

Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

March 2024

The Wheelbarrow Race of 1931

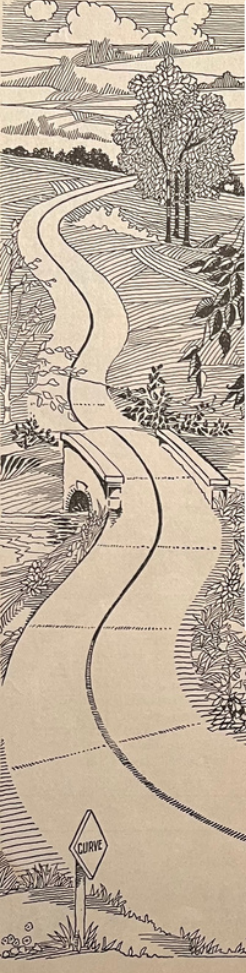
215 Miles, 10 Days and the Attention of the Nation

Something to think about next time you travel down Hwy 45

By 1915, logging the white pine in Wisconsin had run its course. The railroads that had been built to carry logs south from the northern forests to the cities had a new clientele. These same rails now carried tourists north, lured by the adventure the land and the lakes offered.

Businesses that grew around supporting the logging industry were now transforming to supply the seasonal travelers. For Three Lakes, this was the first in a series of transitions made over changing times to survive as a community.

Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, recognizing the potential that the cutover landscape of the Northwoods offered their economies, all began a campaign to improve road travel from the populated cities. Travel by automobile was definitely the future.



The plan in the early 1920's was to "understand the needs and desires of the motorist." The Milwaukee Journal published a yearly pamphlet, *The Call of the Open Road*, that in 1924 boasted that Wisconsin roads were "broad and safe and more accurately and plainly marked than those of any other state," with more than 10,000 miles of "excellent" highway and the counties maintaining another 10,000 miles of road in "good condition." Advertising tempted road travelers with "hundreds of splendidly equipped hotels and resorts...appetizing foods, restful rooms, and courteous service...picturesque places ...

well kept campsites to rough it, and sleeping beneath the stars."



You don't need to be able to clearly read this 1920 *Rand McNally Auto Trails Map* to see where the 10,000's of miles were located in the state.

As there was a committed vision to continue to complete more "excellent" roads, the 1930 Wisconsin State Road Map shows that progress had been made.

In 1930, Three Lakes had two state highways that came into town, both gravel. State Hwy 26 (later to become US 45) had a number of sections that also remained unimproved along its north south length. To call attention to this, the Highway 26 Club created an event to celebrate a completed section near Fond du Lac - a 215 mile, 10 day wheelbarrow push from Waupun to Eagle River.



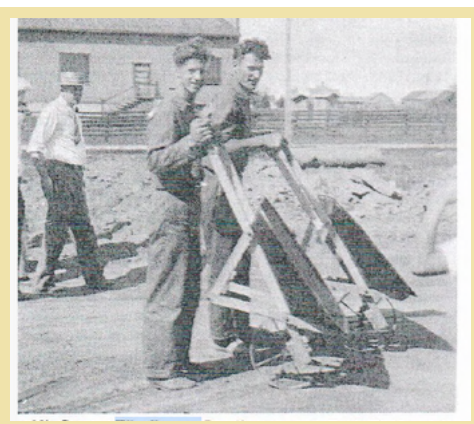
Walt Goldsworthy wrote about it in *The Pine the Plow and the Pioneer*, vol.2

Acclaimed as one of the top promotional events ever to be held in Northern Wisconsin, the Wheelbarrow Race of 1931, captured the imagination of the public from coast to coast. It was reported that 191 newspapers throughout the U.S. carried 425 articles that reached the combined readership of 8,896,353. The event was promoted to call attention to the need for concrete paving on Highway 26 (now U.S. 45). Fourteen racers took off from Waupun, Wis., on August 28, and arrived in Eagle River on September 6, amid a cheering response of spectators. Erwin Wahlers of Birnamwood was the winner, covering the 215 miles in 41 hours, 37 minutes and six seconds. This gave him a rate of 5.2 miles per hour. Second place winner was Herbert Anklam of Rosendale, Wis., who made the total "push" in 43 hours, 51 minutes and eight seconds. Third place winner was Paul Callum of Three Lakes, with the time of 46 hours, 11 minutes and five seconds. Four of the original contestants dropped out. Enroute, the contestants were hosted at the various towns where they overnighted, with food and dancing. On arriving in Eagle River the bands played and the contestants were paraded through the town to the fairgrounds where Angus McDonald of Three Lakes presented the prizes. Prize money was \$150 for first; \$100 for second and Paul Callum received \$50. All entrants finishing received \$5 per day expense money. They also were allowed to keep their wheelbarrows as "trophies" of the event. *the incentive - money and sport*



- 8/28 Waupun to Rosendale 14 mi
- 8/29 to Oshkosh 16 mi
- 8/30 to New London 33 mi
- 8/31 to Marion 24 mi
- 9/1 to Wittenberg 24 mi
- 9/2 to Antigo 24 mi
- 9/3 to Elcho 23 mi
- 9/4 to Monico 11 mi
- 9/5 to Three Lakes 20 mi
- 9/6 to Eagle River 11 mi

The miles listed in an August 22 press release add up to 200 miles. But 200 or 215,, give these guys a shout out when you drive on 45!



"World's Greatest Wheelbarrow Race" contestants, Erwin Wahlers, left, of Birnamwood, and Paul Callum, Three Lakes, right, as they prepare to leave Three Lakes for Eagle River on the final leg of the "big push" that ushered in a new era of paved roads for the North Country. (Harold Chapman photo)