

**Program:** On the Road Again

**Speaker:** J. David Cook, President, Farm Heritage Trail, Inc.

**Introduced by:** Rick Whitener

**Attendance:** 67

**Scribe:** John Peer

**Editor:** Carl Warner

The Zoom recording of today's presentation can be found on the Scientech Club's website at:

[www.scientechclub.org/zoom/468.mp4](http://www.scientechclub.org/zoom/468.mp4)

Today's presenter was Dave Cook, an attorney who practiced in Thorntown, Indiana and retired in 2010. As a dedicated Indy Mini Marathon runner, he is registered to run his 43<sup>rd</sup> Mini in 2021. He was a promoter and creator of the Farm Heritage Trail from Lebanon to Thorntown. The theme of his talk was to be aware of your surroundings as they will often lead to new discoveries.

Engineers keep inventing new ways to keep us moving.

Working in Thorntown, a client suggested the unused Conrail railroad right-of-way be converted into a recreational trail. The client's other motivation was that a local slumlord was proposing to locate mobile homes in the right of way right next to downtown Thorntown. The rails had been removed in the 1980's. After some research, it was discovered that the national "Rails to Trails" program, funded by a fraction of the Federal gasoline tax, was not being used by Indiana (to the financial benefit of our neighboring states). A non-profit was founded and sought funding from the "Recreational Trails Program" (related to Rails to Trails). With a \$1 million grant, the non-profit was able to build the ten mile Heritage Farm Trail from Lebanon to Thorntown which will be extended to Colfax next year. (By comparison, in developed Carmel it costs \$1 million for one mile.)

From a historical perspective, the railroad was established in the 1840's and 50's running from Zionsville to Colfax. Abraham Lincoln traveled on it from Springfield, Illinois to Washington, DC in 1860, and his funeral train returned on the same route. David noted that the line ran at the rear of the property of this boyhood Thorntown home. The trailhead starts behind the Menards in Lebanon. It is about 2/3's paved and 1/3 the original compressed slag (similar to a country road).

Whitestown was named for the Honorable Albert S. White of Lafayette (1803-1864). He was a US Senator and Federal Judge before getting into building canals and railroads. White was the first President of the Lafayette and Indianapolis RR which later became part of the NYC and then Conrail.

Rufus Alan Lockwood (1811-1857), White's partner, was the first attorney in Thorntown in 1830. In the 1840's, he moved to California and became a prominent lawyer in gold mining properties winning the Mariposa Gold Mine case. He is tied into this next episode of discovery.

The book "Ship of Gold" is about the SS Central America and its untimely sinking. In the 1850's, ships loaded with US Mail and gold from California left biweekly from San Francisco to Panama. There the cargo was transported by mule and train to the East coast and reloaded for the two week voyage to New York City. The SS Central America was a 278 foot double side-paddle steamship with three masts. It carried 500 passengers, 100 crew and plenty of gold. The trip to Havana was routine as were the first two days on toward New York, but then they were trapped by the "hurricane of the century" on Sept 9. Two of the three masts broke immediately as they fought 90 foot swells. They initially tried a bucket brigade, but abandoned that when bailing became hopeless. 130 women and

children were evacuated on lifeboats, but over 400 men went down with the ship about 200 miles east of Charleston, South Carolina, in 8000 feet of water.

130 years later Tommy Thompson, an engineer from Defiance, Ohio, made it his mission to recover the gold. Previously recovered gold from sunken ships were all in shallow coastal waters, but nothing from the deep ocean. Thompson had connections at the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio. He raised \$12 million from investors and set upon designing equipment for the challenge. They had to search 1400 square miles, but eventually did find the wreckage on Sept 11, 1988. Only the steel and the gold remained. They recovered two tons of gold coins, gold bars, ingots, and gold dust worth \$76 million. The treasure was pictured in a coffee table book "America's Lost Treasure" in 1998. There on page 41 was a picture of Rufus Lockwood and his family as being on the fateful ship. The family survived but Rufus was lost at sea. Discovery: how curious that the renowned California lawyer was on this fateful ship.

Unfortunately for the investors, Thompson's memory seemed to have lapsed. He dodged paying them off, went off the grid, and was eventually found living like a bum in a mansion in Vero Beach, Florida where he paid the \$3000 monthly rent in moldy \$100 bills. When he was found, he had 25 burner cell phones (burner: disposable phone as not to be traced) and \$500K in cash. He is now serving time in Midland, Michigan for contempt of court for not revealing where the \$76M was hidden.

In 2014, a second search of the wreckage by some of the original participants recovered another \$50M in gold which was eventually used to pay off the original investors.

To come full circle, Victor Vescovo, an equity investor, wanted to be the first to travel to the deepest trenches in the oceans, the most famous being the Mariana Trench and the Java Trench. He commissioned a titanium submarine to be built that could withstand the pressures at 35000 feet, seven times the depth of the SS Central America wreckage. He commissioned Trident Subs to build it. They, coincidentally, are based in Vero Beach, Florida as was Thompson's hiding place...

Final discovery: A stained glass window in Saint Mary's Cathedral in Lafayette, Indiana, bears the inscription "Rufus A. Lockwood 1811 -- 1857". Curiously, this church was built in 1866, 9 years after Rufus died at sea....

Who would have thought there were so many "discoveries" related to Thorntown, Indiana? Thanks to Dave Cook for a very entertaining talk.



**David Cook**