

The Old Road-Then and Now

During the summer of 1920, Dr. John Carl Parish, editor of the newly-born State Historical Society publication—*The Palimpsest*—was giving serious thought to future numbers of his magazine. It would be no easy task to get the little 32-page *Palimpsest* out each month unless enough competent historians were enlisted to contribute articles that would be acceptable for publication. The assignment to write on the Old Military Road, Dr. Parish reasoned, would require individuals with outstanding literary talent. Available on a part-time basis were two men who already had contributed books and monographs to the State Historical Society publication program.

Parish was born in Des Moines in 1881. An able and productive scholar himself, he had received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1908, and had contributed such books as the biographies of *Robert Lucas* (1907), *John Chambers* (1909), and *George Wallace Jones* (1912), to the Society's publication program. In 1920 he had been named lecturer in Iowa history at the University of Iowa, serving in this capacity until 1922. Parish edited *The Palimpsest* until September, 1922.

Who were these adventurous men, both hardy enough to tramp along the hot, dusty road over which Lyman Dillon had plowed his furrow in 1839? They were Dr. John Ely Briggs and Dr. Marcus Lee Hansen—both of whom had achieved a reputation for excellence in scholarship before the age of thirty. Their reputation for excellence, however, was not shared by the Good Roads Movement at that time for there were only 25 miles of paved road, 624 miles of graveled road, and 800 miles of graded road in Iowa in 1920. Indeed, Briggs and Hansen were destined to absorb a considerable amount of dust before their long trek of almost 100 miles was completed. Fortunately, both were men capable of facing such inconveniences.

John Ely Briggs was born on a farm near Washburn, Iowa on July 30, 1890. He graduated from Morningside College in 1913, received his M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1914, and his Ph.D. from the same institution in 1916. Briggs had served as a Research Assistant and Research Associate on the staff of the State Historical Society of Iowa between 1914 and 1918, during which period he had contributed books and articles on Iowa history and government. He began teaching Political Science at the University of Iowa in 1919. An avid cameraman and nature lover, Briggs stood on the threshold of a long and distinguished career.

His companion, Dr. Marcus Lee Hansen, was born in Neenah, Wisconsin, on December 8, 1892. Hansen received his B.A. in 1916 and M.A. in 1917, both from the University of Iowa. His best known contributions to the Society's publications were *Old Fort Snelling* (1918) and two volumes on *Welfare Campaigns in Iowa* (1920-1921). He began his academic work at Smith College, and joined the University of Illinois history department in 1928. In 1941 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in American History for his *Atlantic Migrations*. He died on May 11, 1938.

Their past performances made these men ideal selections to write a report on the Old Military Road. The articles, while appearing in February of 1921, represented the eighth number of *The Palimpsest* which was first issued in July of 1920. It also was the first one devoted completely to one subject. The fact that it contained articles by the first and second editors of *The Palimpsest*, and by a future Pulitzer Prize winner, makes the Old Military Road number unique. Not a single map or picture graced either the inside pages or the covers. Furthermore, no reference could be made to the Newton D. Mereness list of Iowa post offices since this data had not yet come into the possession of the Society. It seems fitting to close the first fifty years of *The Palimpsest* by reprinting this story of the Old Military Road. We have taken the liberty of embellishing it with such pic-

tures and charts as may add to its attractiveness and usefulness.

During the depth of the depression, in 1937, seven bronze markers were erected by the Iowa Daughters of the American Revolution in seven counties through which the Old Military Road passed. Four of them, appearing on the markers at Anamosa, Crawfordsville, Mount Pleasant, and Keosauqua, bore the following identical legends: This Highway / Is The / Old Military Road / From / Dubuque to the Northern / Boundary of Missouri / Authorized by Congress 1839 / Marked by / Iowa Daughters of the / American Revolution / 1937

The three remaining markers bore slightly different legends. The site of Tim Fanning's Log Tavern was the Northern terminus of the Old Military Road and the marker was placed on the Torbert Drug Company building at 100 Main Street in Dubuque. Five miles west of Dubuque a marker was placed honoring James L. and Lucius Langworthy for their part in constructing a "portion" of the Old Military Road. In Iowa City, on the south wall of the First National Bank drive-in, another bronze marker recalls an important "Stage Stop" along the Old Military Road. An enjoyable historical feast lies open for Iowans interested in ferreting out the historic ghost towns and markers along the Old Military Road.

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