

Project Category

NSBF Byway Organization Innovation Award

Project Name

Buffalo Trace Boxes

Byway Name

Indiana Historic Pathways; Established on October 16, 2009; Byway Length: 250.2 miles. The Buffalo Trace is only a portion of the byway which combines 3 historic pathways: the Buffalo Trace, US 150, and US 50. Part of the route of US 150 follows the Buffalo Trace.

Overview

The project would fit into either category 3 or 1. A team of byway volunteers worked with a grant from Indiana Humanities to develop educational boxes on the Buffalo Trace. The Buffalo Trace is an historic pathway developed by migrating bison who moved from the prairies of Illinois each fall across Indiana southeast to the savannahs of Kentucky and Tennessee where they wintered in warmer climates. In spring they came back across the Ohio River at the Falls of the Ohio, crossing the Buffalo Trace again, and back to spread out on the plains of Illinois. Over hundreds of years the entrenched traces (though generally one path, as is true of today's cow paths, the bison created multiple traces as obstacles formed) were used by Native Americans, and later by pioneers moving west. It was used by military troops moving west to protect the frontier and was the first western mail route. The trace was patrolled by the Indiana Rangers to keep travelers safe, and taverns and forts sprang up along its route which was later used as a stagecoach route. Each of these stories have a classroom activity or lesson plan designed for fourth graders and written to Indiana school standards in the box. Each activity has one or more interactive items children can hold in their hands to help them better relate to those stories.

The Buffalo Trace crosses eight counties across southern Indiana. Every public elementary school with a fourth-grade class in those eight counties received a buffalo trace educational box with activities and interactive items. In each county, a box was also placed in a public place (a library or museum) which could be borrowed by home schools, parochial schools, or camps to use the activities.

In addition, the committee of volunteers has held two workshops for teachers about the Buffalo Trace boxes to give them additional ideas on how to use the boxes in their classrooms and more in-depth background on aspects of the Buffalo Trace. Both were well attended. At each workshop we added two more activities and hands-on materials. The additional activities and supplies were then distributed to the other schools along the byway.

Intrinsic Qualities

During the Indiana Bicentennial, our then Governor's First Lady Karen Pence spoke about our Buffalo Trace boxes as an example of a legacy project that would have impacts far beyond the bicentennial year. We believe she was right. They are continuing to inspire. For the second wave of activities we included a life size stand-up cardboard bison for each of the counties that the schools could borrow. We thought the schools could borrow the bison during their Buffalo Trace school activities. The bison were popular items and many of the libraries and museums left them out with a sign saying the boxes were available to be loaned out to home-schools and camps which further increase the visibility of our program. The picture here shows the bison with part of the committee that developed the boxes.

Partners

Indiana Humanities gave us a generous grant to produce the boxes and has helped fund both workshops. They have been our most generous supporters, but we've had many groups and individuals donate countless hours and products to the effort. Not only did David Ruckman, a professional surveyor, survey most of the original Buffalo Trace to create maps, but he and his friends created an educational video where they dressed in period costume and reenacted the 1806 original survey of the Buffalo Trace. The original survey was done at the time when a treaty was being drawn up between the settlers and the Native Americans because the settlers wanted the Buffalo Trace route because of its importance as a travel route so they had the route surveyed. After the original survey, the treaty line gave the Native Americans only the land well north of the Buffalo Trace. David Ruckman donated copies of this educational video to be included in all the school boxes.

<https://buffalotrace.indianahistoricpathways.org/index.php/education/reenactment-video-of-early-surveyors-1806/>

Charles Moman, a musician who makes his living writing musicals for schools to produce, was asked if he could write a song about the Buffalo Trace from the perspective of a child who had to leave a city in the east and go across the Buffalo Trace to the unknown. He agreed to do it for free and donated copies of the song to the Buffalo Trace boxes. He also spoke at our next workshop and performed the song for the attending teachers. Here's his song:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ks0b39hmjojv9f8/AADQdcLPHNNt6o4fJ78BAxiCa?dl=0&preview=Buffalo+Trace+Demo.mp3>

We had volunteers do everything from collecting bison dung, drying it out and double bagging it in Ziplock bags so kids could see and hold REAL bison poop, to those who tied rope "chains" to replicate the steel chains that surveyors used for the activity on surveying the trace. There were hours of labor that was donated as well as skills. We had reenactors from George Rogers National Historic Park make our musket balls.

In the workshops which have followed, our speakers volunteered their time and gave inspiring and fascinating programs, and then we had volunteers deliver the activities and items out across eight counties to the rural schools to keep the boxes fresh and different for the teachers.

Byway Best Practice

The material in the boxes get children enthused and excited about history and about the byway. We hope they get inspired about bison and the history that is connected to their area. We also hope they will relate it to the road signs and realize that byways commemorate important and fascinating pieces of our history. They may take their interest home and tell their families and point out the signs (the Indiana Historic Pathway logo is on all the box materials). Then hopefully, when they travel, they may notice other byway signs and question what these byways may offer that would be equally interesting if they pulled over at a byway kiosk to read more, or googled the byway on their phones. Inspiring an interest in knowing more is what interpretation and education is all about and we hope that our boxes will inspire children to learn more about not only bison and the Buffalo Trace, but about history and scenic byways and transportation routes across the country. Other byways could find their niche and do the same.

Keys to Success

The project had a team that believed in what we were doing. We had the right people doing the right jobs. We had an incredibly creative fourth grade teacher who loved history who wrote our activities. We had people willing to write grants and who had ties with federal, state, academia, and every level of organizations to garner partnerships. A research scientist in Indiana University's Department of Anthropology has worked with us on our committee. The team worked hard and we continue to see the rewards of those efforts when we see other people become equally passionate about the Buffalo Trace story.

Additional Information

Contact Information

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Project Year(s):

The Buffalo Trace boxes were developed as an Indiana Bicentennial Legacy Project and were rolled out in 2016. We later developed 2 more activities in 2017 and an additional 2 activities in 2019 to keep the boxes fresh and ever changing for the teachers.

Website

[Indiana's Historic Pathways \(indianahistoricpathways.org\)](http://indianahistoricpathways.org)

Photographs

