

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of June 7, 2017

In the museum's collections are three identical painted wooden signs, each with a yellow background emblazoned with the head and shoulders of an American Indian man wearing a red shirt and a feathered headdress. The word "TRAIL" is written at the bottom of each sign.

For years we have referred to these as the "Indian Head Trail" signs, knowing only that they once marked a road that ran through Vernon County. By a stroke of luck, I recently came across a newspaper article that helped to crack this cold case.

100 years ago, in March of 1917, the *Vernon County Censor* printed an article entitled, "Viroqua Gets Indian Trail, Great North and South Artery of Our Country." From this and other articles printed that spring, we learned that the Indian Head Trail was originally intended to be a national highway running from Minneapolis to New Orleans. In the spring of 1917, Viroqua promoters attended several regional meetings to lobby for routing the trail through Vernon County.

They were successful. The first plan was for the highway to go from Prairie du Chien through Viroqua to Westby, then on to Coon Valley, Stoddard, and La Crosse. But in May, 1917, road conditions were assessed and it was decided instead that when the trail left Viroqua it would go on to Springville, Esofea, and then Coon Valley, bypassing Westby.

The Indian Head Trail Association was based in Savanna, IL. Their highway never did make it to New Orleans, instead running from Peoria, IL, to the Twin Cities. The Trail was advertised as "the short route from Minneapolis to Chicago... 'No better marked road in the world.' Follow the bands of red and yellow and the Indian Head from city to city. Great scenery along the Mississippi, the Rock river, the Wisconsin. Name taken from great natural Indian head at Savanna, Illinois."

This highway did not involve digging new roads but instead used existing roads. Communities that wanted to be on the trail route were encouraged to improve their roads in order to be considered. Painted wooden signs just like the three we have at the museum were then placed all along the trail, marking the way. Wooden posts painted with red and yellow stripes also marked the road.

Why was this trail created? Automobiles were being mass-produced for the first time in 1917, and people needed good roads to drive on. Small towns wanted to attract the new automobile tourists to Main Street businesses. Routes like the Indian Head Trail sprang up across the U.S. to meet these interests.