

Charles Dickens

By Myron B. Barnes
Bicentennial Commission

The Tiffin Gazette, on Thursday, April 28, 1842, carried this news story. "BOZ". Our town was last Saturday, honored by the presence of Charles Dickens, the popular and distinguished English author. He was accompanied by his lady, and a couple of friends. They took the cars for Sandusky City, and were on their way, as we understood, to Niagara Falls.

"A number of our good citizens missed seeing the "lion" by taking the wrong individual for BOZ. There being two gentlemen in the company, many went away satisfied with having seen the one they supposed to be Dickens, but who, it was afterwards ascertained, was a Mr. Somebody else."

It had all begun on January 3, 1842, when Dickens set sail for Boston on a steam packet with 86 passengers. He recorded his impressions of this trip and they were published as the "American Notes" shortly after his return to England. In these, we read of his impressions of Boston, of Lowell and its factories, of Worcester, Hartford, New Haven, and then, New York, which he found "not as clean" as Boston. He went on down the east coast to Washington by steamboat, but he was unimpressed with Washington, which was dirtied by "tabacco tinctured saliva" as a result of the odious habit of chewing tabacco, even in court rooms and the halls of Congress. He saw Richmond, Baltimore, Harrisburg, and then on to Pittsburg by canal boat, and took a Western steam boat to Louisville and St. Louis. After seeing the prairie, he returned to Cincinnati by boat, where he began his stage coach trip to Tiffin, where he would be able to ride the Mad River R.R. to Sandusky.

En route, he made frequent changes of stage coach, but he found all the coachmen alike. They were always dirty, sullen, and not inclined to talk, even if Dickens rode beside one of them on the box. "The driver always chews and spits, and never uses a handkerchief. The consequences to the passenger on the box, especially when the wind blows toward him, are not agreeable." At Columbus, he was pleased to find a very large, but unfurnished hotel, called the Neill House, with rooms like in some Italian mansion. He found the town "clean and pretty".

At Columbus, he had to hire "an extra" stage coach to carry his party to Tiffin. They also carried a hamper full of savory cold meats and fruit and wine. The road was a mire of mud, through bogs and swamps. Much of the road was a corduroy, made by throwing trunks of trees into the marsh land, and leaving them to settle. Never was the coach in a position or kind of motion that one expected to find in coaches. Wheels would strike against stumps, and they proceeded at a walking pace.

They had left Columbus at 6:30 a.m., but it was almost eleven o'clock at night when they arrived at Upper Sandusky. They entered the log inn and sat in a sort of kitchen, where the walls were covered with old newspapers. He and Mrs. Dickens were shown to their bedroom, a large, low, ghostly room with a stack of whitered brush on the

hearth, and two doors without any fastenings, both opening on the black night and the wild country. To keep these doors from blowing open, they piled their luggage against them. His Boston friend was to sleep in a loft where someone else was already snoring, but instead, he fled to the coach. In his haste, he frightened the pigs which grunted around the coach all night. This friend was afraid to leave the coach and lay there shivering throughout the night. In the morning, he asked for a glass of whiskey to warm him up, but the Ohio Legislature forbade the sale of spirits by tavern keepers in Indian villages.

Dickens met some of these Wyandot Indians. They were riding on shaggy ponies. They reminded him very much of the meaner sort of gypsies that he was accustomed to see in England. They again set out for Tiffin over a rather worse road, if possible, than the one of the previous day. Because the next part of the adventure represents Tiffin in world literature, I shall quote Mr. Dickens word for word, "Arrived in Tiffin about noon where we parted with the extra stage. At two o'clock we took the railroad. The traveling on this was very slow, its construction being indifferent and the ground wet and marshy. We arrived at Sandusky in time to dine that evening". Joseph B. Higbee of Bellevue was the conductor of the train. A message had been sent to Mr. Higbee to get ready, a special car for San-



Charles Dickens' sofa now c

ns Visits Tiffin

dusky. When asked who the car was for, the messenger said he did not know, but they called him BOZ. Conductor Higbee described Dickens as a pleasant appearing, roast beef eating Englishman. This higbee was of the family which soon after, established the Hower and Higbee store in Cleveland, later to be known as the Higbee Co. BOZ had been one of Mr. Dicken's earlier pen names.

We do have a more detailed account of this famous visit, preserved by oral history. One of the hotel or tavern owners in Tiffin in 1842, was Richard Sneath, whose hotel stood across from the court house, adjacent north to where Comstocks Jewelry Store is located on the corner of Market. One of his sons was Samuel B. Sneath, who was 14 years old at the time of the Dickens visit. S.B. Sneath died in 1915, but he had told his son, Ralph Davis, (1863-1940) Sneath, the story of the Dicken's reception in Tiffin. The old Cincinnati Post, on May 7, 1940, published a full page article on Ralph Sneath's account of the visit. This article seems to solve once and for all, which hotel or tavern, Dickens stopped at for his noon meal. Local histories all contradicted each other in naming the hotel. In fact, the D.A.R. History, names two different hotels in its pages. Some locate the Sneath Hotel on Market St., which is in error, for that was the Davis House. Some locate it at the corner where the Tri-County Bank stands. The one account in the D.A.R. is positive that

the hotel was Calvin Bradley's Western Exchange, where the old Post Office building stands.

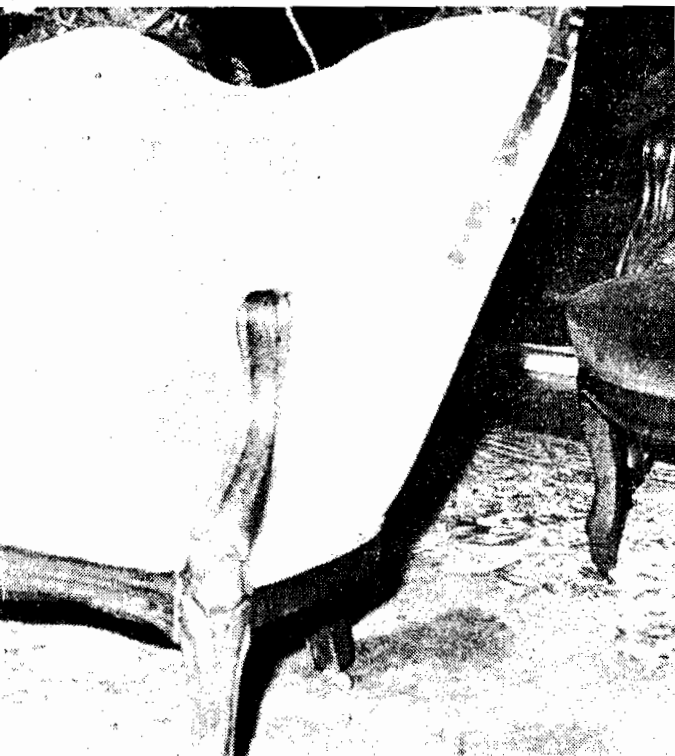
But I had always been told by ancient residents of Tiffin, that Dickens stayed at the Holt House. This is of 1940, pictured in the Cincinnati Post's article and at that time, it was owned by the Gaieto family. It was demolished when Adams Street was closed at Sandusky for the new Kennedy Bridge.

Samuel B. Sneath, as a boy of 14, remembered that the Holt House, a rival hotel of the Sneath Hotel, had been the place where Dickens stopped briefly. Mr. Sneath recalled that Landlord Holt sent one of his staff about town to spread the news. Landlord Holt himself, was to drive the Dickens party to the Mad River Station. They were all piled, bag and baggage, in a spring wagon to carry them the two or three blocks to the station. But, Mr. Dickens secretary records, that Mr. Holt drove them all about town, cracking his long whip. Crowds stood on every corner and in every front doorway, and peered from every window. As the quoted news item from the Tiffin Gazette indicates, "A number of our good citizens missed seeing the lion, by taking the wrong individual for BOZ." But in spite of all the excitement, the Gazette did not make a feature article of the visit. After all, it wasn't news - everybody not only knew it, but had seen the distinguished visitors.

The Holt House was a large two story brick at the S.E. corner of Adams and Sandusky. It had eight openings on Sandusky St., and six on Adams. A wrought iron balcony ran along the second floor of the Sandusky St. front. In the rear, the building formed a "U" shape with a recessed veranda on the second floor. It had been a stage stop on the old Harrison Trail, on the Columbus, Tiffin, Lower Sandusky, (Fremont) and Sandusky stage line. In it's day, it was an elegant establishment, larger than any on Washington Street.

In my early youth, the Holt House still rented sleeping rooms. However, at the time the property was sold to the Gaieto's, what remained of the furnishings were sold. I believe this was about 1915, and I remember accompanying my mother to the sale. I believe the only thing she bought was a walnut love seat, with deeply carved roses at the top of the back. It was in a dilapidated condition. I was sent home for my coaster wagon, and had to then pull this awful piece of junk home. I wanted to go through the alleys, but my mother insisted on walking proudly down Miami St. This was a distressing experience, for I was certain that every lady on Miami St. was watching us. I wouldn't look, for I kept my eyes to the ground. But Mrs. Barnes had her Dicken's sofa elegantly restored and placed in the south parlor.

We restored the house, we sent the sofa to the best upholsterer in Cleveland to be recovered and tufted in gold velvet. Perhaps you can understand why I am happy to say that Dickens did stay at the Holt House. After all, I would not want my disgraceful part in this story to be questionable. I have always been certain of the Holt House. It was the only hotel on the regular stage route following the old Harrison Trail.



owned by Myron Barnes.