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
Indian trail, was built by the Federal Government and called the military road. About 1839 these off-road days. Some parts of settlers entered the area in the 1830s and were through, of course, they have been widened and paved.

To Green Bay

With the coming of the railroads, the Milwaukee Road was built and became the main road from Milwaukee to Green Bay. The road was originally a wagon trail and was later widened and paved. The first section of the road was completed in 1835.

An Early Day Scene

Just as highways today bring in crowds of people from other cities and neighboring towns, so did the roads of early Wisconsin. The roads were often unpaved and hazardous, especially during the rainy seasons when the travelers traveled through deep mud.

The Stage Coach

The stagecoach was a common mode of transportation in early Wisconsin. The coaches were large and comfortable, and the drivers were skilled at driving through the rough terrain. The stagecoaches were a symbol of progress and played a significant role in the development of Wisconsin.
“Eight years ago an indistinct and horse,” was not necessary. Indian trail was all that marked the traveler was always a well-the line of travel between the come guest and the host always shores of Lake Michigan near a genial one. Later regular tav-the present site of Milwaukee erns sprang up and carried on and the banks of the Mississippi, the pleasantries of hospitality Now, comparatively good roads so well practiced by the early traverse the country in every settlers.
direction, and the gay stage coach, a miniature world in it-self, freighted with stalwart And now to come back again is now known as State Street, to today... The scene changes. Its first toll gate was located at... We view with new interest the present site of North 40th our many smooth highways,—and West State Streets. good, traversable highways in

Much interest was likewise all kinds of weather. Safe high-taken in the building of the ways, with numerous farms and Janesville Plank Road, which wayside taverns filling in the was begun in 1844. Janesville, former “open spaces,” and tele-in those days, was a rapidly phone lines marching along be-growing agricultural center, and side them — suggesting a still there was a great need for a faster means of communication road linking it with Milwaukee, in this modern day. The old Farm owners using the high-Watertown Plank Road is now way were particularly interest known as U. S. Highway 16. ed and assisted in building the famous road to Green Bay road by laying trees and timber is now U. S. Highway 41. The on its surface. Two toll gates Old “Military Road” from were erected between Milwau-rie du Chien to Green Bay is kee and Hales Corners, a charge now U. S. Highways 18 and of two cents on every team or 151. Over them vacationists 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.

**Modern Changes**

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