

Surveying the Public Lands History and Hardships

LIFE ON A WISCONSIN SURVEY

Here is a description of life on a survey of the 4th principal meridian and 3d correction line in Wisconsin by Harry A. Wiltse in 1847:³⁰

I was fully aware that . . . It would be impossible for one man to carry more than provisions enough for his own consumption. . . In making up their packs each member of the party was restricted to the clothes upon his back and a single blanket, that he might be able to carry the greatest amount of provisions, which was made to consist of pork and flour alone. Not even a tent of any description was carried. . . Heavy packs could not be carried. . . Upon arriving at La Pointe . . . I employed two of the regular packmen of the American Fur Company. . . These men under one-fourth of the weight which they had been accustomed to carry . . . complained . . . and refused to carry a pack at all.

The aggregate amount of swamp traversed by the two lines was about one hundred and seventy-five miles, a considerable portion of which might be termed windfall.

During four consecutive weeks there was not a dry garment in the party, day or night.

Consider a situation like the above, connected with the dreadful swamps through which we waded, and the great extent of windfalls over which we clumb and clambered; the deep and rapid creeks and rivers that we crossed, all at the highest stage of water; that we were constantly surrounded and as constantly excoriated by swarms or rather clouds of mosquitoes, and still more troublesome insects; and consider further that we were all the while confined to a line, and consequently had no choice of ground . . . and you can form some idea of our suffering condition.

Our principal suffering, however, grew out of exhaustion of our provisions, coarse as they were. . . Worn out by fatigue and hardship, and nearly destitute of clothes, they had now to make a forced march of three days for the lake in search of provisions, of which, during that three days, they had had not a mouthful.

I contracted to executive this work at ten dollars a mile . . . but would not again, after a lifetime of experience in the field, and a great fondness for camp life, enter upon the same, or a similar survey, at any price whatever.