

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ceresco was the hub for five pioneer trails

The following information on native American trails of the Ripon area comes from "The Early History of Ripon, Wisconsin, A Small Victorian Town in the American Midwest."

The book was written in 2018 by Jack Steinbring (1919-2019). This manuscript is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society.

A version of this section of the manuscript on early trails through and around Ripon was published in the Feb. 17, 2000 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

Steinbring was raised in the Ceresco area of Ripon and was a professional archeologist. He conducted many archeological digs in the greater Ripon area over his lifetime.

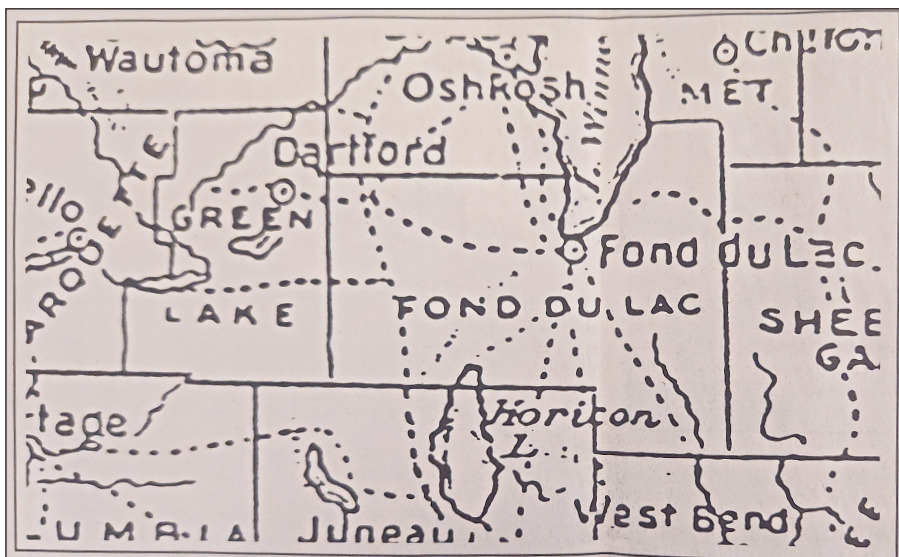
From 1963 until 1990, Steinbring worked as an archeologist for the University of Winnipeg. He wrote several books on Manitoba rock art archeology of the Winnipeg River and petroforms of central Canada. In retirement he was an adjunct scholar of anthropology at Ripon College.

Steinbring grew up in Ripon and then retired to the community, living at 610 Liberty St. This 1850s octagon house in the Ceresco area of Ripon was owned by the Steinbring family for 115 years.

Ceresco was a utopian community founded in 1844 and centered near today's modern Ceresco Park off Union Street. The community was bounded by today's Fond du Lac Street on the north, Congress Street on the south, West Street to the west and Elm Street on the east.

A communal experiment in living, the Wisconsin Phalanx of Ceresco owned most of the acreage around and including modern day Ripon. The Phalanx disbanded in 1850 and Ceresco eventually became a part of the city of Ripon.

Here is Steinbring's manuscript:
Ancient Indian trails very often became the roads for pioneer settlers. Ripon, and more specifically Ceresco, was the intersection of no less than five such trails. The reason for their original convergence is not known. The



THIS MAP OF early trails around Ripon comes from the 1890 Book, "The Story of Wisconsin" by Reuben G. Thwaites (1853-1913). These trails became the roads we travel on today. Ripon is located just below the "f" in Dartford. Dartford, which is circled to the left of Ripon, became the city of Green Lake.

submitted photo

town is not on a major waterway like the Fox River, nor even tributaries to it. It does, however, have a major prominence (sometimes referred to as "College Hill"), which may have served a role in cross-country travel in a system of mutually visible hills. These promi-

nences sometimes served as aboriginal shrine sites, always along trails and commonly near springs.

The spring at South Woods, as well as the source of Silver Creek east of town and a smaller spring near the junction of what is now Highway 23 and Douglas Street, would fulfill that condition. Boulder arrangement and/or mounds on the tops of hills adjacent to trails

near springs have been identified south of Fond du Lac and generally in the area southwest of the Horicon Marsh. Unfortunately, many were destroyed by cultivation. At least two fairly large aboriginal mounds are still present in South Woods just southwest of town. They lie close to a major north-south trail which traverses the west section of the woods. This route also closely follows the historic Watertown Road.

There is no evidence that such a

site existed on "College Hill," but David P. Mapes (1798-1890) in his 1876 *History of Ripon* does allude to an arrangement of aboriginal mounds around Ceresco Valley, and these two large oval-shaped mounds lie directly above the valley formed by Crystal Creek, which flows through the heart of Ceresco.

It is not difficult to surmise that the conditions around Ripon were suited to the convergence of aboriginal trails, just as is the case at Portage, Madison, Chippewa Falls and several other locations in Wisconsin — some of them without a modern town even near them!

In Ceresco, it will be easily seen that linkage to other strategic points in Wisconsin was highly developed. To the north from what is now the junction of highways 23 and 44, a trail led towards Berlin (and had been known as the "Old Berlin Road"). It is now called North Union Street.

This trail toward Berlin led to a site on the Fox River later chosen as the best location for a bridge. Another branch of this trail went northeast from Ceresco to the Fox, where it appears to have stopped.

The Fox was the "main highway" for canoe travel in aboriginal times, and this overland trail from Ceresco probably terminated at a popular landing, possibly at what is now Omro, from whence watercraft served further travel.

Another trail led cross country from Ceresco to what is now Oshkosh. It was known historically as the "Oshkosh Road," then "Oshkosh Street," and

nowadays is "Highway 44." More directly to the east was a trail leading to Fond du Lac. In Ceresco history this was the vital link to mail, all of it being carried weekly west from Fond du Lac, sometimes by foot!

A poorly known trail led south from Ceresco. This trail passed South Woods and its excellent spring and proceeded along the west side of the Horicon Marsh. In Ceresco times, this is the route which became known as the "Watertown Road." It probably connected with a trail at the south end of the Horicon Marsh that led all the way to what is now known as "Milwaukee."

It is well marked on the earliest local maps, and the remains of it form a small terrace along the flanks of the hill bordering Ceresco on the west. While densely overgrown, it is still possible to follow it from Dartford Road to Liberty Street.

Dartford Road itself was an aboriginal trail, leading from Ceresco to Green Lake and ending at the Fox River in present day Montello.

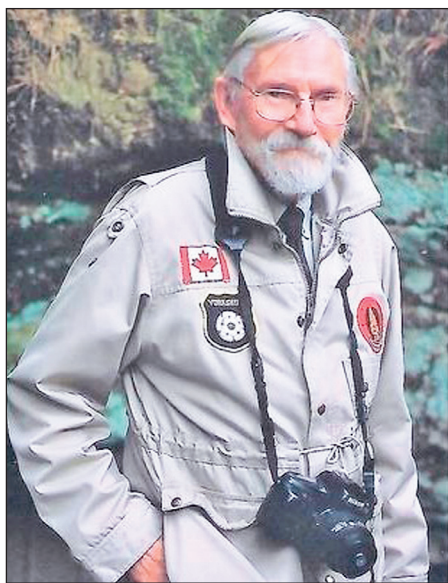
All of the trails converging at Ceresco, of course, connected with other trails, some of which became key routes to later settlements in historic times. The trail to Oshkosh, for example, led finally to Green Bay; the Watertown Road led to Milwaukee; the Dartford road led to the Fox River, which linked Ceresco with Portage and finally Prairie du Chien and the Wisconsin River and the Mississippi.

Very few of the aboriginal trails actually paralleled the Fox, showing that the Fox was already a significant route in aboriginal times. On the other hand, trails along Lake Winnebago (especially on the west) are well identified, as a major trail along Lake Michigan all the way from Racine to Manitowoc.

Thus, it is clear that Ceresco was the heart of a significant interior communications and transportation hub that brought (and sent) news, travelers and goods throughout central Wisconsin and beyond. Based on aboriginal trails, most of this network exists today in the form of roads. Highways 23 and 44, as well as part of Highway 49, remain today active descendants of this Native and early pioneer legacy.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow the historical society at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org



Jack Steinbring

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