



# The Old Trail

by Phil Sander

If one of the oldest roads in Wisconsin could whisper to us its tales of the countless footsteps that have worn a path through forest, and prairies, it would indeed tell a fascinating story — a tale of the transformation of ancient Indian footpath to one of today's major highways.

I shall attempt to recall the Old Trail's past, unravel its legends and review the prominent place it has in the history of Kenosha County. In researching the subject, an old adage comes to mind: "Gather up the fragments that nothing be lost". So, you will recognize I have joined collected bits and pieces so that the highway's history and growth can be retold.

It began as a prehistoric path. Then in 1832 it was surveyed as a military and postal road. It started at Fort Dearborn (Chicago) and continued to Fort Howard (Green Bay). It was named the Green Bay Road. It still is known by that name, although its official designation on state highway maps is Route 31. It passes through Pleasant Prairie and Somers Townships and this chronology of historical events will be woven primarily around these two Kenosha Townships.

The following narrative is included merely to acquaint the reader with the Ice Age Era and the resultant topographic features that helped determine the trail's location.

Why was the location so ideal for the Old Trail? Could it not have been further east or west? Not realistically, because the physical geography designated the natural location, which is a remnant of the last Continental Ice Age, known as the Wisconsin Phase. The melting and receding ice mass left a distinct ridge or elevation which the Old Trail follows. This raised phenomenon is known as a glacial moraine.

How are moraines formed? A geological interpretation gives us this explanation:

Somewhere between 25,000 and 15,000 years ago Wisconsin was covered by a giant Labrador Ice Sheet in the form of lobes. The massive Lake Michigan lobe, one of several advancing ice movements, funneled its way southward along the lake basin. It was probably

as much as one to two miles high. Constant ice movement caused by pressure and gravity, resulted in a gigantic transformation on the surface of the landscape.

An ice lobe can best be described as a super giant ("colossal" would not be an exaggeration) bulldozer. As it advanced from Canada it scooped out the earth, scratched the bedrock and reduced stones to pebbles, sand and clay. This material became suspended in the ice sheet with other soils and fragments of copper. Portions of the debris in the moraine were probably carried from as far as Canada and Lake Superior.

When the glacial lobe reached its most southerly point, near the Ohio River, and the climate became warmer, it began to retreat. Debris and glacial drift were deposited along its outer edges forming a belt of recessional moraines. These moraines extend through Kenosha County and farther north into Wisconsin and south into Illinois.

It is within the vicinity of the moraine ridge that the ancient trail lies. It is located approximately four miles west of and parallel to the shore of Lake Michigan. In Pleasant Prairie Township it takes the form of a subcontinental divide that separates itself into two watersheds.

It is interesting to note the direction the watersheds take that control the drainage in the moraine area. In Somers Township the north and south branch of the Pike River meet just before crossing under Highway 31. It then flows through Petrifying Springs Park, first eastward and then south, parallel to Lake Michigan. It empties into the lake at Alford Park. These waters eventually flow into the St. Lawrence River and then the Atlantic Ocean.

In Pleasant Prairie Township the Des Plaines River, just west of Highway 31, flows south joining the Illinois River and then the Mississippi River. Eventually it reaches the Gulf of Mexico. Several small streams that flow east into Lake Michigan have formed deep eroded gullies or ravines, such as Barnes and Wolf Creeks as well as others southward. These depressions created inconvenient travel crossings and were avoided

by travelers.

On the summit or within the immediate vicinity of the moraine is the trail, which is as old as mankind — perhaps even older. Browsing mammals were the early trailmakers. Bison, elk, deer and other animals followed this ancient game trail, migrating from one location to another seeking new food sources, cover or wintering yards. Instinct led all shrewd animals to follow high ridges for easy traveling and a view that would alert them to danger. As a game trail, it offered access to choice and diverse habitat.

Prehistoric Indians of Wisconsin came to the state in a series of migrations spaced as much as several thousand years apart. Archeologists have hypothesized that the Early Paleo Indians entered Wisconsin about 9500 B.C., followed by Aqua-Plano, Archaic, Early, Middle and Late Woodland stages. All these cultures have been classified and identified by the type of artifacts, ceramics, mounds discovered and by other diagnostic analyses.

On a number of farms in the vicinity of the Old Trail, projectile points, spears, drills, banner stones and trade items have been found. They are convincing evidence pointing to the extensive use made of the trail by the first travelers who hunted, gathered and camped along the way during their yearly migrations.

On the former plowed fields within Petrifying Springs Park, many excellent stone and copper artifacts have been found. Numerous implements were recovered on nearby farms of William Thompson, Leverett F. Leet, E. J. Gardinier and on other locations along the Pike River. My best finds were made after fall plowing when spring rains washed the earth — exposing arrowheads, stone tools and debitage.

In 1792 a Frenchman, living at Green Bay was appointed as a company agent for the American Fur Company. He was sent out to establish a line of wilderness trading posts near principal Indian villages along the west shore of Lake Michigan. He was Jacques Vieau, Sr. (1757-1852). He was born in lower Canada in Cate-des-neige, a suburb of Montreal. Because the Indians had difficulty in pronouncing his last name, they called him Jean Beau or Jambeau. In 1795, Vieau came to the Indian village of Milwaukee and established his principal trading post on the east bank of the Milwaukee River.

Since lake travel was limited to spring through fall months, Vieau would transport goods during that period by canoe from Green Bay to his posts in exchange for valuable furs. On occasion he would leave an agent at the post during the winter to trade and barter with Indian trappers. Furs, especially beaver, which were in demand at European markets.

proved profitable for Vieau.

In 1816 a young French-Canadian named Solomon Juneau was assigned to the Milwaukee post by the American Fur Company as Vieau's clerk. Later he married Vieau's daughter. Because of his age, Vieau Sr. sold his post to Juneau and retired to his farm at Green Bay in 1818.

When canoe travel was restricted during the winter months, traders and explorers followed the Indian trails on foot or horseback. One such trail led from Milwaukee to the Rapids at Root River, then west to a Potawatomi village at Skunk Grove (Franksville). Here in the early 1830s, the sons of Vieau Sr., Jacques and Louis, established a trading center known as the Jambeau Trading Post. Like many French traders they married Indian women and made the post their permanent home.

From the post the trail led south through Racine County to Somers and Pleasant Prairie Townships, Grosse Point, with a stop at the cabin of a French trader, Antoine Quilmette (after which the Village of Wilmette is named), and then to Fort Dearborn. Soon this route became known as the Jambeau Trail.

In Pleasant Prairie Township, in the old Dexter woods, a remnant of the Old Trail exists. Still visible is the trodden path, almost a foot deep, as it winds through the oak and hickory woodlot. This segment of the trail is just west of the present Highway 31 located on the Momper property. This trail was part of a network of trails that connected with Indian camp sites and villages in the territory.

During the 1820s and 1830s, residents of New England states looked westward. Many, seeking to own their land, migrated to Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. Tales of unexplored opportunities in the Michigan Territory (Wisconsin was included) were circulated about the newly-opened land.

As early as 1825 a primitive postal service used the trail and in 1832 Pierre Bernard Gringnon, of Green Bay, had a contract to carry mail between Fort Howard and Fort Dearborn. He hired Alexis Clermont, a French-Canadian, about 25, of De Pere, to make regular trips as a mail carrier, on foot.

He would start in Green Bay and was accompanied by an Oneida Indian. They carried a sixty pound mail pack, musket, shot, two bags of parched corn, knife, axe and snowshoes in the winter. Their main diet depended on the game they shot along the way. They camped out in the woods and slept in blankets. The men encountered frequent hazards and hardships especially in the winter months. Sometimes they wandered off the trail because of deep or drifting snow.

From Green Bay, Clermont followed Indian trails

to Manitowoc and Sheboygan, followed by a stop at the trading post of Vieau and Solomon Juneau in Milwaukee. But, there were many miles yet to travel: West to the Rapids at Root River, with a visit at the Vieaus' trading post in Skunk Grove, another halt at the Indian springs (now Petrifying Springs Park in Somers) and Pleasant Prairie Townships. (following the Old Trail), Grosse Point and terminating at Fort Dearborn. There he turned the mail over to Postmaster John Logan.

Once a month the eagerly-awaited carrier arrived with his load of letters and news he had picked up along the way. The round trip was about 480 miles. Clermont was paid sixty to sixty-five dollars for his arduous work. Each letter delivered cost the receiver one shilling or twenty-five cents. At Fort Dearborn, Clermont stayed only one night before beginning the return trip with letters and dispatches from the East, Detroit and Chicago. Clermont served on the Fort Dearborn route until 1836.

The first post office for Pike Creek (Kenosha) was opened in 1836, at the Willis tavern (later the Elmer Maxwell home) at the northwest corner of Green Bay Trail and Prairie Avenue (60th Street). Harvey Durkee, a storekeeper, rode horseback from the village to the tavern where he would drop off and pick up mail. (He carried it in his hat.) Later a post office was opened at Pike Creek. Walter Towslee was appointed postmaster. During the summer months, mail occasionally arrived by sailing vessels.

An official land route became imperative for the U.S. Army and a survey for a road from Fort Dearborn to Fort Howard was authorized in 1832 by the Federal Government. It was originally planned as a Military Road to connect the two Forts. The estimated appropriation was \$5,000. In 1835 the route was surveyed and mapped by James Duane Doty (Territorial Governor 1841-1844) and Lt. Alexander Center, of the United States Army.

The Old Trail was named the Green Bay Trail and opened a well-defined highway into the territory. The route supposedly would fulfill two objectives: (1) underlie a military capability, and (2) develop an important link in overland communication as a future dispatch and mail route.

As a military road it was never completed. Problem areas were taken over by civilian contractors and the road was not constructed along the surveyed route. Villages along Lake Michigan petitioned to have the route near their communities. Portions were worked on as necessity dictated. Despite some lack of continuity, the planned route led the march to territorial and statehood advancement.

By 1831 the little village of Chicago and the Fort

Dearborn garrison, which was comprised of approximately 200 settlers and traders, was becoming the crossroads of the midwest. The Chicago River, with its natural harbor, allowed sailing vessels to bring passengers and supplies from the east. Trails (or traces) branched out in several directions for foot and horseback travel to the new mid-west territories.

In 1832 there were but four white men in what is now Wisconsin, south of Green Bay and east of Rock River. All were French traders. During that year the Sac War broke out. It attracted the attention of the whole country. Black Hawk's defeat ended further Indian uprisings, making it safe for future settlement.

The title of the land was in the Indian Nations. By the treaty of 1833, between the Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Chippewa, the southeastern area of Wisconsin was ceded to the United States. However, the Indians could remain in possession until 1836. The Government reserved the right meantime to survey the tract. Lieutenant A. J. Center and his survey party then laid out the Green Bay trail, from Fort Dearborn to Fort Howard. That was in 1832.

News of the opening of the Michigan Territory (Wisconsin was part of that area) reached the small village of Oliveburg, Richland County, Ohio. Here Jacob Montgomery, a farmer, saw an opportunity to be among the first to explore and reconnoiter the new territory. He and his two sons, Able and James, left Ohio for Chicago.

In Chicago they found no roads leading into the territory, only Indian trails. They were directed to the Jambau Trail, which was used by traders traveling north. They followed the winding trail. Montgomery was watching for suitable land with open prairies, nearby woodlots and a good source of water.

The trail passed through what now are Pleasant Prairie and Somers Townships. At the Indian Springs, the men became elated. They had found a majestic landscape with vast prairies, woods and the placid waters of a flowing stream (Pike River). It was ideal for homesteads and farming.

Montgomery saw the opportunity to become a land speculator and meet the needs of future settlers. The men began to blaze trees and stake out their preempt claims. They built a log cabin near the hillside springs in the southwest corner of the present Petrifying Springs Park.

Ward Ozanne showed me the location of the indented cabin site and Leverett F. Leet told me his grandfather lived in the cabin while he was building his nearby home at the corner of Green Bay Road and Highway JR. A glacial boulder and plaque along the hillside trail mark the cabin site. It was dedicated in

1976. Montgomery is considered to be the first permanent white resident in Kenosha County.

During December of 1835 and February 1836, U.S. Government surveyors Mullet, Brink, J. Hathaway, L. Lyons and S. Sibley, plotted the six-mile square townships, and the ranges and sections in the eight unnamed townships of the present Kenosha County. These established bench marks made it easy to locate and identify claims and write titles that clearly described locations.

As soon as surveyors completed their descriptions, the U.S. Government opened an office in Milwaukee where land could be purchased. Montgomery and his sons each purchased 160 acres of land on both sides of the Old Trail in Sections 10 and 11 for five shillings (\$1.25) per acre.

Montgomery later built a home on the west side of the trail, about where the old Ozanne home stands. In 1837 he brought his family — wife Grace, seven sons and two daughters — to the Wisconsin Territory. As settlers traveled along the trail searching for farm land, Montgomery was on hand to sell some of his holdings for a fair profit.

By the summer of 1839, Montgomery and his sons had completed their successful land venture and decided to move on. They went to Little Fort (Waukegan) where Montgomery again speculated in land and properties. He also became active in community affairs. In 1853 he moved with his family to Iowa and died in 1866.

Montgomery and his family would make up an interesting genealogical study. He had three wives and fifteen children. Although he claimed to be a farmer, he made his fortune dealing in real estate, moving frequently and seeking greater opportunities. Certainly the Old Trail helped him accomplish his dreams.

## *The Old Trail Resumed*

In the summer and fall of 1835, pioneer families followed the Old Trail from Chicago to Pleasant Prairie. Some of those early pioneers who decided to make their homes along the Trail were the Dowses, the Dexters, the Stanleys, the Holts, the Derbyshires and the Lucas.

In Somers Township, these were some of the pioneer family names: Willis, Maxwell, Smith, Ozanne, Longmore, Mygatt, Mueller, Rhodes, Leets, Strong and Rasmussen.

Soon a small community emerged at the intersection of the Trail and Somers road (Highway E). The village supported homes and had a cheese factory, sorghum mill, blacksmith shop and several churches. Pike River sawmills was built and operated in 1835 by Thomas Parsons. The Foster sawmill, operated by

Benagh Burgess, started a year later.

Previous to this time the Old Trail was not passable by ox cart or wagon teams because only a blazed foot trail existed. About 1835-1836 plank roads made their appearance on the trail. Usually of oak or other hardwood, two inches thick and eight feet long, they were nailed to stringers four inches square. The planks were placed in wet or muddy portions of the road. Nearby woodlots and sawmills supplied the material for local planking needs. Prairie Avenue (60th Street) was known as Plank Road. During 1836 a weekly stage began to run from Chicago to Milwaukee.

By an Act of the State Legislature, the town was named "Pike" on April 15, 1843, after the river that flows through it. On April 1, 1851, "Pike" was changed to "Somers".

When the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad was constructed in 1870, the village of Somers underwent a drastic relocation. Homes, businesses, and churches were moved west on the Somers Road to an area surrounding the railroad crossing. The depot served passengers, freight and the truck gardens produce of nearby farms. The depot became a telegraph office and Post Office. Gradually the village grew into a thriving community.

The Old Trail has seen many historical buildings. Sadly, all are gone. There was the "Old Mill" built by Rev. James Ozanne, an experienced miller, baker, and preacher. He came to Somers, then called Pike, from the Isle of Guernsey, in 1842, and established his home on the Green Bay Trail. Shortly after his arrival he constructed a large windmill one mile west of his home.

The "Old Mill" was an octagonal tower five stories high, built of heavy hand-hewn timbers and beams from the Ozanne woodlot. The huge windmill wheel was made of wood and strips of iron. The milling stones were imported from France. The Rev. Ozanne traveled to Boston, Massachusetts where he knew selected stones could be purchased. When the mill was completed farmers carried their wheat to the mill where it was ground into flour. Rev. Ozanne operated the "Old Mill" until 1868, when it was sold, taken down and moved to St. Martins in Milwaukee County. Wheat was the important crop in Somers Township, but as early as 1865 and for many years after, the chinch bug ruined the wheat crops in many southeastern counties. Farmers then turned to crops such as cabbage, tomatoes, onions, carrots, beets, potatoes, corn and other garden produce. Many shifted to dairying and helped established Wisconsin as the nation's leading dairy state.

Another relic along the Old Trail was the

Government Observatory. It was built in 1860 on the farm of William Robertson, now the Einer Hansen Farm. From that vantage point one can look far to the west and north. Daily weather conditions were read and recorded at the Observatory. It was located about 1 ¼ miles south of the Oakwood Cemetery. All that is left of the tower is a small pile of stones. It is the highest point on the trail between Chicago and Milwaukee. From it, one can see Lake Michigan a distance of three miles.

In my boyhood days I remember a unique landmark in the Leet woods. On weekend hikes to Petrifying Springs to camp and fish we sometimes used the bandstand or gazebo for shelter when it rained. This bandstand was located in Mitchell Park and was moved to the Leet Grove. It was used for many years for concerts and social gatherings. It was finally destroyed by vandals.

Nearby in the east woods was a small cottage named Camp Fogwell. As Boy Scouts we used the building for camping and scouting tests. Naturally we did a lot of exploring in the nearby Petrifying Springs Park.

An area that became part of the south boundry of the Park was the only part that was owned continuously by one family, the Leets. That part of their farm east of the Green Bay Road is now part of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside campus. The home, built before 1840, and barns have been razed.

Until a town hall was built, town meetings were held in the living room of the Leet home.

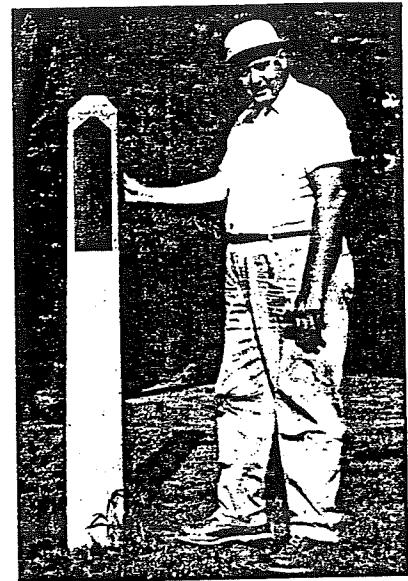
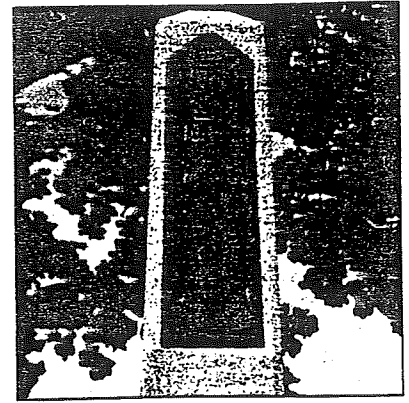
The Town Hall, one of the landmarks of the Old Trail, originally stood at the southeast corner of Green Bay Road and Somers Road (Highway E). Built in 1859, it is gone. But it is now relocated as a historical landmark at Hawthorn Hollow, opposite Petrifying Springs Park. The old Town Hall, the one-room Pike River school house, built in 1847, and a larger school house, built in 1906 to replace it, remain in a setting as a recreation of the old days of Somers.

Today, unnoticed by travelers, along the Green Bay Road is a series of historical markers with a bronze plaque as a reminder that the highway began as an early pioneer trail.

On September 29, 1927, the first marker was placed and dedicated in tribute to the pioneer road builders in Wisconsin. The first marker is in Somers Township on the west side of the Green Bay Road and Highway A.

Imbeded in the monolithic post is a bronze tablet. It says:

Green Bay  
Road  
Pioneer Road  
Chicago  
to  
Green Bay  
Established  
by the  
Federal  
Government  
1832



The author at Green Bay Road marker.

Beneath this is a smaller inscription indicating that it was sponsored by the Wisconsin Society of Chicago.

Similar markers, each a tapered shaft about five feet high, were set at each crossroad abutting Green Bay Road. Many monuments have been removed or destroyed. Some, broken by cars, have been replaced by the Kenosha County Highway Department. Five remain along the highway in Somers Township and four remain in Pleasant Prairie Township. Green Bay Trail is listed as Wisconsin Registered Landmark No. 3 by the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

With the setting of the first marker, the Wisconsin Society of Chicago hoped that similar markers would be placed at every mile between Chicago and Green Bay. The nine in Kenosha County remind us that for more than 150 years the Green Bay Road has changed from not much more than a geological foot path to a major highway. It is one of the oldest thoroughfares in the state. It can be credited with being the opening wedge for pioneer settlement in Kenosha County and other southeastern counties of Wisconsin.

The Old Trail has seen numerous name changes: The Jambau Trail, The Green Bay Trail, The Green Bay Road, and Highway 31. It has undergone many changes in construction, in alignment and straightening. From a footpath the Old Trail now is in the construction process of becoming a double, three lane highway to accommodate the constant increase in traffic.

The Old Trail has many more stories to tell — c people, churches, schools, the railroad, stores, farm and community activities. Some, but not all, earliest records and memories have been lost in time or forgot. But, thanks to local history buffs and fourth and fifth generations in Pleasant Prairie and Somers, the heritage that had its foundation on the Old Trail lives on.

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