

The Sherwood Beech

Building a road through the wilderness was one of the first and hardest tasks Wisconsin's military men faced after the end of the Blackhawk War in 1832. A beech tree, already some 200 years old in 1830 when Congress made appropriations for a survey for a military road linking Fort Crawford, Fort Winnebago and Fort Howard, had marked the ancient trail for untold numbers of Native Americans and early settlers along the east side of Lake Winnebago. In 1846 a group of soldiers resting under the tree carved their names and company numbers into the bark, evidence of their presence that the tree bore for at least another 100 years, as the village of Sherwood, in Calumet County, grew up nearby.

Soldiers of the Second Regiment stationed at Fort Howard in Green Bay, who were assigned the job of constructing the northern 56 miles of the road, undoubtedly stopped to rest under the old beech tree: their task was a formidable one.

In most places they simply cleared a track, generally following the well-established Indian route. The southern section from Fort Crawford to Fort Winnebago was finished in 1835. Far tougher was the

task of building the northern section through dense timber, and that wasn't completed until 1838. Even then it was no highway. Stumps were left in the roadbed; streams were only rudely bridged; and in boggy places, saplings laid crossways corduroyed the road. Blazed trees along the edge marked the route. About 1832, on a slight rise near Sherwood, soldiers wielding jackknives carved faces in the bark of a number of trees. Later travelers called it "False Face Hill," the name bestowed by the Indians.

On the difficult Green Bay-to-Fond du Lac section, each detachment of soldiers worked a week in turn. The 12 miles that Captain Scott and his men cleared were "as straight as an arrow and at the time was considered quite a feat," according to historian Harry Ellsworth Cole.

When finished, the road served troops and immigrants alike, Native Americans, and even wildlife who used the bridges in preference to swimming. "Green Bay races"—when folks raced each other to the land office in Green Bay to be the first to register and pay for a piece of land—provided occasional excitement. There was no stopping to rest under the Sherwood beech for them.