

A River Road-87 Ramble

An Auto Tour of the Oldest
Road in Northwest
Wisconsin



Russ Hanson
The River Road Rambler

River Road-HWY 87 Ramble

You are invited to a River Road – Hwy 87 Self Guided Tour. You may take the whole tour or shorten the loop by taking any of the dozen cross roads along the way. The full loop tour is 40 miles. It begins anywhere along the loop and continues until you return to your starting place.

Drive slowly when you are on the River Road – 45 miles per hour is the speed limit. Watch carefully for deer, turkeys and bear.

The Southern tour starts, for history buffs, at the restored Cushing Land Agency—the Baker Building on Main Street in St Croix Falls. The St. Croix Falls Historical Society has a huge collection of pictures of from the old days on the river.

A few blocks north is the old Auditorium Theater (now the Festival Theater) where you can see what is playing for the weekend and buy a ticket for the end of your tour.

Across the road is the 1906 Power Dam, visible from the lookout stop. The dam covers the falls and backs the water up over six miles of rapids—making the river upstream, a prime summer boating area.

Another few blocks north is the road to the National Scenic and Wild River Headquarters. In 1968, the U. S. Congress created the upper St. Croix River as a wild river, to be preserved for the future. You can find geology and history of the river and logging as well as maps and other displays here.

Head north out of St. Croix Falls on Hwy 87, going slowly and deliberately up the 1840s trail that followed the river. The falls at St Croix and the rapids for 6 miles above made river travel almost impossible. Boats came to St Croix and unloaded their supplies to oxen and horse drawn wagons and bobsleds to continue north and east to logging camps 20 miles or more up river.

The first stop is at the Lion's club park just out of St Croix to read the historical marker that commemorates a huge battle between the Ojibwa (Chippewa) and Dakota (Sioux) Indians fought at the boundary of their territories. The Park is a popular summer place to put in your boat. The River looks like a lake here, behind the power dam at St Croix Falls.

Across from the park is a 480 acre reserve set aside by the City of St. Croix Falls. Look carefully and you will spot the Ice Age trail entrance—a trail that travels all the way across Wisconsin following glacial features from tens of 1000s of years ago.

Just ahead you have a choice to make: Follow Hwy 87 north or turn left on the River Road. The two roads parallel each other for the next 20 miles. There are dozens of cross roads that bridge the few miles between them. Both roads are on our itinerary for the day. Taking the old River Road takes you directly to the edge of the St Croix River where you will enter the Wild River area for seven scenic miles just off the bank of the

Oxen were used before horses for logging in the St Croix River Valley



river. Traveling this road in late fall, winter or early spring allows you to see that you are really on the edge of the river most of the way. In summer, you will only

catch a glimpse of the river here and there through the leaves. To the east side of the road is the steep bank of the river. The vegetation is hardwoods. Try to spot some of the butternut trees and see if they have nuts this year.

The first stop on the River road is Spangler's bay. The Spangler (Spengler) family settled right on the river and provided a stopping place for travelers headed north on the river road from St Croix. It is said that there was a pause in the rapids on the river too, so boats trying to run the rapids could rest too. The rapids have been gone since the 1906 Power Dam in St Croix Falls flooded them all the way to Wolf Creek.

A few more miles and you will see the signs for Nevers Dam. Stop and look at the Wild River parks there. You can put a boat in the river. You may be able to see signs of the 1890 Nevers Dam that stood here. Charlie Nevers had a stopping place along the river road. Loggers sent millions of logs down the St Croix

Nevers Dam held logs and water upstream



and found them getting jammed on the rapids, especially at St Croix Falls. To solve the problem they built a huge

wooden dam where Charlie had lived. They stopped the logs there, built up a great head of water and then let them go with a rush that took them all the way through St Croix Falls and sped them on their way to the sawmills at Stillwater.

Just north of the Nevers Dam driveways you can walk back into the woods and see the foundations of the old Dam buildings, including the intact root cellar. Nearly 300 people worked there for 3 years to build the dam. There were bunkhouses, cooking buildings, a blacksmith shop, sawmill, horse and hay barns, granaries and more.

Logging on the River came to an end in 1914. Nevers Dam was then used to assist the power dam at St Croix by releasing water a few hours before the evening surge of electrical use. People came home from work and the extra water provided their extra power.

Riverside Auto is back from the river quite some distance. The little cabins out front were part of a row of fishermen cabins. When Nevers Dam flooded the river valley below they were prime places to stay and fish on the wide lake above the dam. Now it is all brush and the river is invisible below as it slowly returns to a

Stumps dot the pastureland soon to be fields

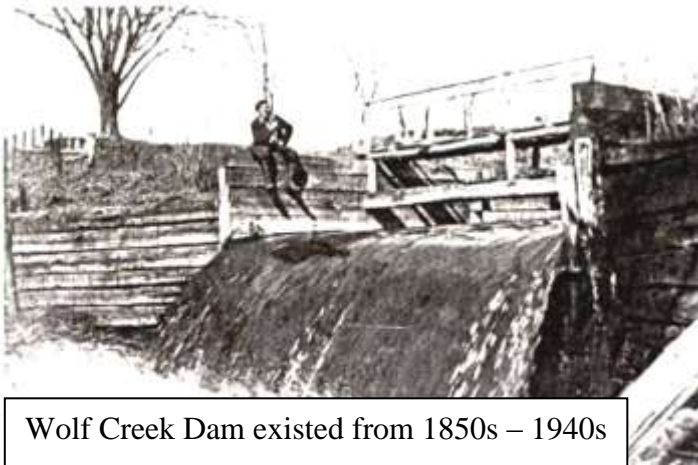


wild state.

With the building of Nevers and then the St Croix power dam, the River Road was moved farther from the river. Many places the old road bed was flooded. Nevers washed out in 1954 and was removed.

The next stop on the River Road is Wolf Creek. An Indian Trading post by 1832, Wolf Creek has been around a long time. Through the 1830s and on for a few decades it served Ojibway people who lived in the area. Gradually as the loggers moved north, farmers and other settlers followed them and Wolf Creek became the center of a major rest stop on the road north and a farming and logging community.

By the 1860s there was a dam and mill on Wolf Creek, a post office, store, doctor, school and church congregation. With the Homestead Law of 1862 allowing people to claim up to 160 acres of US land and get it for free after 5 years of improving it, settlers rushed in. The earliest were from the logging areas of Maine and other eastern states and Canadian Provinces. Then floods of Norwegians, Swedes and Danes came along with various other immigrants. By the 1890s almost all of the land was occupied.



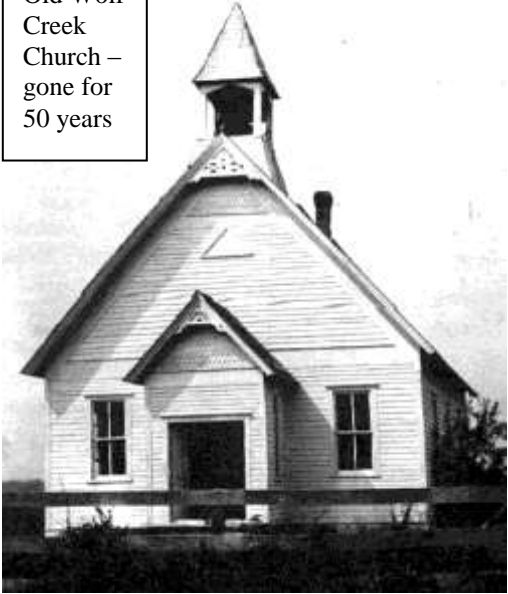
Wolf Creek Dam existed from 1850s – 1940s

With the building of Nevers Dam bringing 300 people to live nearby, Wolf Creek boomed. Several stores, bars, blacksmiths, doctors, a church and school were all

hastily constructed to complement those already here. A short lived newspaper “Wolf Creek Orphan” was started. A large community hall and new church building were built. A huge underground potato storage building was ready for the fall crops.

Nevers Dam included a bridge across the St Croix to replace the old ferry that ran there before. Just up river from Wolf Creek was the Sunrise Ferry. A few more miles north was the Rush City Ferry and more to the north.

Old Wolf
Creek
Church –
gone for
50 years



Wisconsin and Minnesota were bound together much closer by the many river crossings available.

At Wolf Creek, stop at the bar. Have a drink and continue a tradition of having liquor there since in 1831-1832

winter when Henry Schoolcraft, the Indian Agent, burned Joseph Renshaw Brown’s trading post cabins because he was selling liquor to the Indians.

Going north, stop on the bridge of Wolf Creek and look east to see if you can see any remnants of the old dam that was just up the creek. The dry year has lowered the creek drastically. A few dirt foundations along the bank are visible when the leaves are gone. An old mill wheel is a few 100 yards on the bank downstream.

The Wolf Creek Methodist Church has Sunday Services. They use the old Wolf Creek School building. Wolf Creek had a school from 1856 to 1956. This 1922 building is the 4th school building. The first two were log. The school has had as many as 60 students in its prime. Dropping enrollments in caused it to merge into the large Cushing area community school.

The Wolf Creek Cemetery is from about 1860 or maybe a little earlier. Doctor Deneen ran the Wolf Creek Mill and stopping place and post office during the 1850s. Having a cemetery near the Doctor's office was handy. He also built coffins as a sideline. Stroll



Stage that came through the Barrens from MN to Superior in the 1800s

through the cemetery on the edge of the pine barrens and see if you can find any relatives.

At Wolf Creek the St Croix River turns directly west into MN. The white pine logging areas were to the northeast, so people continued on the River Road even though it left the River.

The River road north of Wolf Creek separated hard wood forests of basswood, elm, maple and ash on the east from what was originally prairie to the west all the way to the river –which is at times 10 miles from the

road. The soil is sandy along the road and to the west. Just a mile or less to the east is the big hill where the soil changes to clay loam and the forest to hardwoods. The river road runs along the edge of the old prairie and the big woods.



The old Wolf Creek Store in 1940 run by the Hanson Family with Postmaster Nettie Carnes Hanson

Farmers originally settled the sandy prairie first as it was easy to break into farmland. For a decade or more the soil was productive and crops of wheat, corn and potatoes thrived. Then the thin layer of topsoil disappeared with dry years, blowing winds and farming. By the early 1900s, people were leaving the west side and moving to the east side and clearing the trees to get better farms. The sand barrens almost emptied of people. The 1930s and the depression brought more change. Some poor people lost their homes or farms and moved back on the sandy land. The state and county started fire control. The prairies had remained treeless because of fires. Without them, it grew to a mixture of scrub oak and jack pine until it now looks like all forest.

The River Road follows Wolf Creek for several miles always staying on the sandy side of the creek. Every few miles along the road were more stopping places. A little cemetery marks the Ives stopping place a few miles north of Wolf Creek. Most of the older houses on the

west side of the road were where settlers in the 1850s and 60s lived. The little lakes on Wolf Creek, Roger and Orr, are a memory of their names. You will see some reddish looking grasses – big and little bluestem, native prairie grass, a remnant of the old prairie.

At Evergreen Avenue and read the marker celebrating the beginning of the Sterling Township forest of 4000 acres on the barrens. Take a side trip on Evergreen Av west 5 miles to cross Trade River and stop at the little pioneer cemetery just up the hill. There are some history displays inside.

We follow the River Road on north many miles crossing over Trade River in Burnett County. Hwy 87 and the River Road both cross Trade River. At one time the two roads joined together at the river and headed north as one. If you had crossed Trade River in the 1850-1865 and again in 1900-1910, it would have been choked with logs floating down to the St. Croix. A series of logging dams backed up spring melt water and when released took the logs down river accompanied by the river pigs who kept the logs moving along.

Take the River Road on north until it seems to dead end in a lake. This is the Grettum flowage. Turn east (right) on the road that is the dike for the lake and take it over to Hwy 87. You are a few miles south of Grantsburg at this point. The DNR has flooded the old marshes and fields that were Canute Anderson's 1850s stopping place and farm and turned them into a stopping place for ducks, geese and sand hill cranes.

Headed south on Hwy 87 we are going to watch for old schools. Until we cross Trade River again we are in sandy old prairie land. You can see some of the restored prairies at the flowage where native prairie grasses – big and little bluestem grow.

The Trade River School has a merry –go-round in the yard. It was closed in the 1940s. Just ahead is the new Trade River Evangelical Free Church. Turn to the left (east) just past the church and you will be entering what

was once the thriving community of Trade River. Stores, mill, telephone and electrical company, old church, sawmill, furniture factor. All that remains is the cemetery and a few houses. Trade River was a major logging river in the 1850s with huge white pines floated down river to the St Croix. The river was much too small to get logs down, so a series of dams were built. In the spring the logs and water built up behind one dam. It was released and they roared on down to the next dam and then next until they reached the St Croix. The town sprang up on one of these dam sites.

When you get to Hwy B headed east you can take a 5 mile side trip to the town of Atlas. Stop at the nice antique store and say “Hi” to Betty and Marjorie.



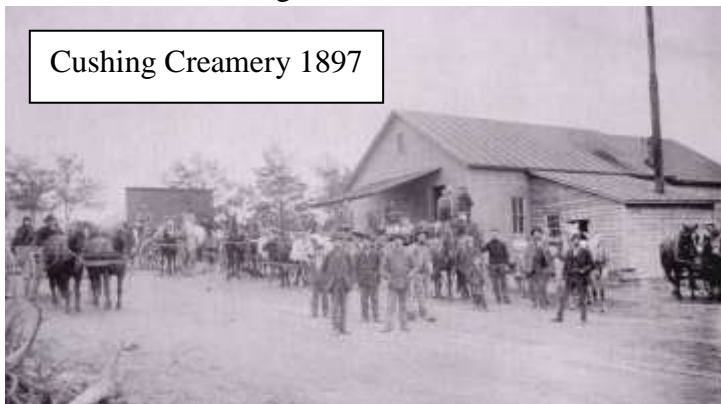
The next schoolhouse is at 285th Avenue. It is the 4th Orr School building. It closed in the late 1950s. Just down the hill to the west is Orr Lake—VERY SCENIC!

On down Hwy 87 we drop into a big marsh where Wolf Lake is on the east and Wolf Creek originates. At the next road to the right is the Bass Lake School house, closed in the 1940s. The road to the west links with Evergreen Avenue. The road to the east is locally called

Purgatory. One hundred and fifty years of road improvements have civilized Purgatory some.

The lake ahead is Bass Lake. We drive right through the edge of it on an old island that before Hwy 87 improvements in the 1930s was a popular island picnic area. The road destroyed it.

Hwy 87 turns abruptly to the east and heads into Cushing. At the corner used to be the Cushing School. Now it is woods on the west. It closed in the 1950s when the new Cushing 8 room school was built in town.



Cushing was named after an Eastern speculator, Caleb Cushing, who bought thousands of acres of land nearby and sold it to settlers. The Cushing area was settled by many Danes along with other Scandinavians. Danes spell their name Hansen, whereas Norwegians and Swedes use Hanson. The names are mostly seen in town. Cushing has a church and post office in the 1870s but did not have a store or other business until 1890. Then it grew rapidly and thrived through the 1960s. It still has many businesses but is in stiff competition with the chain stores that have sprawled into Wisconsin along the Hwy 8 corridor.

Leaving Cushing we enter the Cushing marsh area. In 1912, a 1000 acre marsh was drained to make farmland. Some of the nicest farms and crops you will see are here in the level and fertile area. As we

approach the next town of Eureka, the soil changes back to gravelly and sandy.



Old log house from the Noyes family on the Sterling Barrens was moved when the family moved to east Sterling and used as a barn.

The next school is just before Eureka Center. It is a beautifully restored building now used as the Eureka town Hall. There are many pictures and memorabilia here.

Eureka Center has almost disappeared. When Hwy 87 was widened many years ago, it took several businesses at the crossroads. KJ's bar and restaurant is a very popular place for locals. On to the east is the Eureka Baptist Church over 125 years old.

The last big stop on the way south on Hwy 87 is the Chateau Winery and Vinery. What better way to finish the day then to stop in and have a glass of wine in the rural settings of this amazing place.

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Sand Carp

I grew up as a Jack Pine Savage in NW Polk County on the edge of the land they call the Sand Barrens. I never new much about the area until I met Doug Johnson, professor at the UW, digging in the clay bank along Trade River on Evergreen Av., 10 years ago. He told me this story: Some 10,000 to 50,000 years ago some glaciers melted and made a huge lake upriver from St. Croix Falls. Each year as the glacier melted, layer after layer of clay washed into the lake and settled to the bottom – to nearly 200 feet thick. Then as the melting slowed, only fine sand filtered in leaving another 20 feet of sand on the lake bottom. This lake, he called Glacial Lake Lindh—or just Lindh, drained when the water cut through the rocks at the Falls of St. Croix.

Professor Johnson said when the surface water drained; it left about 15 feet of water still in the lake bottom saturating the lower three-fourths of the 20 foot sand layer. The dry sand at the top started blowing and made big sand dunes—the big ridges through the Sterling Barrens. With time and lots of rain, the dunes stabilized when prairie grasses and plants moved in. Lightning fires kept the trees burned off. He told me that it is woods now only because there are people who put out the fires and plant trees (the County and the DNR mostly). He says the area is especially interesting to biologists because the underground lake is filled with both water and sand—attracting and evolving some mighty strange animals. Since then I have made a study of some of these unique species and will share a few with you in hopes you will help us preserve them in their special sand barrens lake habitat.

Lots of people drive along the River Road or Evergreen Avenue and the other old roads in the Barrens and see the rows of dirt mounds along the ditches and wonder what is making them. Well, very few people have seen the Sand Carp that is pretty common in Sand Lake Lindh. As the lake slowly dried up, pools of water were left with fish trapped in them—land locked from the St. Croix, but sitting on 15 feet of water soaked sand. Over a few thousand years some carp evolved to live in the sandy slurry of the old lake, eating roots instead of water plants, and creating water filled tunnels in the firmer areas. Their most unique difference is the blow hole (just like a whale) that they use to clear their sinuses of the sand that filters in. Each sneeze leaves a mound of dirt on the ground above. If you are driving along a barrens road, look for the series of 4 to 6 mounds in row, the sure sign of an active Sand Carp.

Sand Carp are tasty. Their fins make an especially delicate soup. You must be careful to take only those who have not been swimming amongst poison ivy roots or your stomach lining may

break out with ivy blisters. We catch them by digging a sand pit—a 10 foot hole straight down in the sand near the mounds. The Sand Carp comes swimming and burrowing along in the wet sand and drowns when he falls into the water hole.

The Sand Beaver is a rarer find, but the careful nature watcher can see signs of their work. Like the Sand Carp, they too spend most of their lives below the surface living in the underground creeks, so abundant at the edges of Sand Lake Lindh. Some of these creeks burst forth as springs along Wolf Creek, Trade River and the St. Croix. The Sand Beaver are invaluable to keep the lake from drying out, as their underground dams block many of the outlet springs. You can see their activity when you see a cluster of dead trees. They cut the roots for their dams. They are a nuisance when they mistake your well for a dam leak and plug your well point (many local wells are only 10-20 feet deep taking advantage of the sand filtered lake water). Jack Pine Savages take a rifle shot down their well to scare away the beavers and to blow out the debris.

The Sand Tern is a unique member of the duck family that has adapted to the underground sand filled lake. It burrows deep into the sand hollowing out a small cavern that fills half full of water. There it builds a floating nest with cattail seedheads brought from a nearby swamp, and raises up to a dozen ternlets. The primary difference from the normal Tern and the Sand Tern is the presence of clawed webbed feet and a seining bill. The claws allow the birds to climb from the hole to the outside. The bill is similar to that of a baleen whale (although smaller) who gulps a huge mouthful of water and then spits it out through strainer teeth to keep the small fish, plankton and shrimp. The Sand Tern takes a mouthful of wet sand and then strains out the sand leaving the bugs, algae and krill.

A rare but increasing species is the Sand Alligator. Normally our area is too far north to allow alligators to survive through the winter. However, years of Twin Citians flushing baby alligators purchased on Florida vacations and becoming nasty pets, have let them travel down the Mississippi to Prescott and then up the St. Croix where they enter Sand Lake Lindh through springs and into the interconnected tunnels of the Sand Carp. They prey mostly on Sand Carp and are comfortable in the cold winters far below the frozen surface, hibernating in abandoned Sand Tern caverns (the web of nature is marvelous!). They can be seen sunning themselves along the horse camp on Trade River on a quiet summer afternoon.

The next time you travel through the Sterling Sand Barrens, bring a post hole digger, find a low spot between the dunes and dig a hole down to the lake. Spend a half day peering down this window into

Sand Lake Lindh. If you don't see at least one of the sandwater species I have talked about, I will be very disappointed.



Hwy 87 and the old River Road run parallel to the St Croix River. The River Road dates from the 1830s. Hwy 87 was built as a new state highway 100 years later.