

THE GRAND RIVER TRAIL

Only close observation when traveling I-96 with its gentle rises and filled-in valleys, reveals any indication of the steep hills, many streams and rivers, and the ever present swamps through which a team struggled to pull a wagon load of humanity. It is very difficult to imagine the fields of corn and pastures full of cattle as thick wood of massive trees in the early 1800s.

The homesteader's route northwest from Detroit toward the interior of Michigan, to locate and choose a farm, followed a ditch-bordered, rutted road of clay. About ten miles out the road crossed the Rouge River at what is now Redford (named for the Rouge crossing.) Near this point there were two early taverns: Hannabel Tavern (Botsford Inn) and Ten Eyk's Tavern which was well known as a meeting place of early day politicians.

Here the trail divided, and the traveler had to make a choice, one trail continued in a westerly direction and was known as the southern route, while the other went northerly.

The southern route passed through Farmington, Novi, New Hudson, Kensington and Ore Creek (Brighton). Here it turned north for a few miles, then northwesterly. About a mile beyond that turn the trail passed through the center of the land Great Grandfather Pless purchased in 1841. It also passed the edge of the land adjacent, which was located and settled by Great Grandfather Euler in 1835. The trail continued along the south side of Long Lake (renamed Chemung about 1916) then on to Howell which was called Livingston Centre before the village was organized.

The road ended at Howell, but the Indian trail continued through the low, swampy land where Fowlerville and Webberville are now located and through the Red Cedar River swamp at Okemos. The part of the trail from Howell to Ionia was not open to wagon travel until Lansing became the Capital of Michigan about 1847.

After the southern route was completed to Lansing, the northern route fell into disuse, lost its identity as Grand River Road and is remembered only in history and legend. In fact no continuous, modern road follows the original northern route of Redford to Ionia. Most of the early day inns along that route closed and even towns that started along the route withered and all but disappeared. This withering away also occurred along the southern route when the railroad was built between Detroit and Lake Michigan in the 1870s, and the stage coaches stopped running.

The Detroit to Howell plank road on the Grand River trail was completed in 1850, and by 1852 it was planked from Howell to Lansing. Toll gates were erected and toll was charged. The plank roadbed was eighteen feet wide and the planks were three inches thick. When new it provided a smooth, firm surface for the wagons, stage coaches, and carts of those early days. (To be continued. Condensed and edited from A Scrapbook of Michigan Memorabilia by William A. Pless.)

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