Moving Westward

Many of us have moved or will move in our lives. Perhaps our move will be across town to a different house, to another city or state, or to go to college. Perhaps it will even be to a different country. Moving today is fairly easy. Find a place to live, rent a truck or hire movers, have the post office forward your mail, and off you go. Imagine how it would be to move to a place that really does not exist. There are no roads to this place, no stores around it, no schools or hospitals, no power plants or post offices. In fact, there are not even any houses in this place.

Few people today would accept the challenge of that kind of move. In the 1830’s, many people did. Many left the civilized eastern United States and headed west. Some came to Wisconsin. A small number of them settled in a northeastern part of the state in a place then called Winnebago Rapids. Eventually, they renamed the site, calling the two cities they created out of the wilderness, Neenah and Menasha.

Our book will tell the story of these pioneers. In it, we will attempt to explain why Neenah and Menasha developed into two cities separated by an imaginary line.

Before the settlers could develop Neenah and Menasha, they had to get here. This first chapter is about westward movement. We want to know why the settlers came, how they got here, and what they faced after arrival.

In 1823, the United States was a young country. Less than 50 years before, in 1776, it began fighting the war that won its independence from Great Britain. Later, in 1812, the country fell into another war with Great Britain.

James Monroe was president. He wanted to tell the world’s powers to keep their hands off the United States. He issued the Monroe Doctrine which said, in part:
Moving Westward

... we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system into any portions of this hemisphere, as dangerous to our peace and safety.

Those were strong words, but that is all they were - words. The United States had no great navy to protect its sea lanes and no army large enough to repel an invasion.

The Monroe Doctrine did, however, serve to make Americans feel protected and secure. The strong words of the president led them to strike out from the east coast and explore the vast interior of the continent.

In 1820, a quarter of this nation's population lived in "the west" which at the time was defined as any part of the country west of Pennsylvania. By 1830, it had jumped to one-third.

To more graphically demonstrate the westward movement of people as it relates to this book, examine the changes in Wisconsin's population from 1836, when it was made a territory, to 1850, two years after it gained statehood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>11,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>30,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>305,389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, consider this: In 1850, of the 305,000 plus people living in Wisconsin, only 63,000 had been born here. The table below shows that in 1850, a significant number of Wisconsin's residents came from the east coast:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>68,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What drove these people to pack up their families and belongings and come to Wisconsin? What encouraged these people to move to a place that was, in 1836, about as rough and as uncivilized as could be found? There were four major reasons for such a move.

First, the Erie Canal in New York State had opened in 1825. This had drastically cut travel time. It opened up the Great Lakes system to easterners
A Tale of Twin Cities

wanting to head west. Milwaukee and other cities along the Great Lakes saw large increases in population. These cities became the entry points for easterners. In 1841, it cost ten dollars to go from Buffalo to Milwaukee on a steamship. The trip took just five days, compared to three to four weeks on a sailing ship. The Great Lakes became the "highway" many people took in their journey west.

A second factor in the move west to Wisconsin was a depression which began in 1837. The depression was caused by banks suspending specie payments. Specie was paper used for money in those days. The suspension in payments led farmland values to fall, building to stop, and factories to close. Within five months, 90 percent of the factories in the east had shut down. This generated a tidal wave of migration west because people lost much of what they owned and chose this time to start anew. The west was just developing and there were many prizes to be won. Anyone migrating here had a great chance to better their lives.

A third factor in the move west to Wisconsin was the amount of land owned by the federal government. Huge tracts of land in the territory were put up for sale at $1.25 per acre. This was quite a lure since the United States in the 1830's was mainly agrarian, and new land meant new farm land. The easterners knew the mechanics of land sales so they were able to buy up the best sites in Wisconsin for farms. They also knew what to look for in waterpower sites and bought land surrounding those, too. The government land sales increased as fast as did the number of people moving west. In 1836, the government sold 20 million acres of land, compared to just 3.8 million acres in 1833.

The first three factors influencing the move west were very concrete and easy to measure. The fourth factor really had neither documentation nor statistics to back it up, but it was as important as the first three. It had to do with the spirit and mind-set of the western pioneers. Almost everyone coming to Wisconsin had the "pioneer spirit". For some, this would be the second or third time they had helped to develop a new land. Some had participated in the development of the northeastern states. Others had taken part in the first great move west to Ohio or Indiana.

Regardless of how many times they had moved before, these people were pioneers in every sense of the word. They left what they had established in "civilization" in search of something new, challenging, and rewarding. As Edwin Bottomley wrote to his relatives back east in 1842 concerning life in Wisconsin:
Moving Westward

Better you must be aware that a new settler in this country has to struggle with difficulties but hopes of future reward gives him strength to persevere.

It was the nature of Wisconsin and other western lands that led people to move again. It was a desire for the wilderness that Wisconsin offered that led people who had already moved west to come to Wisconsin. There were opportunities to amass wealth and land holdings. Many newcomers were merely adventurous, but the lure of permanent and prosperous living attracted many more.

In frontier America, most men, regardless of background, could rise to the top. Making money became a great and exciting game everyone wanted to play. The chances of making money in an undeveloped place like Wisconsin were far greater than in the east.

The pioneers were optimistic that they could reap the benefit of their daring. The "pioneer spirit" became part of the fabric of American life at the time. "The public opinion was that it was the duty of every man to help in the development of the nation."

Not only were the pioneers in Wisconsin happy with their decision to move, they told their friends and relatives back east what they had found. This brought still more people pouring into the state. In 1846, Uriah Hall wrote his cousin in Vermont, "We can raise three bushels of wheat easier than one in Vermont". He added, "It is as healthy here as in Vermont (and) the water is as good."

Those moving to Wisconsin were coming to a basically undeveloped land. The difficulties they faced, not only in getting here, but in scratching out a basic existence, makes the story of Neenah's and Menasha's development even more remarkable.

Once pioneers arrived in a port like Milwaukee, it was all overland on wagons or on foot to the interior of the state. There were no highways, just rough Indian trails. Fredricke Bremmer traveled from Milwaukee to Madison in 1849. Of the road she wrote to a friend: "... a succession of hills, holes, and water-pools... sometimes the carriage came to sudden standstill, half over-turned in a hole."

Sometimes, there were no roads to follow. Of his trip in Wisconsin in 1837, Elisha Keyes wrote: "After crossing the river we struck across the opening, with no road, not even an Indian trail, seeing no human being, nor even a shanty."

Once the pioneers found a place they wanted to call home, they had to build a shelter. However, in Winnebago Rapids, there were the abandoned mission
A Tale of Twin Cities

houses and a few crude cabins erected by French traders. Most pioneers had first to erect a cabin, simple and rustic. Edwin Bottomley, again writing of life in Wisconsin in 1842, said:

Our house is not one of the best for keeping the snow out and frost for we get snown on in bed... when we get up in the morning we have to pull our shoes off the floor by main force for they freeze to the floor very soon with having nails in them.

Building a shelter was just the first of many things the settlers had to provide for themselves. Most cooked over an open fire and many fires were kept going year-round. Pioneers had to make their own clothes, furniture, and grow their own food. Most families took just one bath a week, often together in the same tub. Women had to wash clothes by hand in a stream. There were no gas or electric lights, so most work had to be done during the daylight hours. During the winter, houses got very cold since there was no heat, except from the open fireplace, and the houses were cold and drafty.

While there were some doctors on the frontier, many pioneers had no access to one. Consequently, disease was another deadly factor with which to contend. Measles, diphtheria, mumps, fevers, and whooping cough took a large toll. Even when a doctor was available, his training was limited. Before 1840, three-quarters of all doctors in the midwest learned their skills by apprenticeship. The doctors made their own pills and concocted their own cures for ills of the frontiers. Skunk oil was a favorite cure-all, as was gun powder. The favored cure for a wart was to tie a knotted string over it.

What makes the development of Neenah and Menasha so incredible is this basic fact: much of the settler's time was taken up by just surviving. A family's survival during the winter depended on how much food they grew during the summer and how much fuel they could store up for heating. This was time-consuming and basic to existence.

The pioneers who came to this small section of Wisconsin, first called Winnebago Rapids, were a hardy and enterprising group. About the only thing they had in common was the "pioneer spirit". It was that spirit that led them to create the communities of Neenah and Menasha.

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Glenn Brill

12
Relief map of Wisconsin.

Fig. 2. Sketch map showing the various tongues or lobes of the glaciers in Wisconsin at one period of the Ice Age.