

Stone fences an ode to early Irish immigrants

Stone fences once crisscrossed the hilly landscape of western Sheboygan County, dividing farm fields into manageable sizes and ridding the arable land of its limestone litter left by the last glacier. A five-acre field broken by a single horse and a one-bottom plow was work enough for a pioneer farmer of the 1840s.

Glacial drift blessed our part of Wisconsin with cobblestones. Each year, as the land is turned over and made ready for crops more stones work their way to the surface requiring action.

The oldest known stone wall in America dates to 1607, built by English settlers of the Virginia Company along the estuary of the Kennebec River north of Portland, Maine. A settlement rarely discussed, the Popham Colony, was a short-lived venture, located near the mouth of the Kennebec River. Popham Colony closely followed the establishment of Jamestown, but never became permanent.

It's estimated that some 280,000 miles of stone wall were created in New England alone. Labor intensive, a man could lay no more than 18 feet of wall per day; That's something like 40 million man days of labor.

The labor needed for creating the walls was enormous, but a larger effort went into getting the stones to the edges of the fields. Stone by stone, stone boat load by stone boat load the work was done. Our immigrant settlers labored for decades to clear land, early on having stone picking bees; work done in groups went faster and was far more enjoyable.

Most stone walls found here in Sheboygan County are dry stone or dry stack which means no mortar was used in construction. They maintain stability through the careful interlocking of the stones. Most are at least two layers deep; the higher they stood, the wider they needed to be built.

Though all pioneer farmers dealt with the overabundance of native stone, no group is more closely associated with them than the Irish. A common misconception is that the Irish settled in our western townships because the landscape resembled home. The reality was the land was open to settlement by immigrants, and available for a price they could afford. It just happened to be rocky and hilly, much like western Ireland.

Enclaves grew in the towns of Mitchell and Greenbush where large numbers of Irish immigrants settled from 1847 into the 1870s. More than 600 families settled in a broad swath from the town of Lima west to the town of Byron in Fond du Lac County. Those 600 families amounted to more than 6,000 people of Irish descent.

Perhaps something in their genetic memories drew them to the land that would be the Kettle Moraine. The land certainly gave them cause to use their wall building talents.

Céide Fields, located on the North Atlantic in County Mayo has one of the oldest known field systems – with stone walls- in the world, over 5,500 years old. Mayo residents form one of the largest groups of Irish immigrants in the county.

During the years of the Great Famine, 1845-1850, Ireland's starving people, as a form of aid, were put to work building stone fences with no real purpose. They built roads that led to nowhere in order to earn food. But, making weak, starving, deathly ill men work at hard labor in the bitter cold was less than productive, not to mention impractical. This form of relief actually burned more calories than the thin weak soup provided to the men for sustenance. Yet, the peasants scrambled for the opportunity to do the work, and earn one meal a day for their families.

Many of those famine walls still stand today, a reminder of the Great Hunger, the very reason thousands left Ireland for America.

A quote from Galway man, Jerry Costello, gives poignant description of stone fences in Ireland, "For many visitors to Ireland, their abiding memory of the scenery is not the great sweeping seascapes or the ancient mountains shrouded in mist, but these tiny fields emerging from the stony land, surrounded by tens of thousands of miles of stone walls. They are silent witness to hundreds of years of Irish history and reminders to all of us of where we have come from."

Dry stone walls are not merely piles of rocks. They reminders of past, our heritage. They live and change with the seasons. They provide homes for animals and birds. They provide places to anchor for lichen, moss and wild flowers. They provide a link to our past, a thread of connection to the people who built them and their link to this land.

During the past decades, most of the county's stone fences have been removed for property development and road improvements. They're deemed costly to maintain, dangerous and a waste of land.

Yet, historians view them as relics of historical significance worthy of saving. They are true icons of the American landscape, a lasting connection to our immigrant ancestors and their struggles.

So, in your travels, the next time you come across a stone fence, pause and ponder. Perhaps, it's not just a pile of stones.