

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Old Military Road

Trailing diagonally across the State from Dubuque to Iowa City is an old ridge road. It was laid out more than eighty years ago to connect the little mining town on the river with the new Territorial capital. The United States government was then fostering the construction of military roads on the western frontier, and in March, 1839, Congress appropriated twenty thousand dollars for such a road to begin at Dubuque and run "to such point on the northern boundary of the State of Missouri as may be best suited for its future extension by that State to the cities of Jefferson and St. Louis."

The road was ultimately extended beyond Iowa City, but to the people of the Territory of Iowa in 1839 the opportunity offered by the government meant simply access to the site of the new capital. The road from Dubuque as far as Iowa City was immediately surveyed, a United States army engineer named Tilghman directing the work. James, Lucius, and Edward Langworthy, the first two of

whom had crossed the Mississippi to the deserted diggings of Julien Dubuque in 1830, were given contracts for the construction of the road from Dubuque as far as the Cedar River. Edward Langworthy states that after the surveys were made Tilghman engaged Lyman Dillon to plow a furrow along the route to guide the contractors.

Meanwhile at Iowa City the town had been platted and the capitol building begun. A temporary tavern known as "Lean-back Hall" welcomed the travelers and tried to rival the hospitality which they had enjoyed at Tim Fanning's famous log tavern at the other end of the road. In the course of years Tim Fanning's tavern and "Lean-back Hall" have disappeared; nevertheless incentive was not lacking for two historically-minded vacationists to retrace the old road on foot in September, 1920. The writers of the articles that follow — Marcus L. Hansen and John E. Briggs — set out one autumn morning from Iowa City equipped with stout shoes and hearts, a tiny tent, an ancient map, and all the information they could gather about the old highway. Four days they walked on the way to Dubuque, their feet treading the modern thoroughfare while their minds were busy with the traces of deserted villages and the ancient secrets of living towns, with the signs of bygone traffic and the reminders of vanished spirits of the Old Military Road.

JOHN CARL PARISH