The road less-traveled holds historic and natural treasures for the

Bobtown Prairie

A business or family residence for more than 160 years, the estimated 100,000 bricks in the Bobtown stagecoach inn were produced on site.

Story By Rich Wagoner
Photos By Adele Hodde

Scattered through the state are places that remind us of the untamed land Illinois once was. The thrill of finding a wild and remote area reminiscent of pioneer days is exhilarating. An old windmill on the horizon, a prairie unbroken as far as the eye can see or a foundation of rough stone in an abandoned field awakens our curious nature.

There is a road less traveled in central Illinois that winds through a darkened canopy of trees. A sandy road that seems unfamiliar and somewhat treacherous now, but to a drover moving livestock and wagons across the land in 1830, the road was a luxury—the sand road much preferred over the usual slow-drying, muddy quagmires.

The narrow course, perfect for two horse-drawn wagons to pass slowly, makes several hard curves then opens

(Historic photographs from the collection of Tim and Char Wallace.)

Traveling down muddy wilderness roads was difficult and often hazardous, and the appearance of the Bobtown stagecoach stop on the horizon was a welcoming site.

Welcome to Menard County and Bobtown, located a few miles from its sister city Lincoln's New Salem, the latter memorialized today by the popular New Salem State Historic Site. Both cities' fortunes rose and fell with the level of the Sangamon River, and these beautiful flowers of the prairie wilted with the coming of the railroad and modern transportation.

The Bobtown stagecoach stop isn't found on modern maps. Found deep within the records of the Petersburg Historical Society is an 1840 map showing Robinson Mills—Bobtown's original name—a few miles northwest of New Salem at the confluence of Clary and Little Grove creeks.

This is the Clary Creek of Abraham Lincoln lore. Hanna Armstrong, mother of Duff Armstrong, the defendant in Lincoln's most famous trial, was a neighbor and well known to James Robinson, the builder and proprietor of Bobtown's combined stagecoach stop, post office and inn. Lincoln was assigned this area as a surveyor and traveled every inch of its rolling hills and flat prairies—including the road to Bobtown—searching for his direction in life.

Clary Creek starts just west of New Salem and flows northward to the Sangamon River west of Oakford. The slightly to an old crossroad where stage coaches once announced their arrival with blaring trumpets. Years ago, a stage coach inn stood at the intersection, often surrounded by livery vehicles offloading freight—a chandelier from Paris or salt barrels from southern Illinois—and pioneers bravely venturing into the wild frontier.

Modern-day explorers venturing down narrow, winding roads get glimpses into Illinois' storied past.

Cool evenings were spent clustered around the fireplace, recounting experiences on the Illinois prairie and sharing dreams of the fortunes it held.

land was an island of verdant splendor in the endless tall-grass horizons of early 19th century Illinois. The beautiful hardwoods now painting the bluffs above the Sangamon River were not here then. Yearly prairie fires burned the young trees and regenerated fresh growth. These hills were bald then—bald bluff prairies or hill prairies as they are now known.

Nearby, evidence of the effort to restore some of the original bald bluff prairies can be seen, like the work at Witter's Bobtown Prairie, preserved for the ages as an Illinois nature preserve. Years of undergrowth have been painstakingly removed to allow tall grasses and wildflowers to regain their foothold on the bluffs above the Sangamon River. Little bluestem, big bluestem, dropseed, sky blue aster, heath aster, showy goldenrod and pale purple coneflower are making a comeback.

Period antiques and a well-worn, painted checkerboard tell of days when the home welcomed visitors weary from their trek through the Illinois wilderness.

Grasses of the prairie were unbroken when Bobtown was built. Many considered it dangerous to live on the vast prairie—insects, fires and wild animals were seen as obstacles to early settlers.

Wood and water were what the early pioneers needed and that is what Robinson found on Clary Creek—wood for log cabins and water to power his mill. People would come from 75 miles away to have the giant grist stones grind their meal and saw their logs.

The mill became so popular that about 1843 Robinson built an inn to house travelers. Built in the then-popular Federal style, the private residence now is owned by Tim and Char Wallace, who estimate the building contains more than 100,000 bricks, all manufactured on site.

Inside are many interesting antiques, collected to make the experience of living in a 160-year-old home more enjoyable. Original to the home are a journal from the early inn and grocery list from the 1850s. A worn, painted checkerboard tells of nights spent around one of the inn's seven fireplaces, telling stories, enjoying a home-cooked meal and playing checkers.

Next to the house stands a well—deep and dark with sweet, cool vapors rising from its depths. A tall, rugged-looking man might have once stood there, sharing a refreshing drink with other guests. A man who never forgot places like Bobtown when he left Illinois for greatness. One who would undoubtedly be happy knowing people still explore the less-traveled backroads of Illinois.

Rich Wagoner is an avid outdoorsman, Wagoner enjoys backpacking and other outdoor sports. He resides at Ghost Hollow Ranch adjacent to Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Park near Chandlerville.