

South Milwaukee and the Yellowstone Trail

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From 1915 to 1930 South Milwaukee was a noted stopping point on one of America's first transcontinental auto routes, a 3,754 mile long amalgamation of roads known as the Yellowstone Trail. In the early 1900's, with automobile travel still in its infancy, there was no numbering system of roadways. Long distance routes were known by names instead. Standardized maps were non-existent at the time and the roads were identified by using colored markers to show the way. Hailed as being "A Good Road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound," the Yellowstone Trail began as a 25-mile stretch of road in South Dakota. In October 1912, the Yellowstone Trail Association was formed by J. W. Parmley, with its headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By 1917 the Yellowstone Trail had grown to become the main auto route for those travelling from the East Coast to Yellowstone National Park and the Pacific Northwest. While the Association did not build roads, it did lobby local governments in towns along the Trail to help promote the fledgling automobile tourism industry by building and maintaining "good roads." Trail towns paid the Association a small fee or "assessment" to help cover advertising expenses and upkeep of the Trail. Many towns along the Yellowstone Trail had a representative known as a "Trailman", whose duties included providing information to travelers and supervising the marking of the Trail with its distinctive yellow circle and arrow signs or yellow painted rocks. In the 1919 Yellowstone Trail travel brochure, Trailmen were described as being "...businessmen of standing in their communities, and will always be glad to welcome tourists and serve them in any reasonable manner."

There were still dirt roads in South Milwaukee when the Yellowstone Trail first came through town in 1915. The Trail followed South Chicago Avenue to Marquette, then northward along 12th Avenue to Milwaukee Avenue, where the Trail turned east through the business district before turning north again at 10th Avenue and exiting the city via North Chicago Avenue. City leaders were quick to realize the importance of improving street conditions to meet the increased traffic demands. Drainage was improved and in 1917 the city purchased a new steamroller to help with road maintenance. The intersections of Milwaukee Avenue at 10th and 12th Avenues were widened, and new, gas-filled ornamental streetlights replaced the old magnetite arc lights along Milwaukee Avenue. Local "Trailmen," such as R.H. Knoll, Leo Joerg, and Charles Franke routinely appeared before the South Milwaukee Common Council. On May 21, 1921 the city paid a \$50 "assessment" to the Yellowstone Trail Association.

On September 4, 1920 South Milwaukee's newspaper, *The Journal* reported the opening of a new, modern design Deep Rock filling station at 10th and Rawson, noting, "Few cities have more through traffic of automobile tourists than ours. An artistic filling station, situated as this is on the main thoroughfare, advertises our city which takes a civic pride in its appearance." Later, *The Journal* would print "South Milwaukee is especially favored above many cities with an unusual number of tourists."

In effort to deal with the influx of travelers, in March 1921 the Wisconsin Highway Commission asked the city to establish a campground for "automobile tourists." That summer, the Grant Park Tourist Camp was opened, located where the Wil-O-Way Recreation Center sits today.

Due to its superb location, the free Tourist Camp soon became very popular with travelers. Park superintendent Frederick C. Wulff reported that 247 cars carrying 850 people stayed at the campground that first year. Attendance peaked in 1929 with 2,502 registered guests. Then came the Depression, and attendance began to dwindle. However, the Tourist Camp managed to remain open until sometime around 1948.

Located across the street from the Railroad Depot, The Hotel Rogers was South Milwaukee's premier hotel during the Yellowstone Trail's heyday. Listed as South Milwaukee's "Tourists' Headquarters" in the 1927 city directory, the hotel cited "Special Attention Given to Auto Parties" in its advertisements.

In 1918, Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to begin numbering its highways. By 1926, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) had established the now familiar US Route numbering system (like the famous US Route 66). Standardized state maps had also replaced the need for the associations of "named" roads and their colored markers. When the Depression came, many towns could no longer afford to pay their "assessments." In 1930 the Yellowstone Trail Association closed its doors.

Today, visitors to South Milwaukee can find many of the old buildings along the Yellowstone Trail still in use. Sadly, others such as the Hotel Rogers, no longer exist. Still, if one would stand at the corner of 10th and Milwaukee Avenues to gaze down the road once traveled by so many, so long ago, you can almost hear the sounds of the "Flivvers" and "Tin-Lizzies" as they sputter past.