Interrupting Frontier Progress: A Landscape History of Black Hawk Ridge

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In the northwest corner of Dane County, a small cabin sits atop a ridge overlooking the Wisconsin River 350 feet below. Throughout its history, this cabin has been a cramped home for farming families, a rustic escape for myriad city dwellers, and most recently a source of mystery for those who venture up the steep slopes of Black Hawk Ridge. The log structure reads like a palimpsest if one can find it through the dense growth of saplings and invasive weeds that have swallowed it over the last twenty years. Though the south-facing porch sags low, and the windows have been boarded up tightly, the cabin itself is remarkably intact. The half-hewn walls of this simple home come together in square-notched corners - simplifications from the typical German cabin construction techniques that hint at hurried, but skillful construction. Layered over this original construction is cement used to supplement the original wood and lime chinking, and electrical wiring that modernized the rustic space during the 1960s.[1] In these layers is the history of this landscape, one of frontier progress halted and reversed by the environmental movement and by the land itself.

Figure 1. The Kemp Cabin in 2008 and circa 1970. Wisconsin Historical Society.

In order to understand the history of Black Hawk Ridge, it is important to note the ridge itself. The dramatic topography lays at the edge of Wisconsin's driftless region where the last

[1] Carol Lohry Cartwright and Robert P. Fay, "John and Margarethe Kemp Cabin," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, National Park Service, December 10, 2008.

glacial advance left hills and ravines unsmoothed. To the south and east stretch the flatter glaciated lands of the rest of the state. The low wetlands of the Wisconsin River valley sit to the west. Black Hawk Ridge consists of a relatively flat top framed by steep slopes and cut into by branching ravines (Figure 2). From the height of the ridge, one can see several miles to the west, across the Wisconsin River as far as Sauk City. Perhaps it was this impressive view that brought the first European settlers to this particular site.

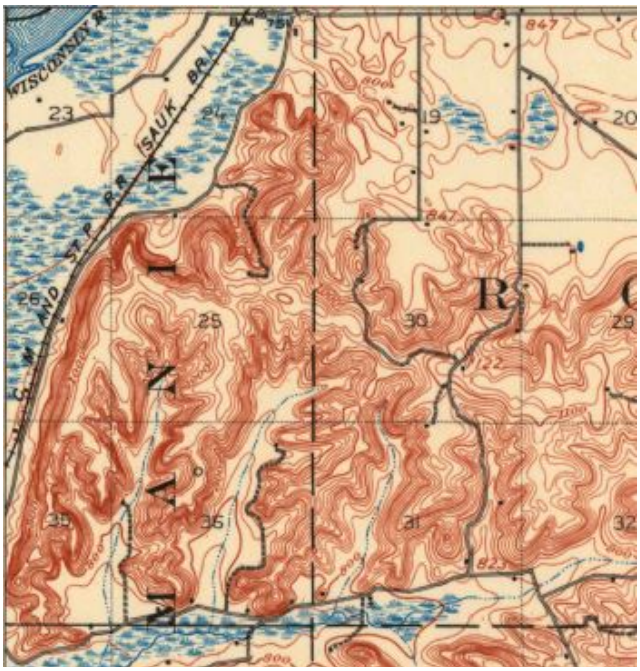

Figure 2. Topographic map of Black Hawk Ridge, located in Sections 24 and 25.
From "Cross Plains, Wis." 1907, United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey.

It was a family of Prussian immigrants, the Kemps, who constructed the cabin in the early 1860s and began the process of converting the ridgetop into productive farmland. They entered the landscape at a time when it was near the edge of the American frontier. Though Europeans had begun settling the area as early as 1839, plat maps from 1861 and 1873 show that

much of the land in the area was still owned in undivided square mile sections, signaling the edge of the frontier. The Kemp land was carved out from one of these larger parcels.[2]

John and Margarethe Kemp found a landscape rich in resources as well as challenges. While the 1832 land survey notes suggest that the area's pre-European vegetation was oak opening, it is likely that in the 30 years hence the openings became hardwood forest for lack of the fires that had suppressed this growth. [3] While valuable as building material, these trees stood in the way of any agricultural endeavor, and the Kemps wasted no time in clearing fields. Perhaps the added labor of clearing the land can account for the many timesaving features that can be seen in the cabin's construction; the unhewn exterior and the simplified corner-notching stand in contrast to other German-built cabins of the era. By 1870 – just 7 years after the Kemps' arrival – 25 acres had been plowed and planted primarily in wheat, but also corn, oats, and potatoes. The improved acreage continued to increase through 1880, when the agricultural census was discontinued for some time. The Kemp's was a typical family farm for that time, with increasingly diverse production including several grain crops, potatoes, eggs, butter, and swine, but throughout this time wheat remained the primary product. [4]

This production underwent a shift when the farmstead changed hands around the turn of the century, after Mr. Kemp passed away. Another German family, the Wachters nearly doubled the acreage of the farm and shifted the focus of production from wheat to dairy. The changes on this one farmstead reflect broader trends as illustrated in Charles O. Paulin's Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States; from 1839 to 1924 wheat production followed the

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[2] "Prairie du Sac and Sauk City, Highways 12, 60 & 78," *Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board*, Last modified August 25, 2016, http://lwr.state.wi.us/subcategory.asp?linksubcatid=351&linkcatid=483&linkid=; Plat maps of Dane County, 1861 and 1873, on file in the Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

[3] U.S. General Land Office. "Wisconsin Public Land Survey Records: Original Field Notes," 1832, Accessed November 20, 2016, http://libtext.library.wisc.edu/SurveyNotes/

[4] U.S. Census Schedules for Wisconsin (non-population), Schedule of Productions of Agriculture, Dane County, 1860, 1870, 1880, on file in the Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

edge of the frontier. In Wisconsin, production peaked around 1860 and became minimal by the 1920s. [5]One local account offers some insight into this shift: reduced yields due to depleted soil and rampant insect pressure along with a volatile market made wheat less and less attractive. Dairy offered a much more lucrative alternative, and many farmers prospered under this model. [6]

And yet, this model of agriculture was as short-lived as that of wheat on the ridge; the Wachter family left the land after about 60 years. This is in contrast to the Taylor family, whose name appears on plat maps from the time before the Kemps entered the landscape to the present.[7] Interestingly, the Taylor land sits to the east, just beyond the ridges of the driftless area. This topographical contrast may explain the difference in the progress of development on each landscape. The Kemp/Wachter farmstead's location atop the ridge would have had several important impacts on life there. First, the steep slopes limited the extent to which the farmers could expand their fields. Second, these slopes, as well as the marshland below would have hindered travel to and from the farm, especially during times of inclement weather. Though the land is just a few miles from Sauk City, one would have had to follow an unimproved dirt road, not to mention descending the steep path from the cabin.[8]

In 1960, Diana and Larry Isenring acquired the property and dramatically changed the role of the ridge in the landscape. The growing environmental movement of this time generated increasing interest in "natural" spaces. The family bought the property as a place to escape to from the city and, quickly recognizing this as a widespread desire, converted the farmland into a

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[5] Charles O. Paullin, Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States, Plate 144, ed. John K. Wright. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1932. Digital edition edited by Robert K. Nelson et al., 2013. http://dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas/144/a/

[6] Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, "Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis," July 2016, http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/lf/LF0093.pdf

[7] Plat maps of Dane County, 1861, 1873, 1899, 1911, 2014, on file in the Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

[8] Wisconsin Land Economic Inventory Maps, Section 24, 9N 6E, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and Markets, March 30, 1937, on file in the Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

"recreation preserve" for others to enjoy, providing opportunities for hiking, camping, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing.[9]

The wooded slopes that once limited the growth of the Kemp and Wachter farms became the Isenrings' greatest business asset. Tourists were drawn to the landscape by the sweeping views from the hilltops, by the physical challenges of climbing up and down the steep slopes, and by the cabins and campsites hidden away in valleys and ravines. One Capital Times article from these years describes the land as providing "a feeling of perfect solitude"; in another, Mr. Isenring boasts, "you can't see anyone from the campsites."[10,11] Because of the environmental movement, undeveloped lands became valued.

The conservation ethic held by the Isenrings did not prevent them from altering the landscape. On the contrary, they altered the landscape in quite dramatic ways to serve their idea of nature and to create a tourist destination, rewilding farm fields while also modernizing and developing the land. They replanted most of the cleared space with trees and prairie grasses and laid the web of trails that wind along the slopes and trace the ridgetops. They even earned some national recognition as one of the only facilities to provide night lighting and make snow for cross-country skiers. They converted a barn into a restaurant and inn that included a sauna and whirlpool, and added numerous buildings to the landscape including trappers' cabins and a second log cabin, several pole barns, a horse arena, a picnic pavilion, and even a swimming pool.

Just north of Black Hawk Ridge, the landscape has followed a progression towards suburban development that is more typical for the area. On rolling hills once blanketed in corn and soybean fields is a subdivision complete with cul-du-sacs, swimming pools, and sprawling

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[9] Mike Ivey, "Blackhawk owners set difficult course," p. 24, Capital Times, January 24, 1987
[10] Tom Kelly, "Blackhawk Lights X-C Nights," Skiing, January 1978
[11] Mike Ivey, "Blackhawk owners set difficult course," p. 24

lawns, marking an advance towards a third stage of development. It was this sort of development, along with a spreading environmental ethic that spurred Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to begin a land conservation effort centered on the Wisconsin River at around the same time that the Isenrings were establishing their recreation complex. In 1989, the state established the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway (LWSR).[12] The Riverway, which extends from Prairie du Sac to the Mississippi River, was established to "provide a quality public use area for unique river corridor activities and compatible recreational pursuits; maintain the natural and scenic landscape of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway; and manage the corridor's natural resources for the long-term benefit of the citizens of the area and state."[13] Again, one need only look to the topography to explain the existence of the Riverway; just as at Black Hawk Ridge, the wetlands that flank the river, and the hills and bluffs of the Driftless region beyond have hindered most major development, thus maintaining a relatively natural state on the landscape such that the DNR's effort was more conservation than restoration.

Black Hawk Ridge sits just beyond the border of the LWSR as originally planned, yet when the Isenrings put the property up for sale in 1989, the DNR was quick to absorb it into the Riverway.[14] This move was due to a number of factors. First, the property was of high tourism potential, given its scenic beauty and the fact that it was already an established destination. Second, the land's position between the growing subdivision northward and the Riverway was key in this decision. At the time of the purchase, a part of the property was being eyed for

[12] Wisconsin DNR, "Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis," July 2016, http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/lf/LF0093.pdf
[13] "Summary of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Lower Wisconsin River State Forest," , 1987, on file at the Wisconsin State Historical Society
[14] Ibid.

subdivision.[15] Aside from the landscapes value itself, it was valued as a buffer between development and the rest of the Riverway.

Since acquiring the property, the DNR has worked to bring the landscape back to a more natural, rustic state. [16]The Isenrings' reforestation and trail building efforts served this goal, but their other, structural developments were seen as detracting from it. As such, many signs of the recreational complex have been removed. Today, past the Kemp cabin, behind a tree line, one finds one pole shed, followed by the pavilion, horse arena, and cabin that the Isenrings added to the ridge. These remaining structures serve one of two purposes; the pavilion and horse arena exist for recreational purposes while the two cabins aim to transport visitors back through history to the frontier.

The wildness of Black Hawk Ridge today is an example of one way in which progress does not necessarily follow the one-directional model of the frontier, in which wild lands are tamed into agriculture and eventually urbanized. Here, the landscape has continuously resisted human development. And yet, hiking through the dense woods or amongst the buildings on the ridgetop prairie, the landscape looks as it never has before. The human mark on this land is as strong as the impact of the land on the lives of those who have walked it.

[15] Susan Lampert Smith, "State urged to buy Blackhawk Ridge," Wisconsin State Journal, Jan 24, 1990
[16]Wisconsin DNR, "Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis"

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