

La Prairie des Chiens



A SHORT NARRATIVE
OF EVENTS AT
PRAIRIE DU CHIEN
WISCONSIN
FROM 1673

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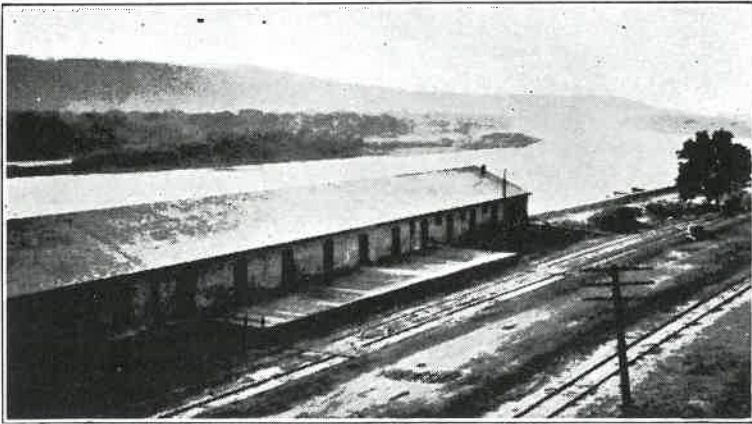
*"All around the happy village
Stood the maize fields, green and shining,
There was peace among the nations;
Unmolested roved the hunters,
Built the birch canoe for sailing,
Caught the fish in lake and river,
Shot the deer and trapped the beaver.
Unmolested, worked the women,
Made their sugar from the maple,
Gathered wild rice in the meadows,
Dressed the skins of deer and beaver—"*

PRAIRIE DU CHIEN'S location at the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers, on a slightly elevated, beautiful plain two or three miles wide and some ten miles long, surrounded by sheltering hills, was an ancient seat of human occupancy before it was known to the white man. Numbers of prehistoric mounds, the patient achievement of many successive generations, bear witness to a great antiquity of human habitation here. Certain archaeological authorities maintain that the lower Wisconsin Valley, with its tributaries, was the chief seat of population of the mysterious race called Mound Builders, and if that be true Prairie du Chien may well have been its capital, for here is located the largest mound discovered in Wisconsin, and in early times many others of varying size and elaborate construction were excavated here.

Meeting at this prairie two great rivers with their tributaries provided access to half a continent. From Prairie du Chien a water route was open to the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence, to the pine forests of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, to the headwaters of the Ohio and the Missouri, and to the Gulf of Mexico. For races whose travels were reckoned by foot trail and canoe the place had no rival in the west as a council ground. However, Prairie du Chien's chief value during Colonial times was its control of the Fox-Wisconsin route between the Mississippi and the great lakes.

Discovery of the Mississippi

Written history of Prairie du Chien begins with the discovery of the upper Mississippi by Louis Joliet and James Marquette. Legends of the "Messisipi" the great River of the West, the Father of Waters, narrated from tribe to tribe of Indians along the Great Lakes became known in the newly planted settlements of New France on the St. Lawrence and aroused profound curiosity. In search of the great river Champlain came as far as Lake Huron; Nicholet, Radisson and Groseillers reached the Western shore of Lake Michigan; Dablon and Allouez were at an Indian village on the upper Fox River, but Louis Joliet, sent by Count Frontenac from Montreal, his companion, Pere James Marquette, who joined him at



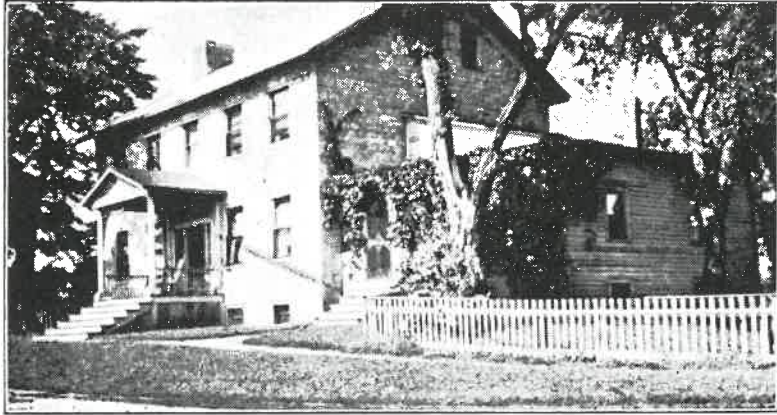
The Diamond Joe Steamship Line warehouse at Prairie du Chien, a silent reminder of the days of teeming river trade and traffic.

Visits of Carver and Pond

The first description of Prairie du Chien by an English explorer is that of Capt. Johnathan Carver of Connecticut who found here in 1766 a town of three hundred Indian families who owned "many horses of good size and shape," obtained in barter from far southern tribes who had acquired them from the Spaniards. Their houses were "well built after the Indian fashion." "This," writes Carver "is the great mart where all the adjacent tribes, and even those who inhabit the remote branches of the Mississippi, annually assemble about the latter end of May (the Moon Strawberries) bringing with them pelts to dispose of to the traders."

Peter Pond, visiting Prairie du Chien in 1773, relates that among the traders assembled there were several from New Orleans, who came in boats rowed by thirty-six oarsmen. Each of these craft was laden with as many as "Sixty Hogseats of Wine, besides Ham, Cheese, etc. all to be had with the french and Indans." Pond alludes to the fact that on this "Very Handsome plain" the French and Indians who rendezvoused here every spring and autumn "plaid the graitest games," the former billiards, and the latter la crosse, a form of tennis.

The villagers delighted in the gala carnival of the fur marts, the evening visits of Montreal, Mackinac and New Orleans traders. They welcomed the picturesque Canadian voyageurs whose boast was "Je Suis un homme du nord," (I am a man of the north.) Their pleasant prairie as bounded by green forests teeming with game, their shining rivers led to the wide world. Along these rivers traders, explorers and adventurers came and went. Occasionally one lingered at La Prairie for years and upon his departure left an Indian wife and her half breed children. French and Indians dwelt together as one race.



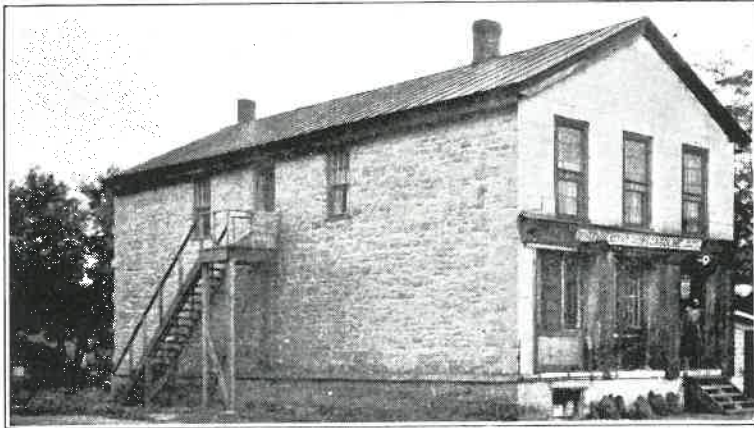
The Brisbois House, built in 1815 by Michael Brisbois, is the oldest stone house in the state of Wisconsin. It faces the river and at the rear of the home is a root cellar intact as it was when the home was built.

Michael Brisbois

But of the five, Michael Brisbois attained the greatest eminence as a man of business and as a public spirited citizen. He was something of a trader, and superintended some farming. He established the first bakery in Prairie du Chien. He took an active part in all community affairs for over half a century, from his arrival here as a young man of twenty-one or two, until his death in 1837, aged 78. His grave on the brow of a bluff overlooking the city is one of the show spots of the vicinity, and the fine stone mansion he built in 1815 still stands on the bank of the Mississippi, one of the oldest and one of the handsomest buildings in Wisconsin.

Michael Brisbois first married a beautiful Winnebago girl, who bore him three children. Their oldest son, Michael Jr. was a lad of great promise, tall, handsome, athletic. At sixteen he could jump over an ordinary Indian tepee. He served in the British force during the local campaign of the War of 1812 and was intrusted with the safety of the American prisoners sent through hostile Indian country to Fort Armstrong at Rock Island. Besides speaking French and English he was familiar with several Indian languages and he finally was appointed official interpreter to Gov. Wm. Clark of Missouri. With his wife, a daughter of Pierre Antaya, he went to St. Louis to live and there he was accidentally shot while out hunting about 1820.

Michael Brisbois' second wife was Domitelle de Vierville Gauntier of Mackinac, and several of their sons and daughters reached high places in their chosen careers.



This building, facing the river front, was used by the John Jacob Astor fur company for a trading post.

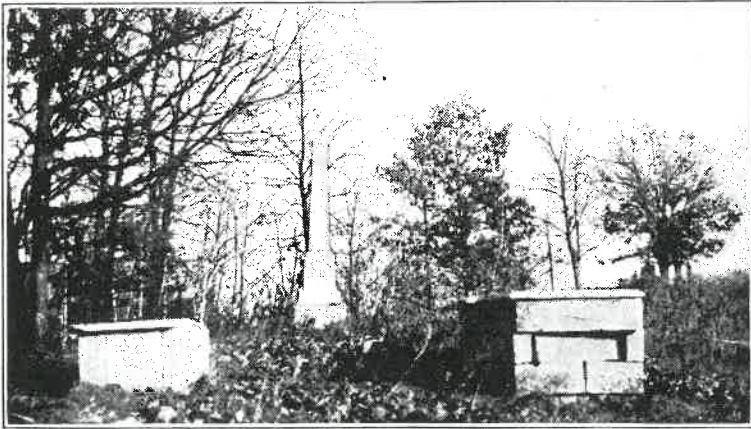
A year after the outbreak of the war of 1812, Gov. William Clark of Missouri, Commandant of the Upper Mississippi, sent an expedition in command of Lieutenant Joseph Perkins on an armed gunboat with a company of one hundred and fifty soldiers to organize a post at Prairie du Chien.

The mound, upon which now stands the Villa Louis, the former home of the Dousman family, was the site chosen. A stockaded fort was erected and named Fort Shelby, after Governor Isaac Shelby of Kentucky. This was the first United States army post in Wisconsin; the first time the United States flag floated over Wisconsin soil.

Great was the consternation of the inhabitants when they beheld that flag boldly flaunting. A stronghold of the British fur trade was not only threatened but, actually invaded.

Michael Brisbois, Joseph Rolette, and Robert Dickson became busy at once. Their efforts resulted in a force, under Col. McKay of the British Army, being organized at Mackinac. Starting from there June 28, 1814, they were joined at Green Bay by a company of traders and at the portage by Dickson and several hundred braves.

The forces were divided into two companies, the Michigan Fencibles and the Mississippi Volunteers. Reuben G. Thwaites vividly portrays them: "With the smart caps and sashes and fringed coats of the woodsman, the crude blue, yellow and red of the Mackinaw habitants, the red and blue and shining brass of the Fencibles and the many hued blankets of the befeathered and ochre be-daubed Aborigines, this human mosaic slowly proceeded through the glistening flood, hoping to capture and hold Wisconsin for his Britannic Majesty." As they drew up before Fort Shelby



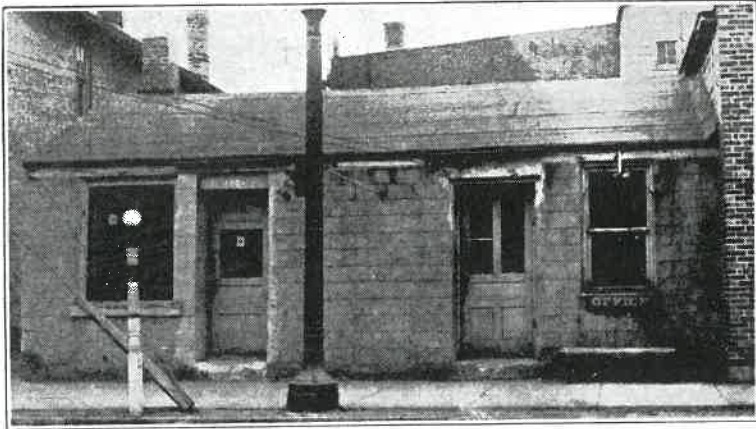
On the brow overlooking the city are the Brisbois' graves. In the background is the Tillmont grave. Michael Brisbois and his sons were among the pioneers of prominence. The three tombs are the only visible ones in the small cemetery.

Old Fort Crawford

In 1816, General Thomas Smith of the United States Army, was sent with four companies of riflemen to establish a regular Army post on the site of Fort Shelby. John W. Johnson, the United States factor for the fur trade, had preceded him by a month and was installed and doing business with the Indians when the troops arrived on June 20th. On July 3, 1816, workmen and soldiers, under the supervision of Colonel William S. Hamilton, began the construction of the new post, which was called Fort Crawford, after William W. Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury. When completed, it consisted of block houses with shingled roofs, sloping outwards and arranged to inclose a space of three hundred and forty feet. The northeast and southeast corners were surmounted by two-story, square block houses, placed diagonally, thus presenting eight faces, each of which was armed with two pieces of artillery. The remaining corners were stockaded. The stone magazine measured 12 ft. x 24 ft.

The little settlement of peace-loving, kindly French people had reason to regret the change in government. General Smith declared martial law and punished them excessively for petty offences. Monsieur Brisbois was sent to St. Louis to stand trial for treason. Nothing came of it but great inconvenience to himself and, while he was gone, Madame Brisbois and their children were ordered from their home that it might be used as a store house for Army supplies.

General Smith remained only a short time and was succeeded by Captain Willoughby Morgan, who had entered the army during the War



The small building on North Beaumont Road which for a time was the office of the Northwest Fur Company now houses a taxi office and a barber shop.

whom were savages or half breeds. Marriages were solemnized and "On the 6th day of May, 1817, the old cemetery was blessed by Father Dunand;" so reads the French record in the archives of St. Gabriel's Church. In this cemetery, north of the city, the markers which would have told us of the pioneers who were buried here have long since crumbled to dust. Only the tombs of Joseph Rolette and his daughter, Elizabeth, remain. Upon his tomb is this inscription: "To the memory of Jean Joseph Rollette, who was born in Quebec, September 24, 1781 and died in Prairie du Chien, December 3rd, 1842 aged 61 years, 2 months and 9 days. With heart open as the day to the melting voice of charity."

On that of the daughter: "To the memory of Elizabeth, the loving and beloved daughter of Joseph Rolette who died, May 7, 1843, aged 29 years. "Mid the blooming of life, her morning sun went down at noon."

Late in the summer of 1817, the first school to be opened in Prairie du Chien and, indeed, in the Northwest, was one conducted by Willard Keyes, a young Vermonter. He had about thirty pupils, children of officers and traders. The tuition was two dollars a month but the school did not continue long, Mr. Keyes finding the place too expensive a one in which to live.

This young man wrote a delightful diary, while living in Prairie du Chien. In it he gives a fairly complete picture of the happenings that took place around the fort and in the village. He tells of a "fleet" of Winnebagos pitching their teepees on the island opposite the fort and of them dancing through the village, naked, "except for a breech clout, and painted all colors." He writes of a duel between Benjamin O'Fallon of the Indian Agency and Lieutenant Schade of the garrison in which the



Villa Louis, the home of Col. Hercules L. Dousman, pioneer fur trader, which has been restored and is now open to the public.

and Foxes, Chippewas, Winnebagos, Menomonees, Iowas and a portion of the Ottawa, Chippewa, and Pottawotami tribes of the Illinois County.

The object of the treaty was to create a lasting peace among the Indians by the establishment of boundary lines between the lands claimed by the various tribes.

Many men, prominent in the military and civil life of the frontier came to attend the Council and acted as witnesses to the treaty. Thousands of Indians with their families came and their teepees were pitched on every available spot along the river banks, in the town, on the islands and across the river where McGregor now stands. They were here for days and before the great meeting was called, engaged in games of prowess and skill, danced their tribal dances for the entertainment of their "white brothers."

At 10 o'clock on August 19th, a cannon from Fort Crawford announced the opening of the Council. The Commissioners sat upon a raised platform; before them the great chiefs with their braves behind them. In the rear were the Indian women and children. The soldiers, in full dress, were seated along the sides, and the wives of the officers and traders had advantageous positions beside them. The fort formed an impressive background.

It was a remarkable gathering and one which might well be fraught with sinister possibilities. There was a current of enmity flowing between those dark savages and they were wary of the white man's interventions. It is said that it was due to the great Keokuk who "stood as a prince, majestic and frowning" that a massacre was averted. Decorah, Wabasha, White Cloud, Red Wing, Shinguaba W'Ossin, mighty chiefs all, spoke in behalf of their tribes; some for, some against the proposals of the Gov-



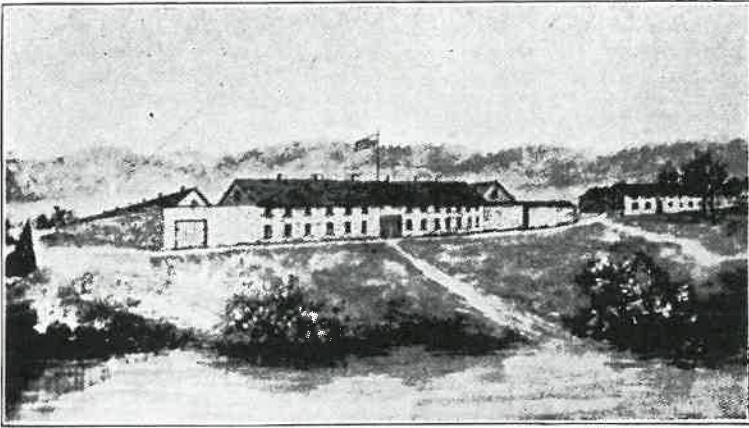
On South Beaumont Road is located the United States Fort Crawford Military Cemetery where are buried many officers and enlisted men who died at the fort. One of the tombs is that of Thomas P. Street, postmaster at Prairie du Chien over one hundred years ago. The cemetery is maintained at federal expense.

Red Bird and the Winnebago Uprising

In the spring of 1827, there occurred at Yellow River, the massacre of the Methode family by a band of debauched young Indians. They were slain in a horrible manner, even to their dog, which was found dead with a scrap of red cloth from an Indian's leggings between his jaws. The Winnebagos were on the war path.

That same spring, there were peristant rumors that the two prisoners, who had been taken away with the troops had been slain. This was fostered by the Sioux, hoping to embroil the Winnebagos with the whites. It is said that one of the traders, although he knew it to be a lie, but hoping to further his own interests by a return of the garrison, repeated the rumor to the Winnebagos. They were inflamed to madness. At a council of the headmen of the tribe, Red Bird, previously a friend of the settlers, was appointed to go out and, according to their ancient law, revenge the death (supposed) of their brothers.

Red Bird, accompanied by Chick-hon-sic and Wee-Kaw, set out to accomplish his unwelcome but imperative task. On reaching the town, they repaired to the home of James Lockwood who was absent, the house and store being in charge of Mrs. Lockwood and her brother. Had Duncan Graham, a veteran English officer and trader not been present, without doubt, the Lockwoods would have been the chosen victims but Graham, having been in the British Army, was looked upon as a friend of the tribe and, owing to his influence, the Indians departed. They then proceeded to



The second Fort Crawford constructed in 1829-31 while Colonel Zachary Taylor was in command.

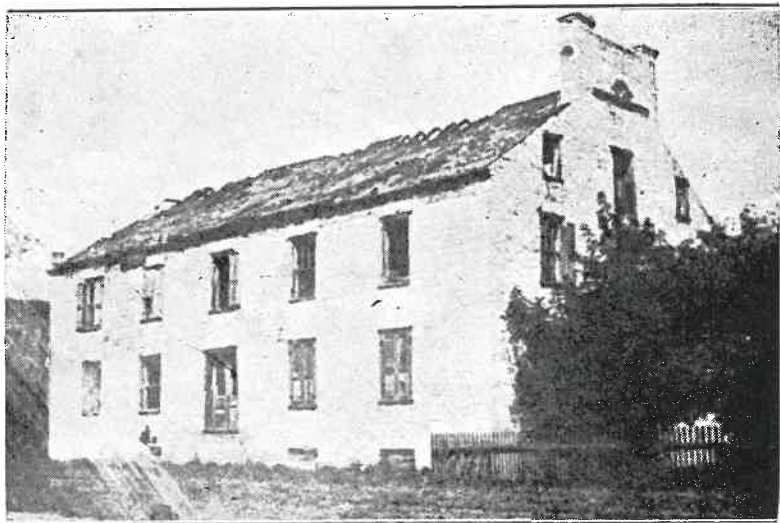
though the hole in his stomach did not heal. Alexis was destitute and the authorities of Mackinac would have transported the poor boy to his home in Montreal in an open batteau, a journey of two thousand miles. He would not have survived such a trip and Dr. and Mrs. Beaumont took him into their own home, and nursed him back to health. It was an act of the greatest charity on their part.

While thus caring for him, Dr. Beaumont conceived the idea that here, through this permanent opening in the stomach, was the opportunity to observe the processes of digestion in the living body. In May, 1825, in Mackinac, he made his first experiment, based upon these observations. He continued his work at Fort Crawford, recording fifty-six experiments made here between December 6, 1829 and April 9, 1831. In all, he made two hundred and eight experiments before publishing his book, which explains his work. So precise were his observations, so true his deductions, that to-day, over a century later, he is considered an authority on human digestion by the medical profession all over the world.

Dr. Beaumont's family, when he came to Prairie du Chien, consisted of his wife and two little daughters. While here, his only son, Israel, was born.

"Beaumont's Addition", noted on the plat of the city, gives proof that he had expected to spend more of his life here and was optimistic of the future of Prairie du Chien. It was not to be, however. After the Black Hawk War, he was given a furlough and although he wished to return, was ordered elsewhere. He died in St. Louis in 1853.

Alexis St. Martin lived until 1880. He was known as "the man with the lid on his stomach."



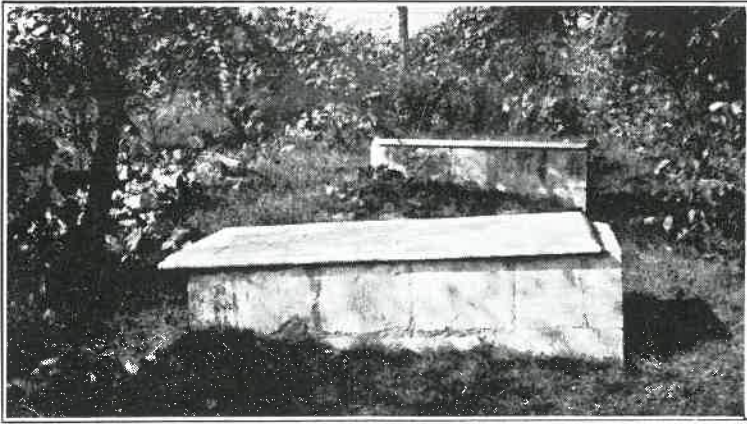
The North American Fur Company storage house which was on the river front indicated the importance of the early fur trading in this area. The building was razed many years ago.

The Second Fort Crawford

The Winnebago uprising of 1827 impressed upon the War Department the necessity of maintaining an adequate garrison at Prairie du Chien, and at the same time it was apparent that the log fort was too small, besides being poorly located. Subject to annual inundations, the buildings were unsanitary, malaria and contagious fevers were prevalent, to say nothing of the inconvenience of having to move into tents on higher ground when freshets swelled the Mississippi.

The location for a new fort was selected on the plateau a mile southeast of the old one, on land purchased from James H. Lockwood, a prominent trader, overlooking the prairie and commanding any approach by river. Work was begun under Major Stephen W. Kearney, who was succeeded as commandant in July, 1829, by Col. Zachary Taylor. The material used was granite from the nearby hills, and in the fall of 1829 Col. Taylor sent a body of seventy men to the pineries on the Menomonee River to cut logs, hew square timbers and make planks and shingles to be floated down in the spring.

The new Fort Crawford consisted of a rectangular enclosure, the north and south walls of which were a stout stockade of hewed pine logs, each one foot square by sixteen feet high. The east and west walls were each formed by two barracks, 35 x 175 feet, built of stone and separated



Joseph Rolette, one of Prairie du Chien's most outstanding pioneers and early fur trader, is buried in the old French Cemetery a short distance north of the city. His daughter Elizabeth is buried next to him.

Service of Zachary Taylor

The years of Colonel Taylor's service, 1829-1837, marked a high tide in the annals of Fort Crawford. Events took place here during his regime never equalled in national interest by any local happenings since, notably the now world-known Beaumont-St. Martin experimental research, the surrender of Chief Black Hawk in August 1832, and the official visit of Gen. Winfield Scott. Gen. Scott, afterward a presidential candidate, and for many years the most noted soldier in the U. S. army, was sent from Washington by President Andrew Jackson to superintend the campaign against Black Hawk, finding it practically finished when he arrived at Fort Crawford. The roll of visitors, official and private, during those years, includes many names afterward famous in the history of the nation.

Col. Zachary Taylor had been for years on the upper Mississippi before his assignment to Fort Crawford. His first appointment as a Lieutenant had been made in 1808 at the instance of James Madison, then Secretary of State, who was a close relative. He reached the Mississippi in time for action during the War of 1812 and his twenty years of service along the river included the commands of both Fort Crawford and Fort Snelling. Col. Taylor did not give undivided attention to the construction of the second Fort Crawford. For a time in 1831 he was transferred to Fort Snelling, leaving Capt. Thomas Barker in charge here, and at other times he was relieved by Col. Willoughby Morgan. His rigid discipline and his practical handling of Indian campaigns earned for him the nickname of "Old Rough and Ready" from his frontier recruits.

boat to steam power, and later to commodious modern steel motor boats, remained in operation for ninety-six years, until superseded by a highway suspension bridge in 1932.

The Black Hawk War drew the attention of the country to this part of the northwest, and after peace was restored American settlement of this old French region increased rapidly. Thousands of settlers crossed here to the Iowa prairies, but many remained, attracted by Prairie du Chien's promise of growth and because of the protection afforded by the Fort Crawford garrison.

Among the notable settlers at this time was Rev. Alfred Brunson who arrived here in July, 1836, from Meadville, Pennsylvania, with his own and three other families. "He was the first Methodist minister ever to step foot north of the Wisconsin River," says his autobiography, and he became one of the leading citizens of his time in the northwest. Besides his labors as a clergyman he served as Indian agent for the Menomones, as a practicing attorney, and as a member of the Wisconsin territorial and state legislatures. He organized the first school district in western Wisconsin and opened the first overland route to northern Wisconsin. A veteran of the War of 1812, he also enlisted as Chaplain of the 31st. Wis. Inf. in the Civil War and accompanied his regiment to the south. He died at Prairie du Chien in 1882, aged 89.

Illustrious Visitors

During Col. Taylor's command at Fort Crawford many travelers were attracted to this place. Frederick Marryat, the explorer, came to examine the ancient mounds; Henry R. Schoolcraft the historian, George Catlin and J. O. Lewis the artists, Charles Fenno Hoffman the author, Charles Augustus Murray and Charles J. Latrobe the English travelers and writers, Gen. Winfield Scott, Gen. Henry Atkinson and other men of note were private or official guests from time to time in the hospitable home of Col. and Mrs. Taylor.

Dr. William Beaumont, famous physiologist and Jefferson Davis, afterward United States Senator of War and finally president of the southern confederacy, both served under Col. Taylor here. The Black Hawk campaign brought to Fort Crawford Major Robert Anderson, afterward the defender of Fort Sumpter in April, 1861; Albert Sidney Johnson and Joseph E. Johnson, afterward generals in the Confederate army; Col. William Hamilton, son of Alexander Hamilton, and Henry Dodge, first territorial governor of Wisconsin.

In spite of primitive frontier surroundings a polished and refined society was maintained by the officers of Fort Crawford, many of them West Point graduates, and their wives, who were from eastern and southern homes of wealth and culture.

Balls, amateur theatricals, skating and sleighing parties enlivened the long winter months, excursions to the nearby hills and on the river were summer diversions. A reading room and library was maintained



Prairie du Chien in 1880 clearly showed the French influence in its architecture. The view is northeast along the old Indian trail. Most of the buildings shown are still standing today.

"The Fourth of July (1835) came at last. A gay party from down the river arrived on the White Swan, and the grand, patriotic ball and reception began at Fort Crawford. Among the guests from Galena were my mother, Cynthia Charles, and her brothers J. Q. and L. C. Charles, and from my mother's lips I have many times heard the story of that night, though she never authorized its publication in her lifetime because of the very confidential part her family took in it.

"Knox Taylor attended the ball, of course, as did Jefferson Davis. She was handsomely gowned and radiantly beautiful. In his new uniform, made for the occasion, the handsome lieutenant looked her equal in every respect. All exclaimed as the distinguished couple advanced, arm in arm, to salute the Colonel and Mrs. Taylor: 'How well they are matched! What a handsome couple!' At midnight came the summons to refreshments. No such brilliant function had ever before occurred on the frontier. Colonel and Mrs. Taylor were supremely gratified, toasts were offered and drunk in imported Maderia and responded to in the stately language of the day. While thus engaged no one observed the transfer of baggage from the apartment of Miss Taylor and from the officers' headquarters, to the 'White Swan'. Only the steward and purser noted that the Captain and Lieutenant Davis' colored valet appeared to be acting on a common understanding.

'Knox Taylor was never so brilliant and witty as she was on this occasion. The Lieutenant also was most happy in his toast and most polite and deferential to the Commandant. But at last the White Swan blew her whistle, the bell rang and all bade their hosts goodnight and hurried to the boat. She pulled out rapidly under a full head of steam and was

a local military force was over and on September 11 the volunteers were mustered out of service. A small detail of soldiers left behind to dispose of government stores was withdrawn in May, 1849, and a single caretaker left in charge.

In Civil War times the fort reopened for recruits, and a hospital for disabled soldiers was maintained for a time in one of the buildings now a part of Campion Jesuit High School for boys. In 1867 the military reservation became the property of Hon. John Lawler. The site of the fort is now occupied by St. Mary's boarding school for girls, and the former military hospital building, purchased and preserved by Fort Crawford Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, is being restored as an historical museum.

Modern Times

The rapid expansion of steam boat traffic brought many changes to Prairie du Chien. In 1857 the Milwaukee and Mississippi railway, first across the state of Wisconsin, reached this place and connected with a line of packets. In a few years the growing tide of grain began to flow from the northwest and Prairie du Chien's new elevator handled a hundred carloads a day consigned to Milwaukee. At the Diamond Jo warehouse forty clerks were occupied recording the transshipment of merchandise to and from inland points.

An event famed in river annals was the race in 1856 between the steamer "Gray Eagle" from Dunleith, Illinois, and the "Itasca" from Prairie du Chien, to deliver at St. Paul the first message sent over the Atlantic cable, St. Paul having no telegraph service at the time. In spite of the fact that the two boats started at the same time and the "Gray Eagle" had sixty-one miles farther to go than the "Itasca", the "Gray Eagle" won. The message, weighted with a piece of coal, was thrown onto the river bank at St. Paul from the top deck of the steamer. The time made by this boat was sixteen and a half miles an hour, considered a wonderful record for a steamer going upstream.

In 1874 the vexing problem of transportation across the navigable channel of the Mississippi was solved by the completion of a pontoon railway bridge, built by Hon. John Lawler. It was the first of its kind in the world and not more than three or four others have been built since to meet similar conditions adverse to bridges of conventional type. The products of northern Iowa, southern Minnesota and the Dakotas were routed over this pontoon, and the settlers of the new west enjoyed the benefit of daily train service to the East, the year 'round.

Banquet for the Sioux Chiefs

A unique reminder of the days when Indians and traders mingled in peace and feasted in "La Prairie des Chiens" occurred in May 1880, when a banquet was spread in the dining hall of the Dousman Hotel for twelve chiefs of the Sioux nation. They stopped here enroute from the Black



Father of Waters Near Prairie du Chien

