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First Cross-State Wagon Road Connected Green Bay, Portage and Prairie du Chien

'Military Road' Linking Forts Howard, Winnebago, Crawford, Built in 1835; 'Plank' Roads Popular at Milwaukee in 'Forties and Fifties'

[Editor's note: This is the third of a series of articles regarding the history of Wisconsin's cities and highways before the advent of telephonic communication.]

By Miss A. M. Warren

In traveling about Wisconsin today, the motorist is impressed with the multitude of hard surfaced, well-kept highways that not only comprise the main arteries across the state, but take the tourist into every scenic corner of this favorite vacation land. Its road map is a veritable mass of black lines indicating serene passage for the motorist wherever he may want to go.

But while we drive about, enjoying these splendid roads of today, why not turn back a few pages and glimpse the highways of yesterday? Back to the days of plank roads, of a famous "Military Road," — back to the days of Indian trails and buffalo

paths. Old Settlers, wherever you go in the Middlewest and Northwest, it seems, like to tell you that "that there road used to be nothing but an Indian trail, with only room enough for one pony at a time." And then, if given opportunity, they will enlarge on it and say that before the Indian used it, the buffalo had pounded it down and made it smooth. This belief is usually substantiated, too, because so often these trails are in key positions to nearby watergrounds. Many roads in Wisconsin, now well-known paved highways, originated just as the Old Settlers tell you, — starting out as a buffalo path, then an Indian trail, only to be improved upon by the white settlers and made into wagon roads.

The Military Road

Wisconsin's first wagon road, which it is said follows an old

2
Indian trail, was built by the Federal Government and called the military road. About 1830 settlers began entering the lead region of Wisconsin and were constantly threatened by unfriendly Indians. For their protection, it was deemed advisable to build a road which would connect Wisconsin's three forts, namely, Fort Howard at Green Bay, Fort Winnebago at Portage, and Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien.

It is to be remembered that at this time the two chief settlements of Wisconsin were Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, and the only communication between them was along the then unpleasant Fox-Wisconsin river route, some four hundred miles long. The \$2,000 appropriation made by Congress made possible the much needed road, thus eliminating the tortuous river trip.

The road was surveyed to run up the south side of the Fox River and around the eastern border of Lake Winnebago. Then it cut across the prairies to go on to the Blue Mounds in Dane County, then along the watershed, later known as Military Ridge, to Prairie du Chien.

The regular army soldiers started the actual building of the road in 1835, going out in squads and working a week at a time. They chopped a way about two rods wide through the timber, often leaving the stumps in the middle of the road. Across the prairies the route was merely marked by wooden stakes, while in thin timber it was indicated by blazes on the trees. Marshes were corduroyed and later ferries were established at the crossings of rivers.

Crude as this road was, historians prove that it was of great importance in the development of Wisconsin. Shortening the distance between Green Bay and Prairie du Chien as it did, it was of real advantage to

both civilians and soldiers who made their home in Wisconsin in those far off days. Some parts of this road are still in use, although, of course, they have been widened and paved.

To Green Bay

About this time, the Milwaukee-Green Bay Road came into being. As early as 1825 there was a mail route between Chicago and Green Bay via Milwaukee, although the only white resident at Milwaukee was Solomon Juneau. The mail carrier, accompanied by an Indian, really blazed the first connecting trail between Chicago and Green Bay and it was over this route that the Milwaukee-Green Bay Road was laid out. Surveyed in 1833, stakes were driven and trees blazed all along the line between the two Wisconsin settlements. Over the unfordable creeks and streams, rough puncheon and log bridges were built and trees were cut at a width of two rods through the heavy timber. This road never saw a modern implement such as the grader until many years later, and remained for some time merely a blazed trail. In dry weather, it afforded good travel, but during the rainy seasons the travelers floundered in the deep mud.

There were several trails about Wisconsin at this time. A well-known one, part of which became the famous Old Chicago Road running between Milwaukee and Chicago, followed the west bank of the Des Plaines River and the west bank of the south fork of the Root River, passing through the towns of Pleasant Prairie, Bristol, and Paris in Kenosha County, and the towns of Yorkville and Raymond in Racine County, then continuing on to Milwaukee. It is yet distinct in many places, especially near the town of Raymond. Another trail much used followed the Fox River through the towns of Burlington, Rochester, and Waterford, leading to

3
manhood and feminine beauty, goes rolling along, the noisy tread of its wheels as they pass the turf of the prairie forming a strange contrast with the hideous whoop of the Indian warrior." ing the city buck or the country lover with their fair damsels. . . Like a restless river it was, — pork, beauty, potatoes, love, romance."

Plank Roads

More roads came into existence after the Territorial Assembly of 1845 appointed a commission to survey them. They included roads from Milwaukee to Fort Winnebago via the county seat of Dodge County; from Milwaukee to Fox Lake, crossing Rock River near the outlet of Winnebago Marsh; from Spring Street in Milwaukee to intersect the road leading from Milwaukee to Mukwonago; from Third Street in Milwaukee until it meets the U. S. road to Green Bay.

An Early Day Scene

Just as highways today bring in crowds of persons from other cities and neighboring towns, so too, in Wisconsin's early day, these roads of the pioneers, regardless of their crudities and oftentimes untraversable condition, brought folks in from the country and far removed points. We find an early day editor, growing eloquent over the sight of "a great deal" of traffic on Milwaukee's main street, in a copy of the *Sentinel* of January 20, 1845. The fact that there were over 200 sleighs seemed to greatly impress this Horace Greeley. He wrote:

"Saturday was an animated day in Milwaukee. The excellent sleighing induced thousands from the country to visit the city on business and pleasure, and our streets were crowded with a dense multitude in sleighs, on horseback and afoot. We stood in Water Street in the vicinity of our office and counted to the number of 265 sleighs and then gave up. We saw teams go by, with loads of wood, hay, pork, and potatoes. Then we saw magnificent sleighs carry-

3
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About this time, highway improvement became the order of the day and there was great interest taken in planked roads. The first of these was the Milwaukee, West Bend, and Fond du Lac plank road built in 1852. It was made of planks two inches thick and eight feet long which were nailed to stringers four inches square, the latter being laid lengthwise and the planks crosswise. About every three miles were toll gates with turnpikes, the charge being a cent a mile for each animal and vehicle. The next planked road was the Watertown Road which led out of Milwaukee from what the Big Bend in Waukesha County. A branch left this trail at Rochester and passed over Indian Hill, crossing the Waukesha trail between Little and Big Muskego Lakes, then going on toward Milwaukee.

The Stage Coach

Over these crude trails were soon to be seen that vehicle of song and story, — the stage coach. Due to the constantly growing number of settlers coming into Wisconsin to make their homes, it was not long until regular stage coach lines were operating definite schedules between settlements. Going over the roads in fair weather was a pleasant pastime, but the troubles and hardships that the drivers of the coaches and their passengers suffered trying to get through during the rainy seasons makes a sorrowful page in pioneer history. Nothing would stop them, however, and before long, there was a considerable network of stages in the state. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* of April 26, 1845, comments on stage coach travel of that vigorous day:

"Eight years ago an indistinct and horse," was not necessary. Indian trail was all that marked the line of travel between the shores of Lake Michigan near the present site of Milwaukee and the banks of the Mississippi. Now, comparatively good roads traverse the country in every direction, and the gay stage coach, a miniature world in itself, freighted with stalwart is now known as State Street. Its first toll gate was located at the present site of North 40th and West State Streets.

Much interest was likewise taken in the building of the Janesville Plank Road, which was begun in 1844. Janesville, in those days, was a rapidly growing agricultural center, and there was a great need for a road linking it with Milwaukee. Farm owners using the highway were particularly interested and assisted in building the road by laying trees and timber on its surface. Two toll gates were erected between Milwaukee and Hales Corners, a charge of two cents on every team or load being made.

As years passed, heavy traffic caused the planks and timber to warp and uproot, creating obstacles to safe and comfortable travel. This occurred with all the planked roads, bringing about a decided decline in their popularity. In 1908 the Janesville Plank Road was purchased from the owners by the state for \$10,000. Later it became the first paved highway in Milwaukee County, and is today one of the most heavily used highways leading into the city.

Wayside Hospitality

In the days of trail and plank roads, every log cabin along the way was a wayside tavern. Travelers pulled up knowing that hospitality would be extended. The sign seen so frequently on hostleries in towns reading "Entertainment for man

Modern Changes

And now to come back again to today. . . The scene changes. We view with new interest our many smooth highways,—good, traversable highways in all kinds of weather. Safe highways, with numerous farms and wayside taverns filling in the former "open spaces," and telephone lines marching along beside them—suggesting a still faster means of communication in this modern day. The old Watertown Plank Road is now known as U. S. Highway 16. The famous road to Green Bay is now U. S. Highway 41. The Old "Military Road" from Prairie du Chien to Green Bay is now U. S. Highways 18 and 151. Over them vacationists speed along in their powerful cars. Farmers, bringing produce into the city as of old, hurry along in their modern motor trucks. . . Flying past them all, with the speed of light as they follow the copper wires, are telephone messages traveling over the highways of speech. . . Time, and its changes!