

Settling the American Frontier



From Port to Prairie: The Journey Westward



THE OPENING OF THE NORTHWEST

The opening of the Northwest was facilitated by the establishment of forts. Military outposts like Fort Winnebago (established in 1828) were instrumental in the construction of roads and made the attractive promise of protection on lands still populated by Native peoples. Some early settlers went directly to the forts before the sale of federal lands had been approved in order to guarantee ownership and to enlist the help of the army in removing squatters. Many such eager landowners stayed at Fort Winnebago.

Beginning in the 1830s, settlement exploded due to the military's increased road building combined with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Now it was possible for settlers to travel by boat through the Great Lakes to the Port of Milwaukee, and in turn travel by foot or wagon into the newly partitioned lands for sale through federal land grants.

Many other settlers took the land route north through Chicago, making their homes in Southeastern Wisconsin. Gradually, as this area of the territory became more populous, settlement began to push further west toward the Mississippi.

From 1840 to 1846, the Wisconsin Territory's overall population increased five-fold from 30,479 to 155,277. By 1850, the newly christened state of Wisconsin's overall population had reached 304,756.

IMMIGRANTS IN A NEW LAND

After the major push of Yankee settlement in the 1830s, a steady stream of immigration from Western Europe brought Germans, Norwegians, Dutch, English, Scottish, and Irish, among others, to the Wisconsin Territory. Land speculators and industry had recruited many settlers through enticing advertisements into industries such as lumbering and mining, and had promised rich farm lands. The largest groups to arrive were the Germans, Irish, and Norwegians, who came from agricultural traditions in areas where farm land was scarce. With the advent of steamboats and the establishment of railroad lines, Wisconsin was ripe for the establishment of immigrant communities. By 1880, 72% of Wisconsin residents were foreign born or the children of foreign born immigrants—more than any other state.

THE LONG ROAD TO A NEW HOME

Establishing a homestead was no easy task. The journey from port to prairie, for some, started overseas in Europe. The Atlantic passage was treacherous, often taking two months or more. Contemporary reports maintain that, exhausting as the overseas journey was, the final leg which took them through Lake Michigan was often the worst. Traveling overland from New York, Ohio, and other states required use of rough roads, with the better roads charging high tolls, use of ferries that severely overcharged the pioneers, and nightly stays at inns and taverns that would charge families 60 to 80 cents a night. Most overland travelers walked, and the wagon often was in need of repair. Some eastern migrants traveled across the Great Lakes by steamer, coming into the Port of Milwaukee, as well.

THE FAITHFUL OX

Oxen had been used for years to haul cargo across the portage, and many settlers used them to make the long trek from the Port of Milwaukee to Columbia County. The first horses were brought to Wisconsin fairly early via Detroit and were descendants of Canadian breeds. However, oxen were most commonly used by settlers due to their hearty nature. One family's account of their journey West holds that the final decision on where to settle was made by their oxen—they simply traveled west from Milwaukee until the oxen stopped from exhaustion near what today is Keyser in Columbia County.

Horses needed grain for feed, but in a mostly wild land, oxen were treasured for their ability to live off of grasses alone. Marsh hay, planted in the fall, was the ideal winter food for oxen. As the name implies, marsh hay could be planted in soils too wet and unsuitable for other crops.

One early Waukesha County farmer was quoted as saying, "...the faithful ox. We may all thank God for the ox."

SETTLING IN

"When Mother came, only two sides of the house were up. One side was partly open the first winter, except for a carpet hung up. Wolves and other wild animals would come and peer through the cracks at the firelight. Sometimes the stick chimney caught fire, and to prevent this occurring too frequently we had to keep it well plastered over with clay.

*Even after the house was finished, it was very cold, for the joists were not tight. We tried to plaster up the cracks with white marl, but when dry, this came crumbling off. Sometimes we used old newspapers, as far as we had any, to paste over the cracks. While we had no thermometer to measure the cold, I am sure that the winter of 1843-44 was the worst we ever experienced." —Richard Dart from *Memoirs of a Fox River Homesteader**

Getting established on the frontier was a long process that sometimes took years. One family—the Ericksons—after leaving their native Norway, traveled from Milwaukee to what would become southern Columbia County in 1845. The Ericksons built their first shelter from the wagon they had used to make the overland journey. After some time, they were able to construct a modest log home, and it wasn't until 1865 that the family was able to build a frame home with lumber hauled from Portage.

The early frontier homes were typically one story lean-tos or two stories with one room on the bottom floor and a partial loft above. Glass was hard to come by, so rugs, blankets, or greased paper pasted over sticks were often the substitutes. Floors were dirt, and rather than a stove, a large fireplace usually warmed the drafty cabin.

The first crops planted were called the “truck patch”—*truck* being derived from an antiquated definition meaning “for market trade—and usually consisted of corn, potatoes, turnips, and any other vegetables the family could plant. These were intended to provide food for the family rather than make money.

The land also needed to be cleared and made ready for farming. To the prairie farmer, this meant a rough tilling job. But to the farmers settling on lands further north, tedious stump pulling and poor soil meant it could take years to establish a modest acreage.

BUILDING A LOG CABIN

It may surprise some to know that log cabins came in many varieties. Style and architectural techniques were ethnically, regionally, and culturally specific, such as the dovetail notch used in Swedish cabin making, and usually changed over time as different groups shared techniques. Most cabins required chinking—usually a mixture of clay and dried grasses or grit (gravel) to seal the boards in the winter—and sizes ranged from single story lean-tos to the two-story loft cabins, which contained sleeping quarters located on a partial second floor.

Settlers often used green wood, or freshly cut oak, rather than dried pine boards, which were preferable for sturdier homes. Roofs could be made of thatched branches or wooden shingles split from a log using a wedge and maul.

Few log homes had stoves, instead using open fire pits that required large amounts of wood to fuel. Floors were usually dirt, and some settlers plastered the inner walls or lined them with newspaper.

THE ROBERTS FAMILY: A CASE STUDY

The story of settlement can easily seem like vast, disconnected experiences of rugged individuals. However, using one family's story, we can break down these generalizations and bring the faces into focus. The Roberts family's story interweaves the narratives of immigration, westward migration, farming, and early settlement.

In 1830, Robert and Jane Rogers of Trawsfyndd, Wales, emigrated to the United States with their three children. The family landed first in Canada, eventually making their way south to Whitesboro, New York, where they settled permanently. Robert and Jane's son, Hugh Rogers, took his father's name upon coming of age (in keeping with a now abandoned Welsh tradition), thenceforth being known as Hugh Roberts. It was Hugh Roberts who, like many of his generation, decided to make the move westward into the Wisconsin Territory.

Leaving from Whitesboro in 1847, Robert and his wife Gwen traveled via oxen team to Racine, where they stayed for only two years. The family then decided to settle in Caledonia, where the tall rock bluffs and natural springs reminded them of their native Wales. When the Roberts family arrived, the portage had a population of around 200, and the only houses to be found were located close to Fort Winnebago. As some of the area's earliest settlers, the Roberts family opened their home and provided hospitality to newcomers who were not yet established. Only one Welsh family had preceded the Roberts family in moving to Caledonia. However, like many immigrants, the family was able to maintain much of their ethnic heritage on the frontier.

Gwen and Hugh Roberts had seven children. One son, also named Hugh (born February 7, 1838), spent his life farming and raising livestock in Caledonia. He married his wife, Margaret Jones, in 1858. The two would go on to have nine children. Gwen and Hugh spoke Welsh in the home and attended the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. While their children attended common schools where English was spoken, Welsh traditions were staunchly maintained for several generations after the family arrived in the United States.

Also central to many European immigrant traditions is the generational inheritance of land. Typically, immigrants who had come from nations where land was scarce or not equally distributed were more likely to keep one plot of land within the family for many years. Keeping with this tradition, descendants of the Roberts family farmed the same land in Caledonia for almost 150 years. It wasn't until recent times that the family homestead was finally sold at auction.

Roberts Family Portrait on next page: Top row (left to right): John Edwin (married Amelia Schult, children were Louis, Ann, Hugh & Clinton), Sarah (never married), Gwen (married Griffith Williams, children were Margaret, David, Blodwyn), William (married Catherina Sophia Roberts, children were Gladys, Rogers, Margaret, Selwyn, Sraah, and Gwen). Bottom row (left to right): Hugh Roberts (father), David Ira (married Evelyn Cameron later in life, no children), rev. Edward (married Mary Mickle, one daughter, Margaret), Margaret Roberts (nee Jones, mother). Hugh and Margaret had 9 children, 3 of whom died prior to the taking of this portrait.



The Allure of the Land: When Wisconsin Was the “Wild West”



ROLLING PRAIRIE AND OAK SAVANNAH: PERSPECTIVES ON THE LANDSCAPE

Before the advent of urban development and suburban sprawl, Wisconsin was a place of outstanding natural beauty. Perhaps the most alluring and widely spanning of the landscapes found in this ecologically diverse region was the endless prairie. This expansive ecosystem encompassed much of what is now southern and central Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Due to the land’s agricultural potential, the prairie was the first site of intensive settlement. Homes were built in close proximity to oak savannahs—the unique wooded coves that dotted the otherwise open landscape. This afforded settlers the opportunity to reap the benefits of mostly stump-free prairie but also have a readily available source of wood for fuel and shelter. Aside from its practical desirability, there was undoubtedly an intrinsic value to be found in the beauty of the prairie. The now-rare scenery is perhaps best described through these contemporary accounts:

“An ocean of Prairie surrounds the gazer, whose vision is not limited to less than thirty or forty miles; this great sea of verdure is interspersed with delightfully varying undulations like the vast waves of the ocean and every here and there sinking in the hollows, or cresting the swells, appears spots of wood, large groves, extensive ranges of timber, small groups of trees, as if planted by the hand of art, for ornamenting this naturally splendid scene! Over this extended view in all directions are scattered the incipient farms of the settlers, with their luxuriant crops of wheat and oats, whose yellow sheaves, already cut, form a beautiful contrast with the waving green of the Indian corn, and the smooth dark lines of the potato crop.” –W.R. Smith spent an entire summer traveling through southeastern Wisconsin on horseback (excerpt from “Belmont Mound,” 1837)

“But that which crowned the perfection of the view, and imparted an indescribable charm to the whole scene, from the knoll where we stood to the most distant point was the inimitable grace with which the picturesque clumps of trees, that sometimes enlarged themselves into woods, embellished this rural landscape from the hand of Nature...America will justly boast of this unrivaled spectacle when it becomes known, for certainly it is formed of elements that no magic could enable all Europe to bring together upon so great a scale.” –George W. Featherstonhaugh, English geologist hired by the U.S. government in 1834, describing the landscape between Blue Mounds and Madison.

“In some instances, prairie are found stretching for miles around, without a tree or shrub, so level as scarcely to present a single undulation; in others, those called ‘rolling prairies,’ appear in undulation upon undulation, as far as the eye can reach, presenting a view of peculiar sublimity, especially to the beholder for the first time. It seems when in verdure, ever swelling; even breezes play around to heighten the illusion; so that here at near two thousand miles from the ocean, we have a facsimile of sublimity, which no miniature imitation can approach.” —Lieutenant D. Ruggles, describing the prairie around Fort Winnebago and the Agency House property in 1835.



“The Country around is fertile and proper in the highest degree for cultivation, excepting in some places near the river where it is too low. It is in no part very woody and yet can supply sufficient timber to answer the demands of any number of inhabitants. The river is the greatest resort for wild fowl of every kind that I have met in the whole course of my travels; frequently the sun would be obscured by them for some minutes together.” —Jonathan Carver, describing the richness of the Fox River area

“He [Cassin Bush Hawes] came out to Wisconsin to investigate before moving his family, and bought a farm, which had already been somewhat improved by another pioneer who had received it fresh from the government and moved on to invest his profits in still larger possessions. This was in 1850. We landed in Milwaukee, having come by boat from Ogdensburg, and all our possessions were brought by teamster’s wagons across the state, the family perched on top of the loads, bumping over the rough prairies, with only the wagon tracks to mark our course. I well remember as a little child of 9 running along at times, eagerly gathering the wildflowers, so many being entirely new to me. The following decade brought marvelous changes, the country being settled rapidly: churches, schools, and towns springing up as by magic...” —Mrs. E.J. Lindsay, recalling the journey and settlement of her family in Randolph, Wisconsin, 1850 (excerpt from the National Society of the Colonial Dames and Historic Indian Agency House book of memories)

THE BADGERS

Lead deposits in Wisconsin had been known for centuries. The Ho-Chunk, Mesquaki, and Sauk tribes had all mined and smelted the metal in some capacity long before the arrival of Europeans. By the early 1700s, French traders in the region had learned of the mineral deposits, and some had started actively trading the Indians for lead.

As most of the veins still remained on Native land, lead didn't draw large settlement to the area until the first treaty for land sale was signed in 1804. From 1804 to 1832, a series of treaties were negotiated between the Native nations and the U.S. that ceded all the lands south of the Wisconsin River. An increased demand for lead due to U.S. military expansion (and increasing need for lead bullets) coincided with the opening of the land. Settlement increased exponentially.

From roughly the 1820s through the 1840s, mining was the largest factor drawing settlement in the territories. Many of the first miners came north from Missouri where a lead boom had taken place only a few years before. In the 1830s, contractors started recruiting immigrants from Cornwall, England, who had mined for generations and could use their ancestrally honed techniques to access deposits far below the surface. Teamsters came north from Illinois in the summers to assist in transportation, earning the nickname "suckers," as they came in the summer and left in the fall like the sucker fish.

Many of these lead boom settlers came West with very little, and there was neither time nor resources to build fine homes upon arrival. The lead miners gained a reputation for hollowing out dirt homes into hillsides, which earned them the name "badgers."

Easily accessed deposits were soon depleted, and by the 1850s, many of the boom town miners had moved West to California in the Gold Rush or to other Western towns where lead had been discovered.

ENTICING SETTLERS

Pamphlets were distributed both overseas and in the Eastern United States to draw settlers to the West. Usually published by industry contractors from mining, lumber, or other interests, the goal was to bring workers to the territories.

The pamphlets were published in numerous languages and often heralded the richness of the soil, the beauty of the landscape, and the ease with which one could strike it rich in Wisconsin.

Many also contained "first-hand accounts" in the form of letters back home from recent settlers, as well as advice about what to bring on the journey overseas. Details of the Homestead Act of 1862 were also often included in the propaganda.

From Sunup to Sundown: Everyday Work on the Farm



EARLY LAND CULTIVATION

The Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) lived on the lands of Columbia County for centuries and developed agricultural systems for subsistence supplemented by hunting and gathering.

Then came the French. Occasionally, fur traders would establish farms near military forts characterized by long and narrow land tracts, much like the farms they had left behind in their European homeland. However, settlement was not prevalent, and the French remained more tied to trade than to farming.

The land came into the hands of the British in 1763, and in turn, the revolution transformed the English forts into American forts. After the War of 1812, the British presence was fully replaced by the “Americans,” many of whom were actually traders and settlers from varying backgrounds who had been in the territory all along. While all of these groups used the land in varying capacities, it wasn’t until the 1830s that farming became the most significant factor drawing large numbers to the Michigan—and later Wisconsin—territory for permanent settlement.

THE OLD AGENCY HOUSE FARM

The Agency House itself existed as a farm in varying capacities after the departure of the Kinzie family. Starting in 1838, the home was utilized as a tavern and “trading emporium,” despite still being under government ownership. The tavern proprietor is dually listed in records as Satterlee Clark and a man with the surname Ubeline.

Fort Winnebago was abandoned in 1845, and in 1854, the land surrounding the Agency House was patented to James Martin under the authority of Jefferson Davis. By 1857, it had passed hands to George C. Tallman, who was the first to utilize it as a farm. In 1878, Tallman sold the land to James B. Wells of New York, who appears in census records as a flour merchant and likely farmed wheat on the property. For some years, the property was rented to various farmers who planted hay, grain, and potatoes.

The property then passed into the hands of Edmond S. Baker, a Wisconsin-born attorney who continued to rent the property as farmland. It was under Edmond Baker’s daughter, Ada, that the property was sold to the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Wisconsin in 1930.

THE WHEAT BOOM

Historians have described wheat as practically a stage in American frontier development. It's easy to grow, brings in quick money, and finances the debts incurred during the first years of farming. Wheat was the first major crop of the Old Northwest, and for many, it was the reason for the difficult journey onto the frontier.

The crop's convenience was, in Wisconsin, impacted further by a shortage of production in the eastern states. Farmers had exhausted the soil by growing the grain with no rotation. Once their lands were drained of nutrients and left barren, many pushed west to find new land for the cash crop.

Throughout the 1840s, the wheat boom expanded over the Northwest in order to make up for the Eastern slack. In 1839, the Wisconsin Territory had produced a little over 200,000 bushels of wheat. By 1849, production hit four million bushels. One settler recalled seeing wheat fields of 50 or 60 acres stretching alongside the bumpy wagon road outside of Janesville on her journey from Ohio in 1847.

Significant profits were made, but inevitably, the bubble burst. Wheat rust and chinch bugs arrived in the West and destroyed the crop on which many had become reliant. As had happened in the East, competition increased as production moved to states such as Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska, worsening the blow.

Many of the Yankee farmers simply pushed further west as they had before, leaving behind the exhausted land. New immigrants, who hadn't fallen into the boom and bust cycle, had more successfully diversified, managing to save some of the land from exhaustion. More still brought up the farms that had been left behind. While this was the first cash crop bubble burst in Wisconsin agricultural history, it certainly wouldn't be the last.



THE HOPS CRAZE AND DIVERSIFICATION

Another chapter in the boom and bust cycle of the Wisconsin economy came during the final years of the Civil War. A wartime tax on whiskey increased the demand for beer, and the demand for hops—a towering 12 to 15 foot vine with fragrant, papery flowers used to add a hearty flavor and aroma to many beers—increased as well. Toward the end of the war, as demand for hops hit its peak, the Eastern crops which had fed the craze were devastated by the hop louse.

In a familiar turn of events, the production of hops moved West. Increased output of beer sent prices soaring from 15 cents to 70 cents per pound, and a new onslaught of profit-seekers arrived in the region. By 1864, hops had hit it big in Wisconsin—especially in Columbia and Sauk counties. The major shipping center at Kilbourn became known as the greatest hops distribution hub in the nation. Due to local labor shortages, workers—most of the young women and girls—were shipped in by the thousands. Laborers traveled by train and were met at the depot by wagons and transport crews who took them to the fields where they earned somewhere between \$1.75 and \$2.25 a day working in the hops yards.

Farmers brought in up to \$1,500 per acre, paying off their loans and equipment bills the first year, leaving only profit thereafter. Many bought expensive clothing and extravagant clothing and lived well. However, the familiar pattern continued. The hop louse came to Wisconsin in 1868, and a particularly bad year negatively affected the quality of the yield. Eastern farmers had successfully combatted the pest that had devastated their crops only a few years before and were bringing increasing competition. Prices dropped to around 3 to 5 cents per pound, and the boom was finally over.

It was this final bust that led to diversification throughout the state's agricultural regions, with Waushara County moving to cranberry production; Rock, Jefferson, and Dane Counties changing to tobacco; and the area near Portage going into potato production. It also led indirectly to the rise of dairying as the major agricultural industry in the state.

FARMING PUBLICATIONS

Popular publications like *Wisconsin Farmer and Northwestern Cultivator* and *Wisconsin Farmer* contained information on the latest equipment, the heartiest seed, and techniques for tending to a variety of crops. Alongside information on the heartiest poultry and the newest advancements in cattle breeding, these publications also contained political writings, essays on the ethical value of farm labor, religion, and detailed descriptions of matters concerning common schools and other community interests.

A SAMPLING OF TOOLS



OX YOKE

This was the original ox yoke used by the Roberts family in their journey West to Wisconsin.

Made of oak with bows of bent hickory, iron. 19th century. Donated by Mr. Lawrence Roberts.



FLAIL

A flail was used to thrash small grain crops such as wheat, rye, and oats, separating the grains from the straw. It had to be made of sturdy wood in order to withstand the work. This flail is made of a tamarack sapling with the bark removed.

Wood and leather. c. 1800. Donated by Mr. E.D. Doney, Waupun.



AUGER

An auger was used to bore holes for wooden nails or pegs.

Cast iron or steel and wood (ash).



FRAME SAW

Frame or bow saw: The blade was turned using the small handles on either end, making this type of saw ideal for cutting curved edges.

Maple, iron, and hemp rope. c. 1800.



DRAW KNIFE

The draw knife was used for shaping wood or making planks. Hand tools were often made by a blacksmith with only metal components, leaving the carving of the handle to the owner. The draw knife was frequently used in this task.

Cast iron and oak. 19th century.

BROAD AXE

To the pioneer, this axe was a necessary tool, but it didn't cut down trees. Tools like these may appear simple, but they were precise in their design and had a specific purpose. The felling axe, which would have been sharpened on both sides, was used specifically for chopping down trees, while a broad axe like this one, with its one-sided blade and flat-sided construction, was used for "hewing," or making flat, square-sided beams out of round logs. This axe was constructed in a style typical of American craftsmen, with a broad, curved blade and heavy "poll" extending back from the handle.

Cast iron and wood. c. 1850.



HEWING

The ideal timber was 8x8 inches, hewn from a 12-inch log. The log to be hewn was first placed atop two other logs, after which "hewing dogs" were driven into it in order to prevent the log from moving. It was then marked using chalked string to indicate where flat sides would be hewn into the bark. After the marks were made, the hewer stood atop the log and created notches every 18 inches on each side using an ordinary axe, after which the broad axe was used to finish squaring the log.

WOMEN'S WORK ON THE HOMESTEAD



On the frontier, traditional roles for women were maintained,
but with added duty and difficulty.

Not only were homes very basic, but frontier hospitality often meant housing other families temporarily or offering a bed to travelers. Borrowing and helping were important on the frontier as an improvised type of insurance policy. If you helped your neighbor during hard times, they in turn would help you in a time of need.

Whether with neighbors or family, cooperation was important. While farming was for market sale, women often managed the food production for the household, tending gardens, doing the shopping, managing the money, preserving food for the winter, and tending cows, chickens, and pigs. The frontier woman was also the home doctor, tending to family members when they fell ill.

Cooking was incredibly difficult. Before flour and mills became common, women had to grind corn by hand, either with a mortar and pestle or with a crude device consisting of a metal sheet with roughly cut holes. Women would often wake at daybreak to prepare meals. During harvest times, this could be a large ordeal as helping hands needed to be fed. Young girls often helped their mothers.

DAY TO DAY WORK

Farming in Wisconsin history was a family business, and women did a significant portion of the work. Many of the activities that today take us only a few hours took the pioneer women a whole day. The standard week for a woman on the frontier looked something like this:

Mondays: Washing / Tuesdays: Ironing / Wednesdays: Baking /
Thursdays: Sewing / Fridays: Cleaning / Saturdays: Meal Preparation

FEEDING THE HOUSEHOLD

The gardens of the Midwest included pumpkins, onions, cabbage, beets, turnips, cucumbers, and beans. Many pioneer women brought seeds that reminded them of their European or Eastern homes. Some seeds could also be ordered through the thriving mail-order catalog business. It was the frontier garden that provided the family with food to eat and trade at the general store, and along with tending to the food supply during the growing seasons, women also preserved food for the winter months.

GATHERING WATER

Wells were either dug by hand or dug using a drill. Many were covered, but they still often had to be cleaned as leaves, debris, and snakes would fall inside. However, not all homes had a well. Many farms were built near streams or springs, and the women and children were often responsible for fetching water for each meal. Yokes like the one in our collection were used to transport large buckets of water, spreading the weight across the carrier's shoulders.



The home of Killan Heplers in the year 1884. This photo shows a well-digger and horses for the power for drilling. Photo taken in the Portage area. Courtesy of the Portage Historical Society.

THE VOICES OF PIONEER WOMEN

"We passed through Asterland and at noon stopped at a small red house and Father asked the woman of the house if she would get us a dinner of bread and milk. She very soon had it ready and a better dinner we had not had since we left home. She thought 25 cents would pay for her trouble. We thought it cheap." —Sarah Foote, *A Teenager's Diary of Coming Overland From Ohio in 1846*

"Four springs my husband and I made maple sugar and syrup in the woods one mile north of Campbell's Port. This sugar usually lasted us through the year and we would use it for everything in place of white sugar as we had no nearby grocery store." —Harriet Dousman de Neveu, from *"Girlhood and Motherhood on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1824-1860"*

"In the very early years of my life we knew nothing of matches, although they may have come into use in the East. There was always a flint, steel, and tinder box in the house, but some could not use these, and so the coals were covered at night. Should they die out we were obliged to borrow fire from the neighbors." —Mary Mitchell from *Reminiscences of the Early Northwest*

Community From Common Interest: The Creation of Small Town Wisconsin



COMMON BONDS

Pre-statehood Wisconsin could be a lonely place. The earliest settlers were single male profit-seekers or married men who had ventured forth to do the rough work of getting established before sending back for wives and children. Even as more families traveled west together or rejoined loved ones, most settled in isolated plots far from their nearest neighbor. Still, beginning with the lead mining boom in the 1820s, settlements and towns began to slowly appear across Wisconsin.

What were the common bonds that brought people together?

Immigration networks brought family and friends of settlers overseas to join their loved ones, leading to the creation of cultural enclaves. Many Wisconsin communities were composed of these immigrant groups who shared a common culture, values, and language.

The immigrant settlement is only one part of the story. As the frontier became more diverse, so did its communities. Regardless of background, there were shared interests that spurred development

Many settlers worked in production industries (farming, mining, lumber, etc.), and the need for services and trade centers to serve these interests developed. Towns sprang up around mines and lumber camps, and in agricultural areas, they developed along rail lines and other trade routes where farmers were able to sell their products.

The processing of farm products, trading and retail posts, along with the common need for skilled labor and craftsmen, were necessities that crossed cultural boundaries. However, the cultural institutions shaped settlement, as well. Often the first buildings in a town were the church (with the denomination reflecting a community's ethnic makeup) and the school house. Thus, shared values and places of congregation were as binding as economic interests.

THE COMMON SCHOOL

Schools have quite literally been written into the founding of the upper Midwest. The Northwest Ordinance of 1785 mandated that townships in the territories be 36 square miles and that section 16 in each township be reserved for a school. Thus, when Wisconsin was surveyed in 1831, every 36 square miles a school section was set aside. This ensured that schools could hold a central location in the township, or in other cases, that the sale of the land would be used to fund a school.

Federal mandate aside, churches and schools were the first community buildings in many towns—before courthouses, post offices, or town halls. To many, education and religion were connected. Also, the school and church were both common meeting places. The school house was the site of traveling lectures, debates, community-wide spelling bees, meetings of charitable groups, and fundraisers.

Many early schools were run out of abandoned buildings or log homes until a permanent building could be raised. The construction of a school was the responsibility of community members, as was maintenance, the construction of desks, and the furnishing of whatever supplies the town could muster. In many areas, families would gather and clean the school house on Saturdays.

Teachers were housed by the community, moving from home to home and receiving room and board along with meals as part of their pay. Teachers were often unmarried women, as little other employment opportunities existed for them. The profession offered some independence, as well as good prospects of marriage in the mostly male-populated West. By the 1870s, 25% of all American-born white women had taught in a school house at some point in their lives. Pay was still meager. Even in the 1880s, a female teacher's salary was, on average, \$54.50 per year (men received \$71.40 per year).

The average frontier school was one room heated by a coal or wood stove with fuel furnished by the community. Grades 1-8 were in attendance, and lessons were taught for 10-15 minutes per subject and grade level. Younger children sat toward the front of the room, and older children sat toward the back. Girls and boys were separated on opposite sides of the room, and in some schools, they were separated at recess, as well.

Discipline and punishment were administered in a way that would shock many students and parents today. Rulers and hickory switches could be used by the teacher to punish transgressions ranging from swearing and fighting to failing to memorize the day's lesson.

Supplies were extremely scarce, with blackboards being a luxury that few schools could afford and books being even more problematic. Often, children simply brought whatever books they had at home as their learning texts. Books were not common in pioneer households, and available ones were typically old and handed down through several generations. More commonly, the only learning text a child could bring was the family Bible.

THE MILL

It is said that the school was the first institution that brought settlers together into communities, but the second was the mill.

As wheat and other crops became more common, the mill was increasingly important. Early homesteaders ground grains at home either with a mortar and pestle or a hand mill. Grinding a fine meal was all but impossible in this fashion, let alone producing enough for market sale.



Horse-powered sorghum mill in Lewiston (near Portage).

Date unknown.



Carnegie Mill, Portage. c. 1900.

Photo courtesy of Portage Historical Society

The mill was not only more practical, but it was more profitable. A farmer could bring his own wheat to the mill and receive the appropriate weight back of ground flour, for which he was charged a fee known as a “miller’s toll.” This processed grain was easier to transport to market and lowered the cost to the farmer significantly.

Most town mills used a mechanism called a “tub mill.” They were located alongside running water, using the current to supply power. Paddles in the water turned gears, which rotated two stacked, heavy stones. The bottom stone, or the “bed,” was fixed while the top stone, or the “runner,” was mounted on a turning spindle. The surface of the stones contained carved grooves, which would crush and grind the wheat into flour. These fine grooves needed to be repeatedly sharpened, which required great skill. As the stone turned, the coarser whole wheat flour would fall in one chute, while the fine flour collected in another and sold for a higher price. Some mills contained complicated mechanisms that passed flour through refining sieves or even raised sacks to catch the flour as it was ground.

THE BLACKSMITH

Among the first tradesmen to settle in proximity to the gristmill was the blacksmith. The town blacksmith was a jack of all trades. Not only did he forge metal wares, but he also shod horses and oxen, repaired wagon wheels, sharpened tool blades, and made gun components. The blacksmith also crafted hammers, adzes, nails, and knives. Many of the tools you'll find in our collection were likely forged by a local blacksmith.



Blacksmith shop in Portage around the turn of the century. *Photo courtesy of the Portage Historical Society.*

THE EMPIRE PRAIRIE STORE

In early frontier towns, the general store served as an important community hub. In Leeds township, the Empire Prairie Store filled this important role for many years.

Anton Engel, an immigrant born in Hanover, Germany, immigrated to Leeds township in 1853 via Buffalo, New York. He was only 25, but he had gained thorough experience in merchandising and sales in his native Germany. In 1847, he established the Empire Prairie Store at a crossroads on the still sparsely populated prairie. For quite some time, the Engel family lived in the two-story building that housed the store, but eventually profits were enough to build an independent frame house. The first floor of the Empire Prairie Store housed the post office, where mail was brought in by stagecoach, and eventually by rail. Farmers stopped by the store regularly, not only to pick up the post, which came three times a week, but to trade eggs, butter, poultry, hides, and rags. The store also contained a small room which housed a community library. All of this made the store an important place for the community to congregate and communicate.

The Empire Prairie Store sold everything from hardware supplies to wallpaper, boots and shoes, clothing, patent medicines, bolts of fine cloth, sewing machines, rock candy and chocolate drops, syrup, molasses, crackers, and kerosene by the barrel.

THE COOPER

If you walked into a 19th century general store, you would find many of the available foodstuffs—everything from pickles and vinegar to crackers and soap—sold in barrels. On the farm, barrels were used to collect rainwater, store food for the winter, and process lye. The cooper made two types of barrels: “wet” ones for liquids and “dry” ones for granular substances like salt or flour or other dry goods.

The cooper first split rough planks with a wedge and maul, smoothing and shaping them into staves with a draw knife, an adze, and a plane. The sides of the staves had to be tapered in order to fit together correctly. A hoop was used to pull the straight staves into their proper shape. The hoops were then driven onto the barrels, starting at the bottom, with temporary hoops being used to hold the barrel in place until the final metal ones could be attached. Barrels could have two heads or one. In order to fit the head of the barrel, the howel plane was used to put a shallow ridge into the end of the staves in which the barrel head would rest. The croze, a special type of plane unique to coopers, was used to make this groove deeper.

