

Down Plunkett Road

By John Bates
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I am drawn to roads that appear to start nowhere and go nowhere, roads whose purpose is remembered only in a few elderly hearts and minds, and then rather dimly. The Northwoods, like any rural place, stores many of these once vital highways. The value of each may have been as small as providing access to one homesteader's cabin, or as large as carrying traffic to a whole region.

These roads could of course tell stories, if the crumbling asphalt had such an inclination. Part of the pleasure in walking them today is in trying to read the intentions and dreams of those who used the roads as arteries in their lives. The reduction to smallest capillary today only serves to intensify the exploratory questions that often arise on a quiet, early morning hike.

Plunkett Road is such a road, just a mile south of our home in the tiny crossroads of Manitowish. The one lane that's left today runs .9 of a mile, a small cutoff segment of what was once Hwy. 51. Only blackberry pickers and grouse hunters use it now, and then only in their season. The old road sprouts alder and willow, and the asphalt is heaved up in hummocks, bursting the roadway in slow, concentrated earthquakes. Here geology comes alive as hard rock and tar evolve into soft green.

Old Hwy. 51 once carried the trade and tourists of the North along this section, until engineers felt compelled to straighten the curves and increase the speed of entry into the north country. My father-in-law laughs about the first roads he drove on to reach Manitowish where his wife was raised.

"The roads followed the contours of the land," he says, shaking his head. "Never could get over 35 miles per hour."

In those days, you did not travel north and back in a weekend rush. You came and stayed a while. The roads allowed few other options, respecting land ownership, bowing to nature's eccentric formations of bog and highland, rolling and curving free from the modern slavery to speed.

The Plunkett family homesteaded back off the road before the first asphalt was laid, before the first yellow line drawn. Their life has no remarkable twists to it, but as with everyone who first struggled to plow ground and find a living in an area where nothing was easy, it is remarkable just in itself. Only small pieces of their story remain. Jim Plunkett logged in the area in the late 1800s. He had his own log marking hammer, as all loggers did in those times. His mark, "YPJ," was registered

Feb. 3, 1892, and he probably was a jobber for the Chippewa Lumber and Boom Co.

Mrs. Plunkett moved from Eau Claire to the homestead at the turn of the century and was famous later in her life for requiring any visitor to come in and have tea, whether the visitor wished to or not. Her home was the only one along that stretch of road, and there may as well have been a barricade stopping travelers in front of her house. It just wasn't neighborly to pass by without stopping for a visit.

Her three boys, Bill, Jim and Matt, remained at the homestead after she died. Bill and Jim were bachelors, living all their adult lives on the homestead and leaving no heirs. The house lacked polish after the mother died in the early '30s. One gentleman has written me to describe the inside of the house, "The partitions had never been finished to define the various rooms, and the paint to protect it was purchased, but remained in the cans."

Bill carved out a little farm along the river, had cows and horses and a big garden and plowed for those who wouldn't or couldn't. He was a small Irishman with a squeaky, high voice that ran too fast. Later in his life a friend described him as having pure white hair and flashing blue eyes, looking as Santa Claus might during his 11-month off-season.

Matt, the third son, bought a cabin on a point of tall pines along the river a few hundred yards from the homestead and rented it to tourists. Matt eventually married and moved to the town of Manitowish, but had no children and thus no heirs as well.

Today the foundation of Matt's cabin sinks slowly into the sandy soil. The old white pines encircle the remains. Eagles commonly hunt from the branches which arch out toward the river. Snakes hide in the rotted wood and rock foundations rubble. Otters enjoy dinners under the pines. Crayfish-impregnated droppings under one particular pine annually attest to their presence.

Precious little else is known about the Plunketts. Why would they leave such a beautiful spot to no one, and why would no relations arise to take the land and work with it again? That is all part of the intrigue of the road now.

Hwy. 51, in its present form, was straightened and rerouted in the early 1950s. Today Plunkett Road is roughly a half-circle, entering and exiting directly onto Hwy. 51, with street signs at either end that are impossible for motorists to read speeding by at 55 mph.

A tangled cedar swamp lays between Matt's cabin and another highland of pines which was recently logged. Rows of scotch

See BATES . . .

(Continued on Page 16)

over

BATES: A healing land

(Continued from Page 15)

pine stand at an even height near the homestead site, the result of a plantation planted by the DNR in the 1960s. A little dirt lane leads into the homestead and the land is still open, as if the forces of old field succession have held off to honor the spot. The skeleton of a massive old willow rises below the home site, providing pileated woodpeckers the raw material for sculpting future nesting cavities. Along the bank of the river are old bottles and cans, the bachelors having deposited their garbage, as was the custom of the time, by throwing it over the hill leading down to the river.

The river, too, has changed. The main channel once flowed along the length of the homestead, but its course has shifted away from the road. Now a slough calmly rests here, a safe haven for wood ducks and muskrat and painted turtles. A beaver lodge sprawls in the shallows and the skinned, pale white branches of aspen and alder that once made up the beaver's winter cache bob along the banks.

Both the road and river are backwaters now, having lost their vital flow of traffic, but gaining other lives in the loss. This process of change surely is just one of many that has consumed and reshaped this spot in the ten thousands years since the glacier's retreat. In land, for every loss there is gain for some other community of species. The value judgments, good or bad, given to this exchange are a concern only of humans, and then a matter of hot debate. That this land is reverting to a wild state though is certain, and for me, a gain.

An eagle's nest across river from the slough first drew us here 12 years ago. We have watched the nest every spring since then. Three years ago it was gone, apparently blown down in a winter storm. We searched the big pines up and down river. Within two weeks another nest was coarsely woven in a tall pine several hundred yards upriver from the blow down.

The spring of 1991 was the first that no eagles nested across from the Plunkett homestead. Loggers were back along Matt's point harvesting wood the required one-quarter

mile away from the nest. But across the river and the marsh leading to the nest, the sights and sounds surely carried as if they were close by. Possibly the eagles nested elsewhere, but not within our eyesight.

Other wildlife have adopted the area. Perched on the old phone wires, kestrels hunt the roadside ditches and old fields which harbor meals of mice and insects. Grouse flush from the young aspen, the new pioneers of the land near Matt's cabin. Red fox dens are hollowed into the hillside sand rising from the river.

The land is healing. One lane of the road is nearly indistinguishable from the ditch in places and, where the healing is slower, the road is gently breaking up in chunks. In late April, wood frogs and spring peepers chorus from the wetlands along the road, and migrating ducks rest in the slough. By early summer, purple knapweed, mullein and silvery cinquefoil push up through the asphalt and the road combines curious hot smells of asphalt and humas. By early August, blackberry canes lean over the decaying road edge laden with fruit and the river is often so low that canoeists scrape the sandy bottom as they pass by the homestead.

To walk this road grants me an understanding of place, and order and time. I wonder if these small germinations gradually bursting the black mass are possibly the definition of hope?

Other lessons may be drawn from these roots than can withstand years of darkness and crushing weight. Over time their power is relentless, yet their strength can't be felt against the hand. Physical law would seem to say no such small lives could push through tar and rock. But reclamation goes on every day here, without fanfare or machinery or sweat. The desire, so powerful in even the small mosses, is Herculean.

To walk on Plunkett Road is to be inspired by mosses, to take with you the resolve, the prayer to be as strong. And if you find such strength of will, you too may have breakthroughs in places you thought to be beyond your reach.