Communication and Transportation

The pioneers in their wildest imaginations could not have envisioned today's technology with our massive communication systems.

There were only a few books and papers describing the pioneer venture at that time. Most of the settlers had to rely on others to tell them what to expect and to give them advice and information. Word of mouth was the primary way to communicate.

With only a few people around to talk to, conversation with anyone was of great interest and a major means of gaining the information. Incoming settlers brought news from the outside world that brightened their lonely existence. The new settlers were told of the development of the village.

However, there was nothing as precious as a letter from home. It did not matter whose family the letter was from, the contents were shared with all persons around them. The letter was saved and kept in a secure place and re-read often. This was a link with their loved ones and all they left behind. Some letters survived generations and have become family treasures.

Writing materials were not plentiful. A letter from home was often folded into a blank piece of paper with the address on it. This blank paper was meant for the recipient to use for the reply. Paper and writing materials were scarce and highly prized by the settlers. There are no remains of these early days that put us more closely in touch with the men, women, and children who moved and lived in these shadowy times than the letters they wrote.

The postal service to the frontier took a long time to develop. One of the first things Harrison Reed did was to establish a post office in his home. The efforts to create a post office began when George Washington took over the presidency of the newly formed United States. President Washington was
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aware of the importance of the postal service in the new democracy. He said, "These settlers are on a pivot and the touch of a feather would turn them away. Let us bind these people to us with a chain that cannot be broken".

It is not hard to see how important the postal service was to make the settlers willing to take their chances going far away if they knew they did not have to cut all their ties with family and friends.

The opening of post offices was not denied any settlement, no matter how small or remote. During this time the stamp and envelope were developed which aided the sender in securing the contents. It was not unusual for letters to take several months to reach their destination.

Just as today, legal documents and contracts were required and needed to be written. Writing is considered by many scholars to be the most miraculous of all things man has devised. The handwriting on the old letters and legal documents was often difficult to read. This created a need for a more readable system of penmanship.

The need to correctly read all letters and documents was instrumental in the creation of the first business school in New York in 1841. The Hartford Commercial Academy incorporated penmanship and rapid writing in their classes. Whether intended for social or business uses, the styles of writing could only be described as ornate with many flourishes and shadings.

Some of the trouble that occurred between Harvey Jones and Harrison Reed was caused by a lack of written statement regarding the change in their contract. Taking into consideration the great difficulty in transportation and communication during the period of the founding of Neenah and Menasha, we have a certain sympathy for the problems that arose that would have been influenced by the scarcity of recording materials to implement the business dealings. Undoubtedly, lack of communication played a large part in the confusion and misunderstanding between the communities.

Once a man would spend a week patiently waiting if he missed a stagecoach. Now he often rages if he misses the first section of a revolving door.

It is almost impossible today to visualize the problems of getting from one place to the other in pioneer days. Let us take a look back to get an idea of how it was.

The two principal means of transportation were by water and by land. Until the introduction of wagon roads, interior travel followed Indian trails which were deep and well defined in soft ground. On hard and stony soil, only an experienced eye
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could discover the way. Losing the trail was a common incident, with an element of danger to the novice traveler.

The Indians had footpaths in many places through the woods. The narrow streams could be crossed on natural fords or on rude bridges of fallen trees. These paths were good, though only about two or three feet wide. Some of the old paths are famous in our history. When new paths were cut through the forests, the settlers "blazed" the tree. They chopped a piece of the bark off tree after tree standing on the side of the way. The "blazes" stood out clear and white in the dark shadows of the forests, like welcome guideposts for the traveler.

Shoes or boots were a very important part of a successful journey. Much of the day was spent walking over rocks and ground-cover for miles and miles. Imagine walking from Milwaukee to Neenah. One pair of shoes could hardly make the entire trip. The travelers very likely used a piece of hide, leaves, or woven grasses wrapped around their feet. Sandals are known as the oldest shoe type. The great cloak not only kept the traveler warm but was used as a blanket when he slept.

Although maps were drawn, they might not have been available to the average settlers. Maps were simple drawings showing the waterways and lakes, mountains, and known Indian villages. From these maps, the settlers set out in the general direction of their destination.

Naturally the trip would be easier if the traveler could afford to have a horse. More supplies could be brought along. In the event one of the party became sick, was overcome by exhaustion, or became disabled, the horse provided a means to continue on.

The weapons that were carried by the pioneers were often ineffective as it was almost impossible to keep the ammunition dry. If the gunpowder was kept dry when traveling on land, the chance of dry powder was greatly diminished when crossing the lakes and streams. Often all the goods being carried were wet when they got to the other side, including the clothing that was worn.

While en route, it was up to the traveler to keep his eye open for anything edible. Along the trails, anything that crawled, walked, or flew was considered for a meal. Hopefully, the gunpowder was dry, their aim was good, and the dinner pot would be filled with meat. Wild berries and rice were found along the trail, adding substance to their meals.

While the traveler was going along the trail, he had not only to find his way but protect himself from wild animals and other hazards. He also had to provide his
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own food and shelter. These needs were compounded if he traveled with his family. These courageous pioneers did not hesitate to bring their families to the new lands.

Shelter on the trail was improvised by whatever could be found along the way, in addition to what they brought along.

Land travel was almost impossible during the rainy season. Many pioneers felt that traveling in the winter was easier as the ground and waterways were frozen. The cold temperatures also had to be considered when planning the journey.

Harrison Reed was one of the pioneers who preferred winter travel. In 1843, he brought his wife and baby to Neenah, by way of Fond du Lac on the ice.

Nothing has been said about the trials and tribulations of such a trip. There were many: insect bites, sore muscles, sprained ankles, broken bones, sore feet, changes in temperature, lack of appropriate clothing, not feeling well, unfamiliar surroundings, unmarked territory, hunger, exhaustion, and anxiety. A real incentive and goal would be required in order to put up with this stressful journey.

Roads were desperately needed when the pioneers started arriving here. Harrison Reed and Gill Brooks (from Oshkosh) cut a road from Neenah to Oshkosh. Mrs. Reed followed them in a buggy.

By the late 1840’s, the Oshkosh Democrat of February 9, 1849, felt it necessary to caution the settlers on the proper method to cross the frozen waterways.

*We observe that many persons in crossing the river here whip up their teams under the impression that in going fast, they go safely. This is a mistaken idea. The jarring of a trotting horse will break the ice when a walk would not.*

Later when the pioneers had established themselves, rental horses were available for those who could not afford to own one. Directions for managing the horses also appeared in the newspaper.

By the mid-1850’s, stagecoaches and steamships were available to the settlers. When the *Aquila* came through the channels, the settlers were overjoyed. Trade and transportation were now readily accessible and created the stimulus of growth to the cities of Neenah and Menasha.

The Territory of Wisconsin had hardly been created when its governor, Henry Dodge, a dashing, romantic fellow who had come into eminence from the lead-mining country around Dodgeville and Mineral Point, appeared before the legislature assembled at Belmont in 1836, and stressing the need for internal improvements in Wisconsin, recommended the construction of a railroad
commencing from a "suitable point" on the Mississippi River and terminating on Lake Michigan's shore.

Most businessmen in Wisconsin were astute enough to realize that the railroads would not come until the territory had been settled more widely, and that could not be accomplished, at least initially, without roads over which the immigrants might travel. So the plan for transportation moved readily from one level to another - from wagon roads to plank roads, from canals to railroads.

Yet the success of plank roads was a limited one, for the enterprising citizens of Wisconsin did not think only in terms of their immediate counties or even of the territory, but rather of all the vast unpopulated lands west of the Mississippi. It was obvious that plank roads, however serviceable for a short distance, would never do for such commerce as these men envisioned.

The primary impetus toward the building of canals to further waterway travel was the success of the Erie Canal, by way of which a great many pioneers had come into the Wisconsin Territory, and by which a great many more were still coming. The initial agitation was for the improvement of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. The necessary portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers at Fort Winnebago (Portage) had long been a source of irritation to the users of the waterway. The irritation grew in direct proportion to the rise in population of the territory, so that the construction of a canal to connect the two rivers was inevitable. Out of this immediate need rose a movement to improve the entire route from Green Bay to Prairie du Chien.

Immigration to Wisconsin offered the key to the proposed waterway improvements, for the initial influx of immigrants had come by way of the Fox-Wisconsin route. The enthusiasm for improvement of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway began in 1829.

Despite the imminence of statehood in 1848, the Territory of Wisconsin still had but two principal avenues of commerce. The military road from Fort Crawford to Fort Howard (Green Bay to Prairie du Chien) was not too frequently in condition to bear anything but military traffic. It actually had only one avenue - the great waterway up the Fox River from Lake Michigan at Green Bay and down the Wisconsin from Portage to Prairie du Chien. This waterway connected the Territory of Wisconsin through Mackinac on the north with the east, and through the Mississippi to New Orleans and the Gulf. Even this avenue of commerce was necessarily subject to weather, and it was principally useful to the fur traders. As the 19th Century moved toward its latter half, the fur trade had declined and the
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pioneers on the land were turning more and more to agriculture and the products of agriculture. Northern Wisconsin was still largely a wilderness. Some of the towns along the Fox and Wisconsin rivers were already old towns, as towns were old in a new country.

As long as the fur trade was dominant, the Fox-Wisconsin waterway did very well. Waterways were of commercial value only as long as products could be brought to the shores. The opening of the land to agriculture diminished the importance of waterways as commercial avenues. The first overland routes were made when Indians followed the animal trails, making networks of narrow paths over the face of the land. The pioneers followed the same trails on foot or on horse. Roads thus formed sufficed for the early stragglers into the territory. After 1840, pioneers came into Wisconsin Territory like a tidal wave. They came up the Mississippi from New Orleans; they came overland to St. Louis or Chicago and up into Wisconsin; they came by water through the lakes, past Mackinac to Green Bay.

By 1843, the farmers complained. There they were, occupying one of the finest agricultural sections of the Union, and they had no opportunity to dispose of more of their produce than they might sell or barter. There were difficulties attending Mississippi River navigation and the all but impassable trails to the lake outlet and to eastern markets.

If any citizens of Wisconsin were to take the lead in bringing a railroad into being, it was the people of Milwaukee, the territory's largest settlement.

From the first, the citizens of Wisconsin were fully aware of the importance of rail transportation. The railroad meant a new and swifter means of travel. It also meant an outlet for the products of the farms, mines, and sawmills. The "Iron Horse" ushered in a new era of expansion.

The moving of supplies and equipment to construction sites was quite often a major problem. The lack of good wagon roads and the difficulty of transporting equipment handicapped the builders. Sometimes extreme weather delayed the laying of track. Sometimes the troubles were financial. In later years, the iron rails were shipped by water from Green Bay.

An old-timer, remembering the early days of the railroads, said:

Swamps and bogs, that's all there was. We had to cross one swamp after another. Soft and tricky land too. We couldn't place ordinary filling material, no sir, not unless we put in something to spread out the load over a larger bearing area. But we did it, and this is how we did it. We
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cut long trees, hauled 'em out on the ice, and put 'em down at right angles to the track, close together and on top of each other to make a kind of mat. Then we put earth, sand, and gravel on top of that, and it got pressed down and down into the swamp until it hit a firm foundation. Then we put on more earth and sand and gravel, and then the ties and the rails.

Early in 1851 the laying of the rails to Waukesha was completed and the company had fulfilled the obligation fixed by the territorial legislature to "locate and construct a single or double-track railroad between Milwaukee and Waukesha".

Trains and railroad buildings were always news of great local interest. The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel for September, 1850, hailed the beginning of Wisconsin's pioneer line, the Milwaukee and Mississippi, and the arrival of the first locomotive in the State. It had no official name when it reached Milwaukee, so the editors promptly dubbed it The Wisconsin. It was later named Old Number 1.

The train was an exciting success. It was the first train to travel in Wisconsin, and all along its comparatively short route, the people stood beside the line and cheered its passage. Enthusiasm for the first railroad in Wisconsin was widespread and infectious. The Madison Argus said:

No State in the Union, and no country in the world has ever heard the snorting of a locomotive at so early a period of its settlement. We once thought, should we live to a good age, we might, possibly, ride across Wisconsin in a STAGE COACH, but before we have begun to get old, the locomotive is at our heels. No wonder the editors throw up their caps and make a joyful noise. Had we been there, we would have thrown ours so high that it never would have come down.

The coming of the railroad to Wisconsin was the beginning of a new era. The arrival of the first train at any time along the line was a great event and the signal for an all-day celebration, complete with band music, dinner, and oratory. Railroad songs were composed. Railroad marches, waltzes, and polkas quickly became part of the music of the times. Excursion trains offered a great thrill to passenger and spectators alike as the engine "sped on amidst the pealing of the bell and the screaming of the whistle" as one observer in 1850 described it.

At first the railroads were not thought to be long distance carriers, merely the means to get the produce to the waterways. But once the possibility of cross
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country lines was made feasible, a general hysterical interest in railroad building took over the country.

Both Neenah and Menasha were very interested in obtaining rail service to the communities.

In June 1856, there was a railroad meeting in Appleton, about the same time as the Aquila came through the Neenah locks. The meeting was for the purpose of eliciting and expressing views in reference to obtaining a railroad connection with Oshkosh, Fond du Lac, and Chicago. A resolution was adopted by a standing vote:

Whereas, it satisfactorily appears to the citizens of Appleton that it is for the mutual interest of this section of country and the railroad company which shall obtain the Grant of Lands just made by Congress for the construction of a railroad from Fond du Lac, on Lake Winnebago, to the copper and iron regions of Lake Superior, to have said road built to Neenah and Appleton, inasmuch as these towns will be almost in the direct line of the main trunk road, thus touching at points which promise to be the two greatest manufacturing points in Wisconsin, they having as is everywhere confessed the largest water powers in the West, thus providing immediate and permanent business for the road.

It was not until 1861 that the Chicago & Northwestern tracks were laid from Fond du Lac to Neenah, making this a significant year for Neenah.

George Reed of Manitowoc, brother of Harrison and Curtis Reed, had been vainly trying to promote and build a railroad from Manitowoc to Menasha which would connect it with Lake Michigan. As early as 1850 he envisioned a line to the Mississippi via Menasha. A few miles of rails were actually laid on the Manitowoc end, but Reed could not secure the necessary cooperation from Manitowoc people to put it over.

Menasha wanted a railroad of its own. The Reeds joined with a lumberman of Stevens Point, secured the land grant, and then went to the money mart, which was in Boston, to secure the financial assistance to put their plans into being. These plans were not completed until the creation of the Wisconsin Central Railroad in 1881.

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