

# Benjamin J. Gifford, capitalist, land baron and 'swamp king'

*"In America there was more land than anyone could measure or comprehend. It was like man's ancient dream of picking up money in the streets. It was money, as good as money, better than money. It was money at interest because every year it increased in value, often by very substantial increments, and one could, almost literally, pick it up. . . . So from the beginning land was money."*

—Page Smith, *The Shaping of America*



UP 'TIL NOW

VIC JOHNSON

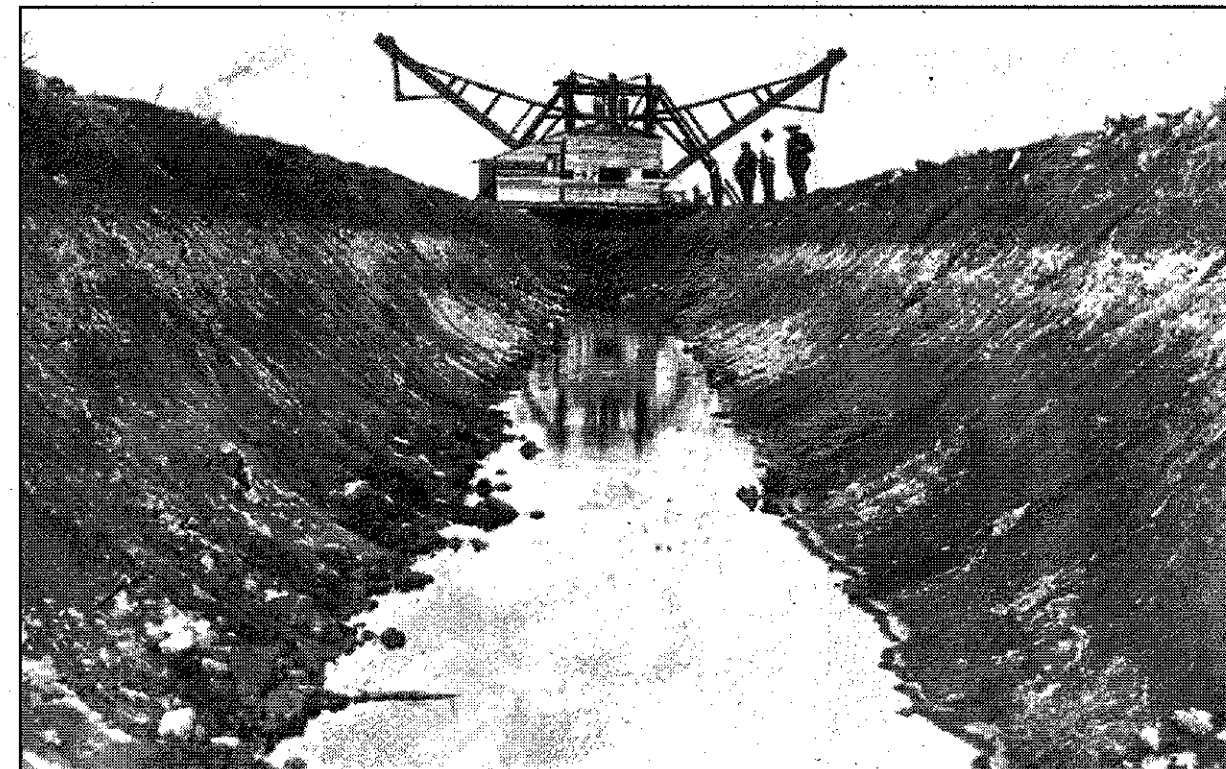
You won't find his name numbered among the Gilded Age aristocracy of the Rockefellers, Morgans, Vanderbilts or Astors, yet he built two railroads, owned the Cleveland and Marietta Railroad, dug over 100 miles of drainage canals and ditches, developed tens of thousands of acres of farmland in Illinois and Indiana, and imported about 1,000 tenant farmers to tend it, and sunk eight oil wells that yielded fifty barrels a day. In the 1890s his office was in Kankakee's Arcade building, where his shingle read Law and Real Estate.

Benjamin J. Gifford much like many other entrepreneurs of his day practiced "private capitalism," wherein he used his money to develop land and natural resources to further his own wealth.

"It may be of interest to the people of Kankakee to read what esteem our well known fellow businessman Mr. Gifford is held in other places, said a July 1895 article in *The Kankakee Daily Times*.

"Benjamin J. Gifford may die one of these days but Jasper county [Indiana] will long bless his memory, says

the Delphi, Indiana, *Journal*. Less than four years ago Gifford, who lives in Kankakee, Illinois, dropped down into Jasper county and bought in the neighborhood of 23,000 acres of swamp land in that county. [Gifford eventually owned 32,000 acres in Jasper County and 1,000 acres in Lake County.] He proceeded at once to make the land valuable. He set two steam dredges to work, erected two saw mills and employed a small army of laborers in one way or another. The result was that the land which three or four years ago was useless, some of it deep under water, has become valuable and almost every acre of it is tillable. Much of this land, which the average citizen considered worthless, last year yielded from forty to eighty bushels of corn to the acre. Having drained it Mr. Gifford cut it up into small farms and last year commenced to erect houses and barns. Sixty-five houses and as many barns went up, each house equipped with a windpump and all other modern conveniences and into these sixty-five houses went sixty-five families last spring. The majority of these families came from Illi-



Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society

**STEAM-POWERED DITCHING** machine used to open "swampland" and the marshes of Indiana for farming. The ditching machine moved across the land on a wooden track seen in right foreground.

nois and many of them will purchase the land upon which they moved, for it is Mr. Gifford's policy to sell rather than hold after having brought this land into the market. On this land that has been reclaimed four school houses have gone up and several churches have been built.

"Mr. Gifford made a fortune out of the investment and he deserved to make a fortune. He has done a service to Jasper county and the State of Indiana that no other man would have done. . . .

"Champaign and Ford counties in this state can say the same thing of Mr., Gifford. He had reclaimed 11,000 acres in these counties before he visited Jasper county, Indiana. He has since sold \$400,000 worth of these lands and has about as much left yet on the market for sale. While Cham-

paign, McLean and Vermilion counties in Illinois, together with Warren county in Indiana, can pass to his credit a railroad which they can now enjoy and which was proposed and built by him."

Benjamin J. Gifford's parents arrived in Kendall County by covered wagon in 1838. Two years later, on April 5, Cornelia Gifford gave birth a sixth child, Benjamin.

As a young man of 17 Ben taught school and attended summer classes. At the age of 21 he organized a company of volunteers at Yorkville, Illinois. Gifford's company served throughout the Civil War under General Ulysses S. Grant. Gifford suffered several wounds and carried a Confederate ball near his spine for the rest of his life. When Gifford had time

he read law books.

"After the war," says a Jasper County history, "he married Etta Martindale, practiced law, developed large tracts of land in Champaign and Ford Counties, Illinois, and built the Havana, Rantoul and Eastern Railroad running some 75 miles from Leroy, Illinois, to W. Lebanon, Indiana."

An act passed by Congress in September 1850 allowed states to reclaim their swamp and overflow lands. The federal government then ceded these public lands to the states. Illinois granted each county title to those wetlands within their boundaries. Each county then appointed a drainage commissioner to dispose of that property. Between 1854 and the 1880s some 40,000 acres in Kankakee County were

sold at prices ranging from \$1.25 to \$3.50 per acre. During the years after the Civil War, Gifford acquired land in Champaign and Ford counties at similar prices.

An October 1894 *Kankakee Times* article described Gifford's swampland improvements.

"Mr. B. J. Gifford, of this city, is a pioneer in the drainage of large sections of slough or swamp lands, while others doubted the ultimate result, he held fast to his opinion which he has proved to be correct. Some twenty years ago he purchased at what may be considered a very low price, several thousand acres of wetland in north Champaign county, his headquarters at that time being in Rantoul. He went at the draining of these lands systematically and invented a ditching machine drawn by oxen that worked very successfully. The ditches made were small affairs compared with those dug in later years, but the benefit was soon apparent, and thousands of acres of these hitherto worthless lands were brought under the plow and made to produce abundant crops.

"Later a drainage district was organized, neighboring farms were taken in and the ditches greatly enlarged, so that what was once an unproductive portion of the country, growing nothing but bullfrogs and malaria, is now one of the most valuable sections of the state. . . .

"His Champaign land he has been gradually disposing of and was in a fair way to close it all out when the "democratic times" came on and put an end to further sales. Now the demand for farms has begun and within the past few weeks he has disposed of about \$100,000 worth of Champaign county farms, and has applications for what is left. Prices have advanced ten to fifteen per cent, yet the buyers are waiting in line. . . . There is no reason why, in Champaign county farms should not sell at from \$90 to \$100 per acre, according to the improvements and surroundings."

Next time: Gifford turns Indiana's Pinkamink Marsh into an onion field.