

CATTLE DRIVE THROUGH ALMA, WISCONSIN

Eighth In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

How did local farmers get their cattle to market in the 19th century? Getting food animals to market required herds to be driven hundreds of miles to Midwest markets where they were loaded into stock cars and transported eastward to regional processing centers. From Alma, Wisconsin this was an impossibility because of the terrain.

Water transportation on the river was only available about six months out of the year. Town roads were developed from the county's two centers of trade, Alma and Fountain City, utilizing the bluff ridges or following the foot of the bluffs and the wide prairie. The few roads that were available were not easily traveled because of the notion that roads should avoid crossing a creek or river and many of the roads ran up and down the steepest grades and through ravines and were not suitable for transporting cattle.

The arrival of the railroad in Alma in 1885 and regular service on a daily basis changed everything. Stock cars had been used for carrying livestock to market by the railroad since the 1830s and transportation by rail was seen as the answer for transporting cattle.

We don't often think of cattle drives in Wisconsin, but that is exactly what occurred every Monday as local farmers drove their livestock to Alma, Wisconsin for transportation to market. Gerhard Gesell's photograph captures this weekly occurrence and brings to life the reality of this now forgotten event as the cattle are driven in front of the Burlington Hotel to the stockyard at the Alma train station.



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Photo: Cattle Drive In Alma (WHS Image 25902)