Arrival of Hopeful Settlers

After the failure of the Indian mission and the sale of the land to Harrison Reed, the stage was set for the creation of a new village. With the help of promoters and speculators like Doty and Captain Lauchian B. McKinnon, a naval captain, the people out East were notified of the wonderful land and business opportunity which existed in the wilds of the Wisconsin Territory along the Fox River. Aids like The Emigrant's Handbook and Guide to Wisconsin by Samuel Freeman helped those attracted to the possibility of a new life. "There is something highly exciting and grateful to youthful daring and independence in traveling onward in search of a future home and having found some sweet encouraging spot in the bosom of the wilderness, in rearing everything by his own handwork." The final push was probably given by a member of the family, a neighbor or a close friend who had already settled and was praising the beautiful and productive land of opportunity.

With this understanding of the westward movement into the Fox River Valley, we can examine the motives and the people who chose to come to establish a new life for themselves and their families.

Advertisements praising the virtues of the region abounded. One only has to read a published letter in the Green Bay Evening Star of June 12, 1839, to realize that the propaganda must have affected many a discontented soul struggling in the East.

The tide of western emigration is now pouring its mighty volume into the fertile regions of Wisconsin. Every steamship that plies upon our lakes... is crowded with emigrants, who quitting the less fertile and more expensive lands of the older states, have, with all their earthly goods, come to the more promising regions of the West... Here, a fertile soil and a salubrious climate allure them; here the forest welcomes the axe, and the prairie invites the plough share and here,
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breathing the atmosphere of republican liberty, the honest emigrant by the labor of his hands, under equal laws and free institutions, can attain wealth and independence. Here no system of myths, conceived in fraud and enforced by power, can deprive industry of its reward. . . Here every man is permitted to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience.

On and on the propaganda proclaims the virtues of this unmatched land of opportunity. In 1839, the picture of this land was highly exaggerated but certainly alluring.

The first settlers to Winnebago Rapids represent all the usual reasons for coming to an undeveloped area. Some were consciously seeking a better life; others were trying to remove themselves from uncontrollable events like depressions and poor depleted farm land; still others were merely swept along by friends, relatives, and neighbors. However, the circumstance of an entire settlement with its improvements being offered for sale made it unique. Furthermore, it was obvious that the waterway would produce abundant power for the future development of industry. The speculators, led by James Duane Doty, soon advertised in the East the desirability of the place for future enterprises.

The majority of the early settlers were single men, adventurous spirits, looking for any good livelihood. Jothan Lincoln was one of this type. We have his letters to his friend back in Hingham, Massachusetts, about his attempts at acquiring land and making a living on it by farming. Men who brought their families along into Wisconsin quite often did not have their homesteads picked out. The family members more likely stayed in Watertown, Waukesha, or Milwaukee, while the men explored the wilderness land to the north. This was true of Gorham Vining. In some cases, the destination was known and the head of family, while establishing a business, also prepared a residence for his family when they would arrive at a future time. The Kimberlys purchased property for a store, a mill, and a residence and ordered supplies for the store all prior to the time of their families' arrival. Just about every man who came with a special skill was immediately sought after. The most useful man in the early days had to have been Joseph Jourdain, who had been hired to run the blacksmith shop during the Indian mission days. Even during the years when the mission was in decline, he kept the smithy going full blast making spears and steel traps for the Indians.
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Seeking a better life was certainly the essence of westward fever. George Mansur arrived in Winnebago Rapids with his family shortly after Harrison Reed. He stayed in the settlement about a year helping Reed repair machinery, then settled on what he considered choice farm land on the lake shore south of the settlement. He was the first permanent settler. Present day Mansur Bay on Lake Winnebago marks the location of his farm. Other farmers who discovered the choice farm land around Winnebago Rapids and who stayed to make contributions to the Town of Neenah were Gorham Vining and Ira Baird. Upon arriving at the Rapids, Vining was received with open arms by Reed and was offered one of the government houses near the grist mill as his lodging. He stayed until the next year running the government mill. The rapid flow of the river prevented the water from freezing, so this was the only mill in the area that could operate all winter long. Thus, settlers for miles around came to have their wheat ground during all seasons. This was the start of the flour milling business in Neenah.

Getting in on the ground floor and establishing a business in a community which had a most promising potential certainly drew the attention and action from entrepreneurs with capital. The Kimberley brothers, John and Harvey, were the best examples. They came with that precious commodity - cash. Theirs was an educated move carefully planned, ending with the establishment of a new mill and a store on the main street of a future Neenah. Even before their site was established, they had a shipment of goods arriving from the East via the Great Lakes waterway.

The government employees for the mission could have become the nucleus for the new settlement. The important group were the teachers, but it is interesting to note that none of them was suited for teaching or even farming, but all of them qualified because of having character and moral habits and for being industrious. All of them had "connections" or had made names for themselves in some past endeavor.

Residents who remained and whose names appear in early histories were Peter Pendleton and Archibald Caldwell. Although Pendleton's contribution is not stated, there remains a town road bearing his name. He was a squatter in the big block house on Lake Winnebago at the end of the future Wisconsin Avenue. He stayed there and shared residency with Harrison Reed for eighteen years. Caldwell was a trader with the Indians; he was a noble person. During the smallpox epidemic in 1835, he stayed with the Indians to nurse and nourish them.
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until he contracted the disease himself. He remained in Winnebago Rapids for many years and maintained his trading post on a 90 acre island in Little Lake Butte des Morts. This island later became the property of Joseph Stroebe and now is known as Stroebe’s Island.

One name that stands out prominently as a doer was a builder, James Ladd. Arriving in 1846 and choosing land on the west side of Little Lake Butte des Morts, he soon realized some kind of bridge would have to be built to avoid crossing a slough with a team and wagon in water almost to the top of the wagon. He solved the problem with the help of his neighbors, each paying him $100 to build a bridge. This he did by making cribs of logs and laying stringers from crib to crib and covering with poles. In 1847 when the Neenah dam was being repaired, “there was no place to board the men, Ladd built a barn back of Winnebago House which was built on the corner of Wisconsin and Walnut, moved into it, and took fifty boarders, besides keeping what travelers came along”. Ladd was definitely a man who made a difference in helping young Neenah get started.

One of the real leaders in guiding the new communities through some of their problems was a man who stepped into the area at precisely the right time as a spiritual leader, namely O. P. Clinton. A congregational minister later said: “He brought together strangers in a strange land in a dozen towns each worshiping together the God of their fathers. In doing so, he linked together lonely hearts who were longing to hear a friendly voice and to feel the handshake of a man who had come to bring messages of love from the World’s Redeemer”. This was a service that was without price to the new settlers. The story of his contribution has been described in an earlier chapter.

No matter what the reason the pioneer had for wanting to face the future in western lands, the routes available were fixed. The Rev. Mr. H. A. Miner’s story of the Clinton family’s journey in 1844 to the Fox River Valley described a typical route taken:

It was for the Clinton family by stage and canal, and rail and steamer to Detroit, and again by stage to Milwaukee and a ride in an express to Waukesha where after 18 days Rev. O. P. Clinton, wife and two children arrived at the pioneer home of his brother, E. Ed Clinton who had preceded him by a few years.

Then Miner told about the overland trip Clinton took in 1845 traveling north to investigate the situation at Winnebago Rapids:
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No parlor car door opens to receive him and his baggage, just a simple buckboard (wagon) and horse constitute his traveling outfit. It is not over macadamized roads he is to travel, nor is it over a beautiful prairie or through oak openings he is to pass, but here and there he'll find a marsh or slough to walk through, or a corduroy bridge to ride over, unless perchance it may be bridged with ice at this season of the year, and long stretches of timber lands through which he must find his way by the aid of blazed trees to guide him along. Knowing this he completes his outfit with an axe, a shovel, a few feet of rope and begins his journey.

In this way, he ultimately reached his destination - Winnebago Rapids.

Travelers coming from the north through the port of Green Bay had similar experiences. Mary Aurelia Kimberly, in her account of her trip, vividly describes the hazards encountered:

Next morning a lumber wagon drawn by two horses came to the door. Everything was piled in and we started south. The roads were miserable, sand or mud to the hubs and although it was a state road (Military Road) leading to the fort at Green Bay, it was little more than a trail through dense forest of pine, or elm and oak hardwoods.

Using a river waterway for a family to complete a journey carrying all their worldly goods would seem like the best way to go. However, the course on the Fox River between Green Bay and Lake Winnebago was the most difficult route to cover in all the state with a series of rapids with which to contend. Traveling south from Green Bay, the George Mansur family with all its possessions trusted Capt. Peter Hotaling to transport them in his steamer through the treacherous river. When they reached the most difficult rapid at Kaukauna, they were forced to find a way to get through. The paddle wheel was removed and placed on shore. It became their canvas-covered home for three weeks. When the men failed at running the rapids in a stripped-down craft, they had to return it to land to try to haul it around the rapids. Again their efforts failed. Then it became time for the arrival of a new baby. Polly Mansur had the baby in this temporary shelter near the Grignon home. In the meantime, the men proceeded to Winnebago Rapids where they engaged a Durham boat with seven Indians to transport their belongings the rest of the way.

All of the former examples have been rough, but manageable. Consider the story of Ira and Amy Baird traveling north to Neenah in December from Watertown when they were faced with a life and death situation. They arrived at
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the river in Oshkosh about nine o'clock at night in below zero temperature. Baird's face and fingers were frozen and Amy and their child were very close to freezing in the wagon. They were faced with a dilemma. If they did not get to shelter, they would all perish. To reach shelter on the other side meant that there was the chance that the ice on the river would not support the loaded wagon, the three steers, and themselves. Fortunately, the temperature had dropped low enough to freeze the open water in the river. With nothing left to do but take the chance of crossing, Ira is quoted as saying to his faithful wife: "There is no other way, Amy. We must cross the river. If the cattle go through, the wagon and all we have on earth will go with them and I shall follow you. We will cross to the other side or go to the bottom together". The rest of the story is that the ice supported the load and they found shelter at one of the few cabins on the other side. The next day, they reached their destination of Winnebago Rapids following the route known as Lake Shore Road (now County Trunk A) and took up residence in a house near the mill. Fortunately they all survived the experience, and after reaching their destination they soon dismissed it as they confronted all the problems they were to face in building a new life.

To arrive in an existing community was one thing, but to come to one which was in the process of being created was something else. This wonderful account by Mary Aurelia Kimberly, fresh out of an eastern finishing school, cannot be equaled to get the feeling of what a raw, primitive, and uncouth place Neenah was at the time of the Kimberly family's arrival in 1849. Years later, recalling it to her daughter, she remembered it well:

About sunset we reached Appleton which consisted of one tavern built from a barn and a few huts. At Little Chute we met a sailboat coming from Neenah. As it began to rain, we hired the boat at double fare, sailed and rowed up the Fox River... A sailor described Neenah as 'two lights - one a saw mill, the other Neenah.' This was not very consoling. I felt I would just as soon go to the bottom of the lake, as Neenah. It was pouring rain when we reached the dock. Slipping in the red mud, stumbling over stumps we found the hotel - a two-story wooden building minus paint... there was not a bed left to rent in the house. The kitchen was full of squaws and bucks... Two beds were made up in the parlor across the hall from the barmom for us two girls, Father, and Alfred. There we girls cried ourselves to sleep for very homesickness. All my world was Troy (New York) and this was so different. Torn away from everything desirable and taken out West where I did not want to go! Never,
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never was I so miserable! In the morning. . . to find Aunt Ann I went up the stairs guiltless of a rail, down the hall where the doorways were hung with Indian blankets in lieu of doors. She sat looking out of the window and at my 'Good morning,' she turned with, 'Heavens, Mary, what a place!' She sat gazing over the swamp of rushes and stumps. . . The stream was bridged by a log corduroy road as far as where the library now stands. Many times when the river was high, I have jumped from one rolling log to another going down the street.

This was the way Neenah was when it was just getting started - certainly not a place for a refined young lady.

Not everyone who came to this locale had a story of danger and hardship. The coming of Joseph and Frances Stroebe to their island was more like a fairy tale. They found their dream home and lived there happily ever after. An article in the Milwaukee Journal reporting an interview with the couple in their late years tells how one family came and survived the first year in their wilderness home. It tells so much about the conditions of the lands and the way they set up a new home that it is worth quoting:

When Joseph, hunter, trapper, and lover of the out-of-doors, discovered the perfect spot for his future life with his young wife, they quickly packed their belongings and journeyed forth from Milwaukee by oxcart to the beautiful spot.

The island was like a bit of fairyland. Everywhere there were wild flowers and splendid old trees; wild birds abounded. A small band of Indians were camping there and welcomed them. The Indians canoed them and their belongings from the mainland to their new home. They soon had a log hut constructed which answered their simple needs. Outside Mr. Stroebe built an oven of precious bricks carried from Milwaukee for the purpose. Inside, the big fireplace was fitted with hooks for kettles; dishes, tables and chairs were put in place, animal skins were spread upon the floor; the spinning wheel, loom and cording machines were set up and life began in earnest for the young pioneers.

Their first real meal consisted of venison, shot by Joseph the day of their arrival. Berries were found ripe on a thousand bushes and wild rice was plentiful and promised many a goodly dish when it should have ripened in the late summer. They hoped that when their fields were under cultivation and wheat and corn were raised, they never need to leave the island for food.
From Buffalo to Chicago, via St. Louis, on the Illinois-Cumberland Passage. This was last year. The advertisement for the steamboat route got in, and it is usual to take the Illinois-Cumberland as you go. There is no railroad from Chicago to St. Louis.

From St. Louis to Keokuk, Iowa, via the Illinois-Cumberland, by steamboat, 500 miles. The expense is different routes. The expense at the town of Keokuk by the Illinois-Cumberland route would be about $12.50.

The Green Bay route—Steamers run to Green Bay, but last year there was only one steamer in competition to the Milwaukee route. From Milwaukee to Green Bay, Keokuk, is about 35 miles. From Green Bay and west, the Illinois-Cumberland route is about 37 miles. For the steamer, the route this way will be best when the river is rising.

The Illinois-Cumberland can run to Keokuk, and more it would not be advisable to take that route. If a man was coming alone without any baggage and wanted to see some of the best-looking places God has made in this world, as well as some of the worst, he had better come by way of Green Bay, and go up the Lake of the Plains.

"Why do I prefer the Illinois-Cumberland? In the first place, because I like the Woods to live in. The Woods are the best, there are so many things to see and do. The woods are the hidden home of hunting. The Woods are full of beautiful scenes. The braves are all clear in the Woods. That is dry in summer.

The Braves are all seen at a glance. The 1st of July is at most always the best. The Wood is always in hiding in the Woods. A Wood is a Wood is always a Wood. A Wood in the Woods is a Wood in the Woods. The Wood has a good name, but the name which the Brave man has to any other way I too,
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Joseph went about the necessary task of clearing five or six acres of heavy timber, building shelters for the animals - cows, horses, sheep, and hogs - which they had driven ahead of them from Milwaukee. Occasionally, his wife joined him in his work outside.

It is a popular misconception to this day that after the Treaty of the Cedars all the Indians were moved away. Not so! There were many Menominee who remained and camped all around for a long time. They may have been startling at first to the white population. Because of their child-like curiosity, they were often found peeping in windows at the white man's strange goings on. Sometimes in bad weather, they were invited into the white man's home. They simply came into the kitchen and bedded down in front of the fireplace, leaving quietly the next morning. Mr. Stroebel recalls such an incident when two Indian friends were fishing on a terribly cold winter day and were preparing to bed down on the ice without any protection except some animal skins and a blanket. They were invited into the Stroebel home that night; the Indians never forgot this kindness. Often the Indians were called on to help in portaging freight around the rapids. Indians certainly were permanent fixtures around the countryside and in the village throughout this period of development. They loved this part of Wisconsin and many were reluctant to leave it. While among the white men, they often proved to be good neighbors.

For Jothan Lincoln, life in the new land was not easy. When he staked his claim on farm land south of the settlements, he came without any possessions and, of course, without cash. There is a valuable set of letters, dated 1848-1852, to his friend back home telling in much detail what life was like on his quarter section. From this letters we learn first-hand what a struggle it was for him to get his land into full production of a cash crop. He tells about his first year:

The land in Wisconsin is Prairie, openings and wood. The Prairie can be ploughed right up and planted. . . Some of the wood land is heavy timbered, some light. . . About 12 acres of mine is meadow hay yielding wild grass in profusion which makes much better hay than meadow hay east. The rest is woodland. I have cleared a little and am at it now clearing. It is good weather in Spring for burning I shall get a crop in next season. I have built a shanty. It is about 10 ft. square, with a free space that I can roll wood into without measuring the length. . . I have been at work for 2 or 3 days just on the big oaks. I cut down one yesterday measuring over four ft. in diameter. In leading this life in the woods I enjoy myself well. . .
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believe by swinging the axe I have made room for heart and lungs to play easy.

In another letter he continues: "After entering my land last fall, I shipped for a Fall and Winter Campaign at Lumbering expecting by this time to have cash in my pocket ready to commence farming or something else on my hook." However, he explains the mill owner had failed so he (Jotham) had gotten no cash. In a couple of years he did get a start at farming. In 1851 he wrote about it:

I have got a small crop of corn, potatoes, beans all small on account of the wet Spring. . . For six weeks nothing in the nature of logging, burning, ploughing or planting could be done. . . Corn is undoubtedly the best crop that can be raised. Immediately on the shore of Lake Winnebago one of my neighbors last year raised 80 bushels of shelled corn to the acre on new land - once hoeing - no manure.

Year by year he improved at his farming and was contemplating starting in with hogs. Suddenly the letters stop. Some opportunity must have presented itself and according to records in Hingham, he moved further west. His letters have been preserved by someone in his home town. They are a tremendous testimony to the pioneer struggle in a new land.

It is hard for us, living in an advanced civilization with all the comforts and conveniences, to comprehend how these settlers managed to do what they did 150 years ago. To leave their comfortable homes, relatives, and friends in a stable world and head out to an unknown wilderness home; to brave the dangers of travel unguided through lands with Indian trail only; to make a choice of where to settle gambling on it for a future life; to subsist through difficult winters with little food, and not know what one could do to make a living - all could only be answered in the character of the pioneers. They came, first of all, with a burning desire to make for themselves a better life, along with a determination to succeed at it. They came with the confidence in themselves to meet the challenge and were willing to accept the risks while putting up with temporary inconveniences. They came and stayed in spite of all their trials because they developed a strong faith in the future prosperity of the area. With this strong resolve to achieve their goals, all came with an added industriousness and used their talents to quickly resolve the most pressing problems. A sense of community prevailed. It was the only way to build a future.

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The new arrivals had one thing in common. They were first strangers to one another, then they soon became neighbors. The wilderness experience and the strangeness of a new place affected almost everybody in the same way. They each became extremely hospitable and helpful to newcomers. This meant they took them into their homes when needed, probably shared their food and helped them get acquainted with the resources of the community. No one has recorded how many babies were born in the Doty Grand Loggery on the Island. Out of gratitude for these kindnesses, it was only natural that they responded in kind to their future neighbors. Neighborliness was the order of the day. Most all had lived through the same kind of experiences and all needed one another.

The settlers coming from the New England states during this early period were, for the most part, educated people of English descent. They came with the vision of duplicating their lives back home. The architecture of early homes, mills, and churches reflect this fact. Examples still remaining are the Kimberly double house on Wisconsin Avenue, Neenah, along with the Vining farm home on Oakridge Road west of Neenah. Harrison Reed even reserved land in his early plat for a possible village green. To this day, Columbia Park is referred to as "The Green".

For the pioneer family, the first concern had to be shelter. This was not too much of a problem at first, with all of the unoccupied government mission buildings. In the village, James Ladd was quick to respond to the need for shelter. For those who were homesteading a piece of land, a few months of hard work felling trees gave them plenty of logs to erect a log shack, as in the case of Jothan Lincoln.

In most cases, a proper dwelling had to wait until more building resources and more cash were available. This, however, was not true in the case of the Kimberly brothers who could afford to buy property and build a sizable house for the family members who were arriving later. When finished in 1849, it must have looked like a mansion in the woods alongside the usual log cabin. It was built as a double house to accommodate the two Kimberly families and was located on the river between the fast growing business area and Lake Winnebago. It still stands today as the Visiting Nurse Headquarters, a reminder of an elegant eastern lifestyle transported to the wilderness.
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Through the early years, every family must have struggled with the problem of having food for the table. It did not take long before the supplies which they brought along were exhausted. These were usually the staples salt, flour, sugar, etc. They soon had to turn to hunting, fishing, and foraging. The next step was to grow some necessary crops - wheat, potatoes, cabbage, root crops - which could be stored or preserved for the winter months. Barter was the rule of the day. Even where there was money, it probably would not be used for food. To obtain needed cash or food, hiring out to cut down trees or preparing their own cut lumber for sale was a common system. This was one way to get such food as flour, pork, sugar, or tea.

Raising some livestock certainly was the answer toward becoming self-sufficient. A cow could provide the all-important source of milk, butter, and possibly cheese; the calves produced were barterable products. On the frontier, it was common for Indian neighbors to bring wild rice, corn, or game to exchange for dairy products. Almost everyone with property had a flock of chickens for a source of eggs and one for the pot every now and then. In those days there were few fences, so it was common for livestock of all kinds, including pigs, to be roaming in the streets. This was such a nuisance that very early it became necessary to enact an ordinance to require the containment of such "critters".

The early settlers were in a hurry to develop a community very similar to what they were used to and a church usually came first. Competing for members were the two newly organized church bodies, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. According to Mary Aurelia Kimberly's account, whenever a new family settled, there was a rush to call by both church leaders to influence the newcomers to join their respective church. She writes delightfully about her first Sabbath in Neenah, June, 1849:

The day was filled with the charm of early summer, made musical by bird songs and fragrant with budding leaf and flower. . . (the meeting place) was a large wooden building painted white, standing at the southeast corner of Wisconsin Ave. and Walnut Street. The lower story was occupied by stores. . . in an upper room were gathered for worship those seeking in the faraway West to renew sundry ties and vows. . . The floor, woodwork, benches, pulpit and choir rail were of unpainted pine; the walls of rough brown plaster. . . The pulpit was occupied by Rev. H. M. Robertson. . . At the opposite end was an elevation of two steps where the musical members of the community. . . rendered in an energetic, if not artistic, manner the songs of Zion.
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Between, the benches were more or less filled with men, women, and children. . . The strength of robust manhood was here. Each profession and various callings found a representative in the audience here gathered for service. Occasionally the sharp crack of the sportsman's gun in the woods nearby suggest another way of spending the Sabbath!

As soon as there was the semblance of community, there were community activities. It was natural to want to enjoy the company of other human beings. Lonesomeness was characteristic of the pioneer, and it was common to bring along the same social activities of the eastern towns. The church, being an existing organization, naturally became the center of many social doings. The women were quick to organize a sewing circle. Mary Aurelia Kimberly tells:

The ladies (of the Presbyterian Church) formed a Sewing Society, meeting to sew in the afternoon. They made flour bags, blue hickory shirts, white shirts, aprons, needle books, and knit woolen socks. As the method of living was plain, there was little call for anything merely ornamental. The life each day was earnest work.

These ladies stayed to tea and in the evening their husbands and the young men would drift into the kitchen where they would play various games with forfeits redeemed by penalties. . . But should any perchance to indulge in a social dance, the next prayer meeting was made blue by long faces, deep sighs, and groans of the Elder brethren, who offered sharp admonitions as to the danger of such worldly amusements. . . This often caused more wrath than penitence in these youthful members, leading to anything but a desire to emulate their would-be-sainted censors.

In Jothan Lincoln's letters, he tells of being invited to a New Year's Eve ball preceded by a sleigh ride. A ball in the wilderness?

When we read the description of the first Fourth of July celebration in Neenah as recalled by Mary Aurelia Kimberly, we would never guess it took place in undeveloped Wisconsin:

The town of Neenah celebrated the ever glorious Fourth by listening to an address by the minister, and the choir sang America. Then everybody marched to a bower made of saplings and branches, cut in the nearby woods, where the ladies had spread a long table, with a feast for all. It was opposite of our house, so we went over to see the tables. The centerpiece was a three story cake dipped in frosting. Aunt Ann had invited the Jones family to dine with us on
green peas and roast lamb so we did not see the tables cleared. In the evening a few of us young people walked to Dr. Yales and went for a picnic supper on the island, rowing down the Menasha channel, where a few shacks stood on the bank. A stroll by moonlight through the woods brought us home.

From these accounts, we can conclude that although life in the community was hard, people of all ages still managed to have fun.

So far all settlers mentioned have been from Neenah. However, on the northern branch of the Fox River were the beginnings of another town-Menasha. The land there had been on the market earlier and had been bought by speculators. As a result of the Treaty of the Cedars, the U.S. Government had acquired this property. It was not a part of the Menominee Indian Reservation, as was a portion of what later became Neenah. By the end of 1848, a rough town had been formed by a dozen vigorous young people.

The first permanent residents were Cornelius Northrup and his family. In 1848 his son, Corydon, erected a slab house located at the intersection of present-day Milwaukee and Sixth streets. Cornelius was a carpenter, as was his son, and self-educated. He always kept himself informed on the leading issues of the day, and his sterling worth had led him to be the people’s choice for many local offices. He had the implicit confidence of his fellow men, and his word was as good as his bond. This family continued to serve the community for a number of decades. Lucy, his daughter, was one of the first librarians in Menasha and was the last of the Northrups in the area.

More than any other man, Elisha Dickinson Smith was responsible for making Menasha what it was to become. He was born in Brattleboro, Vermont, March 29, 1827, where he grew to manhood. At age 17, he left school and became a clerk in a general store. When he was 21, he accepted a position in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Here he met his future wife, Julia Ann Mowry, the daughter of a banker. Three years later, after checking out business opportunities in Georgia, a friend urged him to move to Menasha. He and Julia were married on October 24, 1850, and the following day they began their arduous journey to their future home.

Fortunately, his new bride was willing to share his pioneering spirit and his courage to face new frontiers. When they arrived in Menasha, he opened a dry goods store in partnership with his friend, Dr. J. D. Doane. This enterprise failed so that when Doane pulled out, Smith was pressed to gamble on the natural
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resources at hand. He then bought a pail factory from Keyes, Wolcott & Rice. In a few years the equipment was replaced, the products increased, and market expanded. It progressed and grew because the management had the sense and ability to adjust its products to the changing conditions of the country. The company began by making wooden pails and later paper and corrugated containers. Starting as the Pail Factory, it was incorporated as the Menasha Wooden Ware Company in 1875, and the business was continued by Elisha’s two sons, Henry and Charles R., their sons and grandsons. In 1962, it became the Menasha Corporation.

As a young man, Smith had operated his business with the belief that everyone was as honest as he. After much money was lost on non-payment of some accounts, he declared, "No credit will be given for any amount. No exceptions will be made". His time was well organized and he could attend to a variety of tasks at the same time, always being systematic and thorough. He could take on a problem of business and arrive at a reasonable solution. He was prompt in keeping his business promises. His relations with his employees were that they were just men, not human machines, who should be justly rewarded for their services rendered. He always encouraged them to build homes by providing the necessary lumber.

As he grew older, he spent more and more time promoting the betterment of the community. Later in life, he made generous contributions which included a public library and a park. Although not a member of the church, he served on a committee to construct a new Congregational church in 1855. He then proceeded with financial support, and four years later he became a member. He also assisted the pastor in many ways. Believing in the value of religious training for youth, he actively participated in supervising a mission school west of Lake Butte des Morts. Out of the school came many useful and religiously inspired men and women.

Today, as we look back at what our communities have become, we cannot give enough credit to the first settlers who came and started them. They came with a vision and they had the right qualities to turn it into a reality. By 1850, the settlements of Menasha and Neenah were well on their way to becoming full-fledged villages due to the industrious nature of their citizens.

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Phyllis Herziger Krueger

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