

The Old Road, Byron Township

What was it like to be a youngster in the 1920s and 1930s and live less than a quarter of a mile away from an old abandoned road that had a dark and sinister history?

My parents bought the "George Herman" farm in section 19 of Byron Township. We moved onto it in April of 1926. Our buildings were inside the first bend of River Road, a gravel township road, but less than a quarter mile to the west there was an abandoned road, a half mile long, that ran from River Road south to County Road F. This was just a "green space", overgrown with grass and clumps of sumac and wild plums. The fence on each side of the road was still intact, so the farmers on either side just worked the fields up to the fence. The last vehicles that traveled the old road must have gone through muddy stretches as the middle of the road was quite rutted up. We walked along the fence rows.

The story of the old road, as I remember it, was: George Herman and his wife owned the farm now identified as fire #N3551 River Road. They wanted to semi-retire, so they built a new "Sears Roebuck" house and a small barn across the road (the one my folks bought). They planned on moving into it and letting their son farm the older place. However, while their son was courting a girl who lived somewhere to the south of them, another fellow started dating her as well. Young Mr. Herman knew his rival would be coming home on the old road, so one night he went to ambush the fellow and murdered him. Nowadays murders are "a dime a dozen" on TV and in the movies. We know that as soon as the cameras are turned off, the victim will get up, wash off the fake blood and be on his/her way, possibly to pose as a victim/corpse in the next "whodunit". But back in the 20s and 30s, murders were for real, and just the thought of them made shivers go up and down your spine.

My older sister Dorothy and I ordinarily walked a half mile west to Mill Pond Road, then a half mile south to County Road F to get to Genesee school. Sometimes in early spring, we would walk home crosslots by going east on F to the first farm, cut through their farmyard, then go north to get to their fields of water cress springs. There were about five acres of pristine, rough, hilly land with several springs and miniature waterfalls, each of which had wonderful fresh water cress. The stores did not carry fresh greens all winter as they do now and even if they had, we would not have been able to afford them. Dorothy and I would fill our lunch buckets with cress, then walk home via the old road. I was always apprehensive – how did I know I wasn't walking on the very spot where that murder had taken place a few years earlier?

To make matters worse, we had a story in our reading book about "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." The goats had to cross a certain bridge to get to their pasture. A wicked old troll lived under the bridge. He got the first two goats, but the third one outsmarted him and escaped. Now I knew that was a "made-up" story. There were not really any such things as trolls. However, where the Old Road joined River Road, there was a deep ditch and the crude old bridge across it was still there. It had been some years since the bridge had been maintained, so several of the planks were missing or loose. As I said, I knew there wasn't any such thing as a troll, but with my nerves all on edge from possibly walking on the murder site, I could not help but think that if there really were such things as trolls, this rickety abandoned old bridge would be just the perfect place for them, so I would run across the bridge as fast as I could, just in case...

A little later in spring, Dorothy and I would go along the fence rows of the old road and pick asparagus. Since I don't believe asparagus is native to Wisconsin, we figured there must have been two or three log cabins that had gardens with asparagus along the

road. Nothing was left of the buildings. They were probably dismantled and hauled away to build sheds and barns, but the asparagus beds and a few patches of blooming crocus and some small piles of broken dishes marked the spots where the cabins must have stood. Sometimes I imagined that I could almost see the pioneer boys and girls playing and working by their log cabins. And before then, there must have been wigwams and Indian boys and girls, and herds of buffalo...

The "Old Road" was still intact through the 1960s, a green space with a fence on either side, but sometime since then a fence was built down the middle of the space. The adjacent fields were worked up to the new fence, leaving no reminder of the former road unless there is still a vestige of it near the water cress springs.

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