indianans. From the article, “An Indiana man seeing the ridicule intended, took it up and commenced nibbling and the fisherman commenced drawing in the prize slowly, until he drew him within two or three feet when a tremendous blow between the eyes laid the angler sprawling on the ground.” The second clipping to the right is an advertisement for a confectionary in New Orleans. The bread reaches a level of popularity or at least recognition that the advertiser specifically lists hoosier bread as a selling point. This marketing gimmick, invoking hoosier to sell wares, will become an increasingly popular ploy and I suggest demonstrates the tipping of the scales from hoosier as negative epithet to hoosier as positive moniker.

Refer to Harry Ho(os)ier slide.

Harry Hoosier, born a slave around 1750, became a renowned Methodist preacher, regularly accompanying Francis Asbury, described as the patriarch of American Methodism, on speaking rounds. They travelled throughout the country with Hoosier preaching after Asbury and often filling in for Asbury when he was ill. A description of Harry Hoosier From G. A. Raybold in Reminiscences of Methodism in West Jersey published in 1849, “He possessed a most musical voice, which he could modulate with the skill of a master, and use with the most complete success in the pathetic, terrible, or persuasive parts of a discourse. . . He was never at a loss in preaching, but was very acceptable wherever he went, and few of the white preachers could equal him” (Raybold 166-67). Stephen Webb in his Indiana Magazine of History article, “Introducing Black Harry Hoosier: The History Behind Indiana’s Namesake,” Webb posits that despite Hoosier’s skill and popularity racism forced him to remain outside of leadership roles within the church. He suggests that the early negative connotations of hoosier stem from and I quote, “slang for people who were [deemed] so uneducated that they would follow a black minister.” I am intrigued by this origin story. It has roots much early than most, sits in the oral tradition I spoke of at the start, and because primary sources connected to the theory are few, requires digging. The Harry Hoosier Project, at harryhoosierproject.org is the outlet of a group dedicated to tracing this hoosier origin theory.

Refer to negative epithet slide. From an 1852 collection of satire and musings we see a rare image of two hoosiers about to be married by a hoosier clerk (with what is described as a large spoon, hasty pudding, and
wearing his office attire, flannel pajamas). The exchange is quick with the clerk stating, “Well then you want to be tied!” The husband-to-be responds, “I reckon so.” And it is done.

In this clip from the *Weekly Louisianian* in 1871, “An Indiana cooper showed a peculiarity of Hoosier calculation the other day by putting his little boy inside a cask to hold the head up while he nailed it. After I was done, he found the bunghole was the only means left for his son’s exit.”

*Refer as positive sobriquet slide.*

Surviving and thriving in the backwoods of the frontier required gumption, stick-to-it-iveness, and strength. This existence was also reclusive and by city dweller standards, less refined. Stories that reflect the positive and negative of all these characteristics abound in the newspapers analyzed. In fact many stories at first appear derogatory but upon full reading are actually more praising in nature, describing an uncouth backwoodsman who surprises the writer with strength and hospitality.

Even into the 1890s we see quips that allude to hoosier's bifurcated sentiment. From, "The Educated Hoosier Cockroach," in the *Rock Island Daily Argus* in 1893, we see a combination of insult and praise. The antihero Hoosier Cockroach pitted against the office gentleman, proves his brawn, gumption, and brotherly valor, over lesser roaches and the presumptively educated clerk.

It describes a scene of one roach being flung into that wall by a flip of the clerk’s finger. “Smaller roaches passed by their prostrate brother, evidently without noticing it, but a larger [my insert-hoosier] one came along pretty soon, stopped, went over to the one that lay upon its back, straddled across it and giving it a quick jerk with its forelegs landed it deftly upon its feed, and the two disappeared over the edge of the desk.”

*Refer to Advertising slide.*

Another finding that supports this notion of positive claiming of a term is the proliferation with which advertising begins to include hoosier as a proper noun, a product name. We see examples of farm implements employing Hoosier as a type, for example: Hoosier Corn Drill, Hoosier Wheat Drill, and Hoosier Plow. Hoosier appears consistently in Indiana papers as the beginning of a business or store name, such as Hoosier Grocery. The most prolific and indeed the majority of all references to hoosier in our newspaper study was that of the Hoosier Cabinet, a piece of kitchen furniture hailed as a time saving necessity and manufactured by the Hoosier Manufacturing Company in New Castle, Indiana from late 1890s-1930s. Hoosier Cabinet advertisements make up 31.5% of all hoosier references in Chronicling America. To connect one's livelihood to a product name and brand assumes that the word garnered widespread positive appeal. Alternatively, or additionally, to what extent did the national embrace of popular products like the Hoosier Cabinet further feed the positive sentiment of hoosier?

*Refer to Riley slide.*

One of my favorite origin stories, but likely fully in jest as it comes from James Whitcomb Riley is retold by Indiana historian James Madison in his book *Hoosiers: A New History*, “After a brawl in a pioneer tavern that included eye gouging, hair pulling, and biting, a bystander reached down to the sawdust-covered floor and picked up a mangled piece of flesh, ‘Who’s ear?’ he called out” (Madison ix). Throughout this presentation you’ve seen examples of the curious manner of speaking often attributed to historic hoosiers. To end these hoosier musings I’d like to play a clip of James Whitcomb Riley reading in a hoosier dialect.
My understanding is that these records were discovered in the Central Indianapolis Public Library downtown about 20 years ago.

_Play recording._

_Refer to slide Thank you. Any Questions?_

I hope this brief dive into the origins and usage of hoosier has piqued your interest in using historical newspapers. Chronicling America is freely available online as is an Indiana version, the Hoosier State Chronicles, but approach each with caution. You will lose hours if not days to sifting through its generous offerings be it your own hunt for hoosier or perhaps a peek into the 1895 business of Fortnightly.