

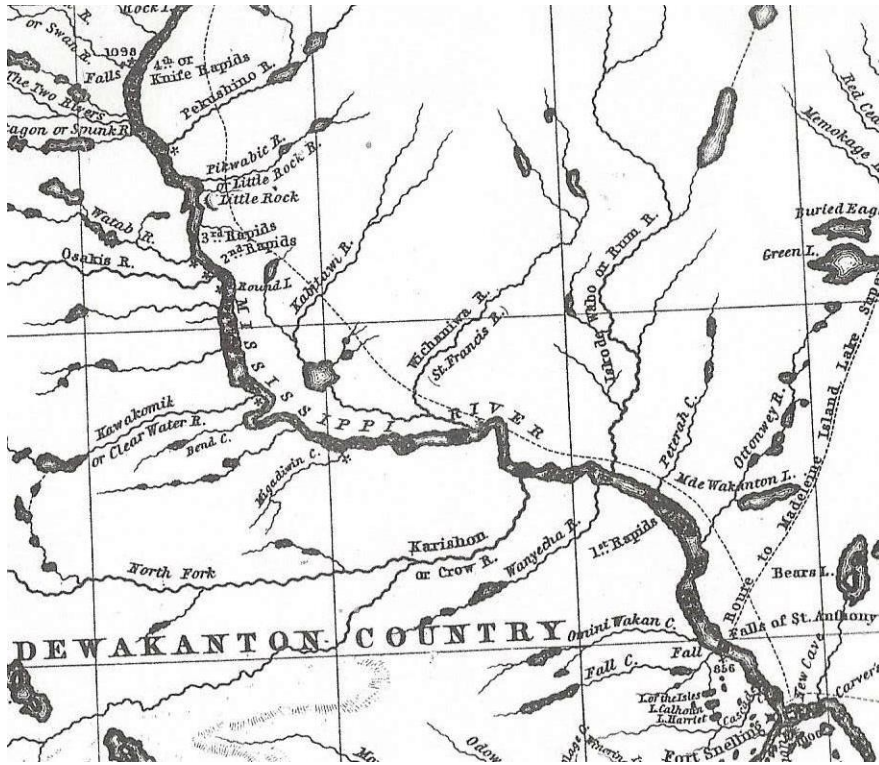
Nicollet's Trail through Sherburne County

By Tom Barthel, Last revised, 12/28/2015

Purpose of this paper

In 1836, the French Explorer and Cartographer Jean Nicollet traveled the Mississippi River collecting data for a map of the region. Nicollet's map, published in 1843, was titled "A Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River."

Nicollet's map was the first accurate and comprehensive map of the Upper Mississippi region. Nicollet's map shows a trail that traverses what is now Sherburne and Benton Counties.



From Nicollet's Map

The trail runs east of the Mississippi from Fort Snelling to Crow Wing.

Nicollet's Trail through Sherburne County keeps to the north side of the Elk River. It is shown to cross the St. Francis River and although not shown on Nicollet's map, it crosses the Snake River twice. Further on, the Trail crosses two streams which drain into the Briggs Lake Chain and the Elk River. The route was mixed woodland at the time of Nicollet's exploration.

Nicollet's Trail also appears on an 1849 map by Captain John Pope of the Corps of Engineers, titled "Map of the Territory of Minnesota." This 1849 Corp map shows Nicollet's Trail as a dashed line. The well-known "Ox Cart Trails" are in solid double lines.

In contrast to Nicollet's Trail, the known Ox Cart Trails pass through the County on the south side of the Elk River and keep to the open prairie.

After the publication of the 1849 Corp map, Nicollet's Trail seems to disappear from history. To my knowledge, Nicollet's Trail never again appears on a map, nor is it referred to or noted in any text or article about the Ox Cart Trails or the history of Sherburne County or Minnesota.

The purpose of this paper is to explain what I know about Nicollet's Trail and to provide proofs for its existence and location.

I am confident of the following points.

The trail appears on two credible maps.

Its use by wheeled traffic preceded the known Ox Cart Trails.

It traversed Sherburne County keeping north of the Elk River.

It crossed the St. Francis River just north of the Svea Hill Church in Orrock Township.

It crossed the Snake River at our Snake River Farm in Santiago Township and again about one mile to the northwest.

It passed north of Rice Lake in Palmer Township.

It is unknown or under appreciated in the history of Minnesota and Sherburne County.

Background and Historical Context

The Ojibway Indians as allies to the French and then the British actively trapped the wooded areas of Minnesota for nearly 100 years before the War of 1812. There were numerous trading posts along the Mississippi River including one at the mouth of the Crow Wing River.

Before the War of 1812, these posts were supplied and controlled from the north.

Within a decade after the War of 1812, control and communications switched to Fort Snelling.

In addition, following the War of 1812, the people of the Red River communities were required by US law to switch much of their traditional trade of buffalo hides and goods to the United States. The fur trade in general was focused toward the Fort Snelling (future St. Paul) area. In the early 1800's St. Paul was the second busiest fur-trading center in the US.

The Sioux Indians controlled and occupied the wooded area of Minnesota before the development of the Fur Trade.

The French initiated fur trading in Minnesota and by doing so they both supplied and encouraged their allies, the Ojibwa to invade Minnesota.

The French routinely intermarried with the Ojibway.

By 1825, the Sioux had been driven from the forested areas north of the Mississippi River.

A treaty between the Sioux and Ojibway established this line of demarcation between the tribes in 1825.

Nicollet's Trail was used around 1830, a time when hostilities between the Ojibway and Sioux were intense. Sherburne County was on the line between the woodland controlled by the Ojibway and the prairie controlled by the Sioux.

The Metis, the Fur Traders and many of the people of the Red River were mixed blood Ojibway. It was dangerous for Ojibway people to travel in Sioux territory or to be seen by Sioux hunting or war parties. There are numerous well-documented meetings between the tribes in that period resulting in bloodshed. Nicollet's Trail avoided the prairie and kept to wooded terrain to avoid the Sioux. The same reasoning was later used for the development of the "Woods Trail" farther north and west.

In 1837, another treaty line between the Ojibway and the US Government was established through Sherburne County running in essentially the same location as the 1825 line.

Nicollet's Trail connected the trading companies based near Fort Snelling with the frontier trading posts at Crow Wing and north. It may also have been a communication link to the Red River communities.

As the Sioux were further subdued the danger to the traders subsided. By the 1840s, the time of peak ox cart trade, Nicollet's Trail was abandoned for the more easily traveled Metropolitan Ox Cart trails.

There are several solid proofs that the Trail was not just a footpath but rather that it was established for wheeled vehicle travel. Wheeled vehicle traffic, at that time in Minnesota history, meant ox carts.

1. Numerous footpaths existed through the area of the Map but Nicollet did not bother to record them. This trail was obviously special.
2. The Trail avoids hills and wide marshy areas, a requirement of ox cart travel.
3. The Trail follows a route that would have been suitable for ox carts. The Trail was not the best route if traveling by foot or horseback.
4. The Trail traverses through the Mississippi River bed below Elk River. Something that ox carts are known to have done.
5. The trading posts generated sufficient trade before 1840 to require transport by wheeled vehicles.

Oxen are not able to put forth a burst of energy or strength in the same way that men on foot or horses can.

Therefore, ox trails must be as level and as firm as possible.

The Trail had to stay on level ground or gentle slopes, it needed to avoid swampy areas and it needed to cross streams in places where the banks were firm.

The Trail was limited to only one good crossing place on the St Francis River, a few potential crossing places for the Snake and a crossing of the Elk River as far up stream as possible.

Comparing Nicollet's Map & Trail to Current Maps and Geographical Features.

The following is a brief explanation and description of the Trail between Elk River and the area of Rice Lake.

Nicollet's Map shows the Trail traversing the bed of the Mississippi River. The route emerges from the Mississippi on the east side of the Elk River at its mouth.

That the trail ran in the riverbed bothered me for a few years and I tried various print matching schemes on the assumption that somehow it was a printing error.

Eventually I learned that ox carts used river bottoms and sand bars in times of low flow. The trail did follow the river bed and is correct as shown.

We do not see the Mississippi at natural summer lows. The minimum summer flowage of the Mississippi has been regulated for almost 150 years. The Mississippi is the water supply for the city of Minneapolis. Several large lakes in northern Minnesota are used as reservoirs.

Nevertheless, during drought periods even now, a person can walk across the entire stream just upstream from the Highway 169 bridge. The exact spot that Nicollet shows the Trail first entering the river bed.

The cart trail exits the riverbed near the mouth of the Elk River at about the location of the old football field. The terrain there is low and level with only a gradual slope toward the mouth of the Elk.

Ox carts would follow this route to avoid having to pull up the bluff on which the City of Elk River is built.

The Trail probably passed through the bed of Lake Orono. Lake Orono is a man-made lake. The trail then wound its way toward the St. Francis River. The Trail crossed the Saint Francis north of Svea Hill.

The terrain from the mouth of the Elk to the St. Francis crossing is quite varied. I do not identify a most likely route. The route would have made many curves to avoid the numerous hills and swamps. There are many possible routes. Possible routes include the winding roads still in use and others that were shown on earlier plat maps.

The crossing location at the St. Francis River however can be positively identified.

There is only one good location for that crossing.

My primary reference map for locating the crossing is the Sherburne County Soil Survey with aerial photos.



From 1968 Sherburne County Soil Survey.

The St. Francis River, like most natural waterways in Sherburne County, is generally shallow, wide, and slow moving with a soft bottom. The River has a wide swampy margin on both sides, often averaging over a quarter mile in width. The swampy margin becomes narrow at only one location, and that is the point of crossing, north of the Svea Hill.

The crossing is on the left center of the illustration above.

A dirt road crossed there until the 1970s.

I crossed it many times.

It was replaced by County Road 15 and a new bridge from the south.

The original crossing was then abandoned.

After crossing the St. Francis, the Trail wound westward for ¼ mile to skirt a high sand ridge. A sand dune actually. It then turned north for 1/2 mile, then turned northwesterly.

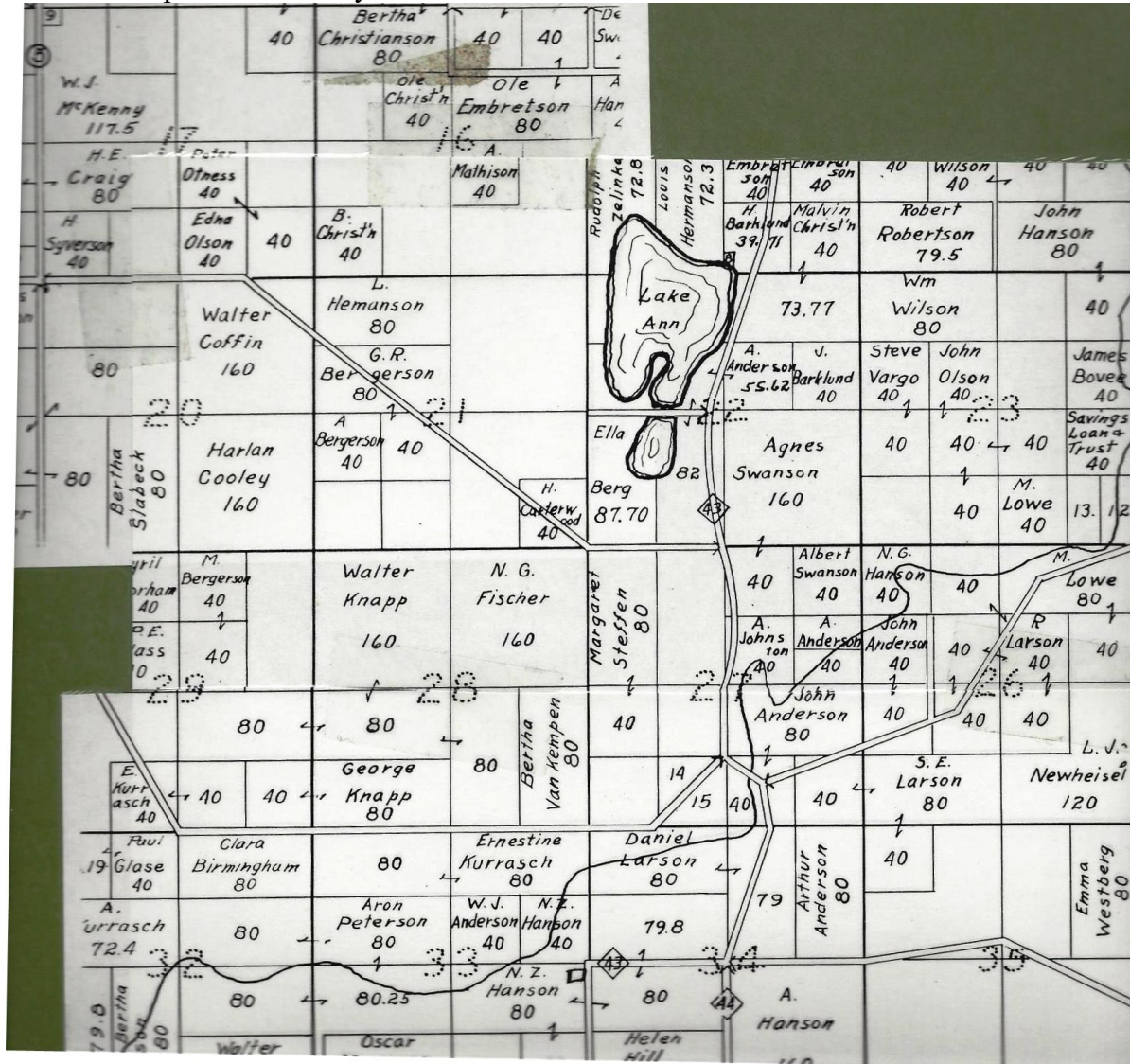
It passed just south of Orrock.

This segment of road across level ground from the St. Francis to Orrock is now mostly gone. It is well documented by old plat maps and other sources.

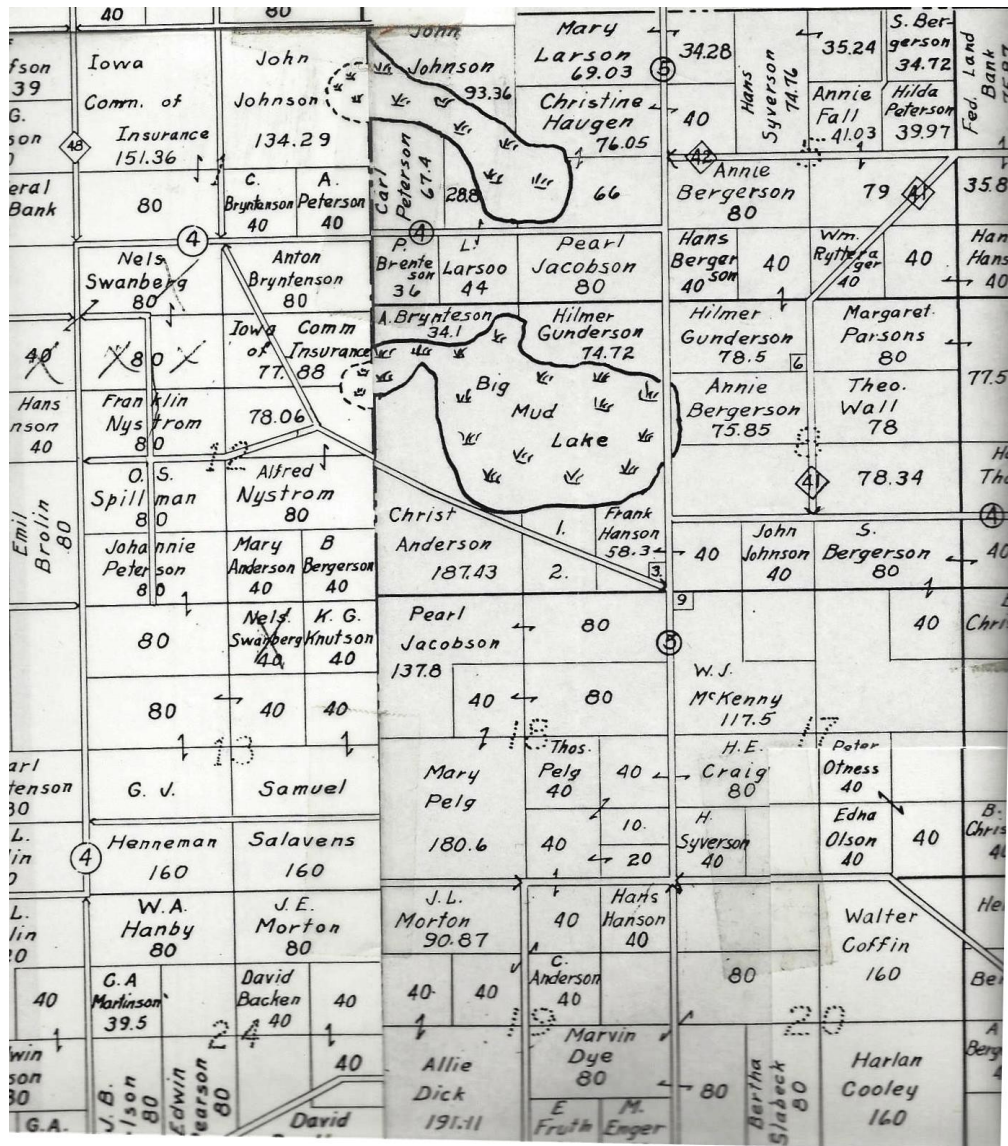
The Trail route was originally selected for ease of travel.

Travelers and settlers who came decades later used Nicollet's Trail. A ten mile segment of the trail from the St Francis crossing to a settlement named Dairy was used into the 1900s. Several segments are still in use.

The portion of the trail between the St Francis and Dairy is well documented on old plat maps and other maps from the early settlement era.



The image above, from a 1940 plat map, shows the St. Francis crossing in the lower right quadrant. After the trail crossed the St. Francis, it rounded a bluff and then turned sharply north by north west. The diagonal segment in section 21 follows the trail toward Orrock.



The segment in the lower right quadrant of the above illustration is the same segment that appeared in the upper left of the previous illustration.

Orrock is near the center of this illustration, at the juncture of County Road 5 and the diagonal segment below Big Mud Lake. Big Mud Lake was renamed, Orrock Lake about 1970.

After the Trail passes the location of Orrock on its southern edge, it passes Mud Lake on the south and west side. That road was known as the Angle Road. The Angle Road is a sand road that was used until about 1980 when the Wildlife Refuge blocked it off.

The Trail can thereafter be located in aerial photos of the Ouellette farm in Section 1 of Becker Township.



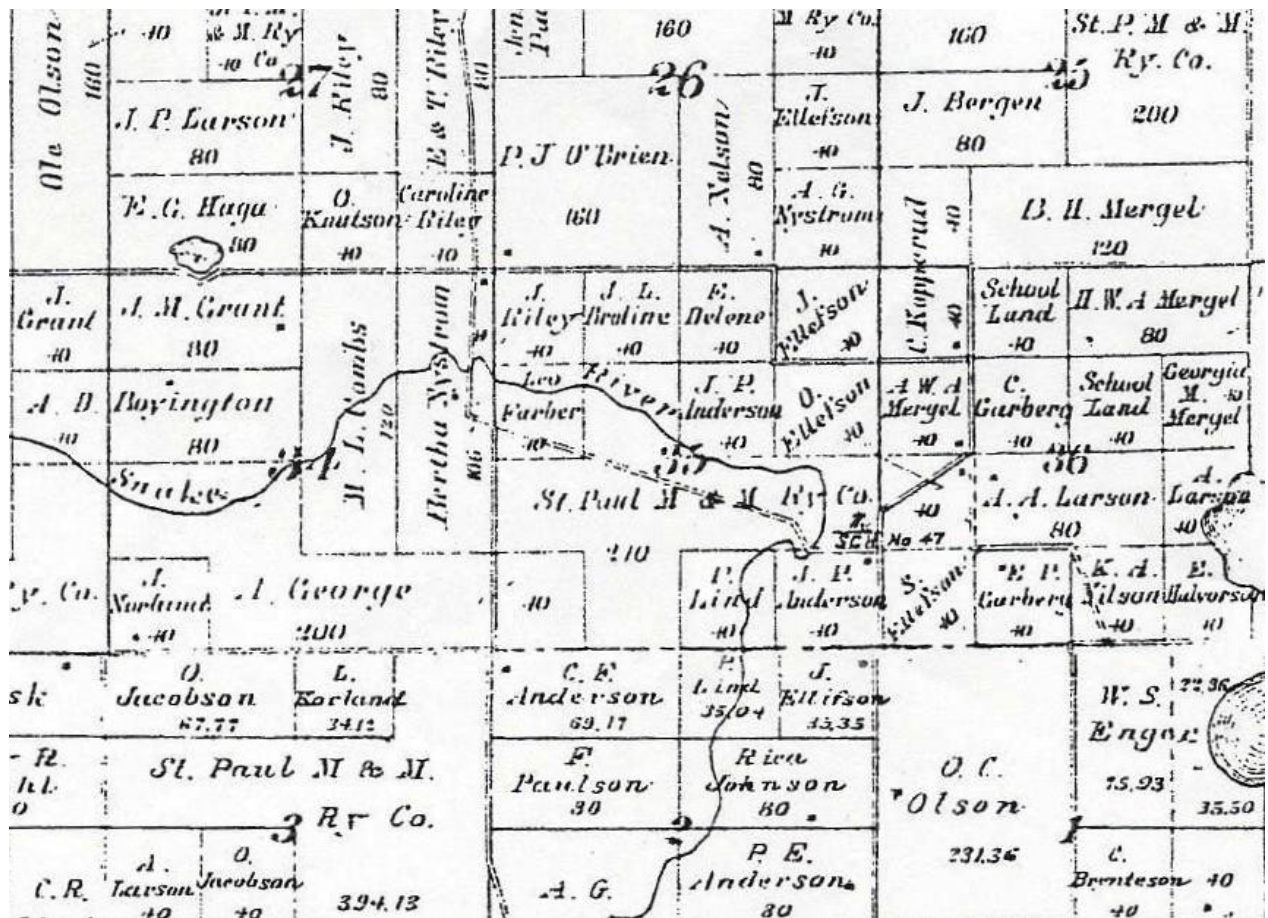
Locate the diagonal line near the bottom center of the illustration. That marked trail is northwest end of the “Angle Road” which runs below Mud Lake. The trail continues into a mature stand of oaks and shows up for about a quarter mile. The trees in the trail are different in size, age, and type from the surrounding forest. From there the Trail continues as a line of mature oaks which divide the field on the same northwesterly diagonal.

This segment of wooded trail does not appear as a road on even the 1903 plat map.

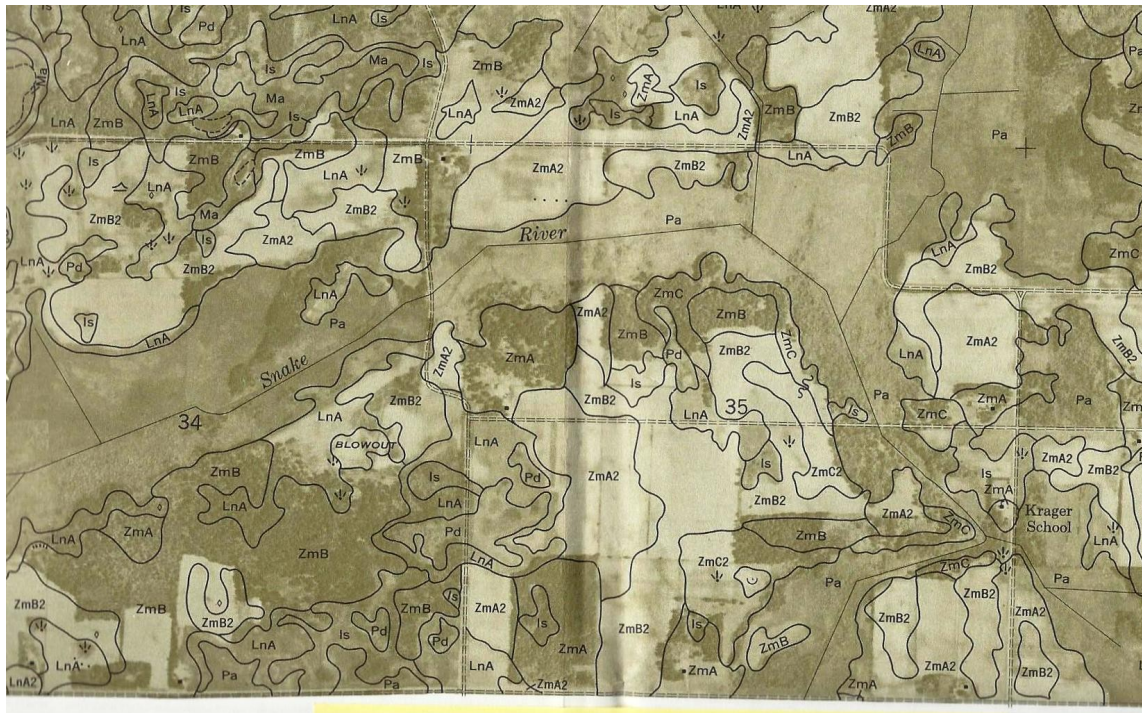
For the next one half mile, the Trail passes through open land and cannot be located.

Again, bear in mind that when in open country the drivers would vary the route to avoid the soft tracks produced by previous traffic. A couple years of tillage would eradicate any signs in an open field.

The Trail approaches the Snake River from the south as shown on plat maps in 1903 and 1914. This is on our farm, section 35 Santiago Township.



The above section from the 1903 plat map shows both crossings of the Snake River. Like the St. Francis River, the Snake River, is flanked by wide swampy areas except at these crossing points. It was not possible to avoid crossing the Snake by going east and north. The land immediately to the east and to the north of the Snake is extensively marshy. The Snake had to be crossed.



The first crossing of the Snake is near the lower right in this illustration.

The second, a north south crossing, is center left.

Note the extensive marsh indicated by the letter “Pa,” for “peat and muck, deep.”

When viewed on the ground, the roadway is still easily visible for 1/8th mile on each side of the Snake. This land along the riverbanks is Oak Savanna and was never cultivated.

The Trail proceeds west by north. Old plat maps show it to run concurrent with exiting 175th avenue at the location of the 62 street crossing.

At that point, the Trail turns north and again crosses the Snake at a narrow and solid spot. The Snake is a small stream. Before it was ditched in the early 1900s the stream at the second crossing did not have a significant bed. In fact, the 1850 surveyor’s maps show the Snake ending before the location of the 175th Avenue crossing. The Snake or more correctly County Ditch # 34 continues westerly for several miles. That portion of the stream was man-made during the ditching projects of the early 20th century and may not have been a factor in 1830..

The Trail follows 175th avenue, after it crosses 52nd (County Road #16).

Perhaps it is more accurate to write that 175 follows the trail. Even now, 175th is an unimproved gravel and sand road. It flexes and winds northward for over a mile avoiding marshy spots on both sides.



The Trail continued north to the location of the village of Dairy. The road ran north in this area because lands to the east and west are wet.

Dairy was shown on the 1903 and the 1914 plat maps but disappeared thereafter.

The Trail turned westerly and resumed its west by north route as it approached the location of Dairy.

It did so to avoid the wetlands of the St. Francis. Those wetlands still exist and are over a half-mile wide, south of Santiago. The west by north track kept the Trail on solid ground on the south side of land now drained by County Ditch # 22.

The trail's exact route is not apparent west of Dairy. It enters an area of open ground that has been tilled for many years. It is certain however, that the route would have been south of Ditch # 22 and north of Boyd Lake.

Nicollet's Map is quite specific concerning the crossing of Briggs Creek and Stoney Branch. The first drains into Briggs Lake, the second runs into Rice Lake. These streams have various names on different documents.

Nicollet's Map clearly shows the Trail crossing both of the two Rice Lake streams at a location near the north end of Rice Lake.

The 1968 Soil Survey shows that the best crossing of these two waterways is in fact, ½ mile north of Rice Lake, near the center of section 2.

Nicollet's Map shows many details concerning the location of the trail relative to the lakes and streams.

This crossing above Rice Lake is one of the most conclusive pieces of evidence validating Nicollet's Trail.

The Trail then resumed its west by north direction through unremarkable terrain to the Elk River. A probable route for it is just south of Stoney Brook as it runs west by north.

I have not located a specific crossing of the Elk in this area. Many possible crossing points exist. The Elk River has a well defined bed and is not marshy. Although the banks can be high in some locations there are plenty of opportunities for an easy grade approach by traveling parallel to the River for a short distance.

After crossing the Elk River, the terrain is generally solid but rolling. Numerous routes could be followed.

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