

TAKE A Ride Back in Time

By **Nancy Hiller** Photography by **Steve Raymer**

Maple Grove Road

To hike, bike, or drive up North Maple Grove Road is to catch a glimpse into southern Indiana's agricultural past. The narrow road veers northward from West Arlington Road, twisting and turning through a canopy of trees and bordered by dry-stone walls. To the east, visible over the walls' saw-tooth capstones laid by hand more than a century ago, rolling hills extend as far as the horizon. Bales of hay dot valley fields, while cattle graze hillsides studded with limestone outcroppings.

Early morning, summer, Maple Grove Road.



In the misty distance behind purple blooms of ironweed, two old barns and a neighboring silo bear testament to Maple Grove Road's agricultural history.

A dozen houses and farmsteads, along with a school, cemetery, and church, stand witness to a way of life that most of us have never known, but one which several families on Maple Grove Road have shared for generations. Because it so richly exemplifies the area's traditional rural landscape, Maple Grove Road was listed in 1998 on the National Register of Historic Places as Indiana's first Rural Historic District.

For much of its length, Maple Grove Road follows the course of Stout's Creek. This shallow stream, now largely concealed by woods that border the road, was a crucial factor in the area's early 19th-century development. It powered the sawmill that cut the timbers settlers used to build their homes. It also ran a gristmill for grinding the wheat and corn settlers grew on land that they themselves had cleared of forest. The creek

is named after Daniel Stout, one of many ambitious individuals who took advantage of government incentives designed to populate the Northwest Territory in the early 1800s. A miller by trade, Stout was based in Corydon, Indiana's first capital, when he journeyed to the Vincennes Land Office to purchase 160 acres from the U.S. Government in January 1818, just one week after Monroe County's establishment.

Near the banks of the creek that would later bear his name, Stout built a log cabin for short-term shelter. Over the ensuing years he hauled massive limestone blocks out of the shallows and carried them, aided by draft animals, to his homestead. He dressed the stones and stacked them to form the 22-inch-thick walls of a permanent dwelling.



Kitty Burkhart, owner of the Daniel Stout House, stands in front of her home's facade. The house was built entirely by hand using limestone hauled from the banks of the nearby creek that bears Stout's name today.

Dating to 1828, the Daniel Stout House is recognized as Monroe County's oldest standing residence.

Frank Bauer and his late wife, Beverly, bought the stately Ben Owens Farmstead in 1984. The brick house was built in 1864. The property is now owned by Bauer's daughter and son-in-law, Mary and David Ray.

A flag waves in the sun outside a small clapboard house probably built for hired hands at the Ben Owens Farmstead.



Monroe County's oldest house

Today the Daniel Stout house, which was completed in 1828, is recognized as the oldest standing residence in Monroe County. Its owner, Kitty Burkhart, has been integral to the house's story for more than 60 years. Burkhart's parents, Carol and Hubert Brown, purchased the property in 1942. For Carol, it was love at first sight—in fact, so passionately was her mother smitten that Burkhart recalls exchanging anxious, puzzled looks with her dad.

In retrospect, of course, Burkhart understands. The country was at war. "Everybody was uprooted," she explains. "No one was where they were supposed to be." The old stone house, which had survived the Civil War, World War I, the stock market crash, and countless other storms, both figurative and literal, was the perfect antidote to the upheaval of the times.

Burkhart's parents lovingly restored the house and had it listed on the National Register in 1972. Upon her mother's death in the 1980s, Burkhart inherited the property, whose history she stewards with as much care as she devotes to the house itself.

Up the road from the Daniel Stout House stands the Ben Owens Farmstead, one of the most intact Civil War-era farms in this corner of south-central Indiana. The brick Georgian home shares its setting with several other structures typical of the county's early farms—a summer kitchen built of hand-hewn logs, a small clapboard cottage that was probably used to house farmhands, a slate-roofed storage "crib," and a massive timber-frame barn constructed around 1900.

Ben Owens inherited the property from his father, who had purchased it at Vincennes in September 1816, two months before Indiana became a state. Owens built the brick house in 1864 and lived there until 1917, when the farm was transferred, for the first time in 99 years, to owners beyond his family. The property subsequently changed hands several times until it was bought in 1984 by Frank and Beverly Bauer, whose family has been its second-longest owner.

Bauer and his late wife first visited the farmstead in 1976, during a Bicentennial-inspired tour of historic county houses. Both had grown up in rural locations and were struck by the privacy of the place, in addition to its history. Eight years later they made it their home. The property is now owned by their daughter and son-in-law, Mary and David Ray.



Late summer is one of the most beautiful times of year to visit Maple Grove Road.

Stone walls built by itinerant Irish masons in the late 1800s still line many stretches along the road.



Sharon McKeen has preserved the original circa-1840 house on her property, the Old Fyffe Farm, and is in the process of restoring it.



The Maple Grove Christian Church, home to this cemetery, has been a center of community culture for over a hundred years. The current church dates to 1876, but evidence suggests that the cemetery was in use before the Civil War.

Love at first sight

Like the Bauers and the Browns, Sharon McKeen, another Maple Grove resident, was enchanted by the magic of the area on her first visit. Her family had been living on Bloomington's north side, but McKeen missed the pastoral and small-town settings of her youth. One day in the mid-1980s she spotted a classified ad for a farm west of town and decided to view it, a trip she recalls with emotion. "That first drive down North Maple Grove Road, you see Kitty Burkhardt's stone house, and the big Civil War-era house, and all the limestone walls...and I just fell in love! I couldn't get it out of my mind."

Studying her property's abstract after she and her husband had bought their farm, McKeen was intrigued by family names that recurred throughout the history of the Maple Grove Road community. She now recognizes this phenomenon as typical of pre-20th-century rural settlements. Before cars, telephones, e-mail, and the many other tools of contemporary life that enable us to relocate with relative ease, pulling up stakes was a daunting task. In order to move, you had to know where you were going and have a plan to secure your family on arrival, and you had to travel at least part of the way by horse and wagon, if not on foot. Why relocate, if you were part of a family homestead that provided food, shelter, and a close-knit community of neighbors who could depend on each other? This, after all, was precisely the dream pursued by the generation that first settled Maple Grove Road.



The beauty of Maple Grove Road's sunsets may prompt us to wonder how much longer we will be able to enjoy such traditional farmland views. The district continues to be included among Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana's "Top Ten Most Endangered" places.

Mist hangs in wooded hills beyond a soybean field at dawn.



For further information, see co.monroe.in.us/planning/hp.html.

A famous resident

The rhythms and the spirit and of this community were celebrated by the road's best-known resident, author Rachel Peden. Her stories about farming life appeared weekly, beginning in the 1940s, in *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Muncie Evening Press*, and she authored three books, *Speak to the Earth: Pages from a Farmwife's Journal*; *The Land, the People*; and *Rural Free: A Farmwife's Almanac of Country Living*, all published by Knopf.

Peden expressed a wistful awareness that the culture she immortalized in stories about threshing grain, filling silos, and sharing feasts prepared by neighbors from their own farms' bounty was gradually disappearing. In a Bloomington *Herald-Telephone* column published in 1966, for example, she lamented the loss of fertile land to shopping centers and other forms of modern development.

Today, despite contemporary encroachments, Maple Grove Road still retains much of the cultural and topographical landscape that Peden loved. Numerous vantage points afford traditional rural views without a single modern building. Peden understood the human need for such vistas, which enable us to immerse ourselves in nature's beauty and to fathom our own place in it. She urged us to appreciate the marks of traditional agriculture not as detractions from this splendor, but as reminders of our interdependence with it. To cultivate the land responsibly, she believed, is to honor the blessing of our existence. ✨

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