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Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail (WEST). National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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Driving through the countryside of eastern Wisconsin one is likely to remark on its "all American" appearance: dairy cows grazing in rich green pastures, oceans of corn, sleepy cities and towns with tree-lined, flag-draped streets. But when one looks closely, another landscape emerges. A diversity of immigrant groups, predominantly from northern and western Europe, has settled along the western shore of Lake Michigan over the past 150 years, each leaving its own mark on the region's urban and rural areas. Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail (WEST) identifies many original areas of ethnic settlement and guides travelers though these historically significant environs. <p> Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail is a series of nineteen separate motor and walking tours covering more than 200 miles. Twelve tours focus on specific ethnic groups: Germans (3), Poles (2), Luxembourgers, Dutch, Irish, French-Canadians, Bohemians, Belgians, and Swedes. Many of these group specific tours contain sites related to other ethnic communities. Irish landmarks dot the area, for example, and the Swedish tour is in essence a "Scandinavian tour," as it also encompasses Norwegian and Icelandic settlements. Six tours focus on distinctive ethnic neighborhoods, largely in the Milwaukee area. Each tour contains a variety of landmarks that feature the region's immigrant and ethnic history, such as museums, churches, and characteristic architectural and archaeological sites. Traversing the region is the Green Bay Ethnic Settlement Trail, which follows the original Chicago to Green Bay highway that guided many immigrants to the area. The ethnic trail is in many ways a work in progress. The WEST staff is currently planning Native American, Norwegian, Danish, Italian and Swiss tours. <p> The settlement trail grew out of the Heritage Tourism Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Launched in 1989, the program seeks to harness the growing tourism industry for the promotion of history by forming partnerships between local businesses and historical agencies. The Wisconsin ethnic trail was one of the Heritage Tourism Program's 16 pilot projects. In 1992 the Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail became a permanent program, jointly sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Wisconsin Division of Tourism. The ethnic trail is one of four Heritage Tourism programs in Wisconsin, the others being the Fox-Wisconsin Rivers Heritage Corridor, the Frank Lloyd Wright Heritage Trail, and the Lac du Flambeau Chippewa Indian Reservation. The project staff publishes a guidebook for the trail (discussed below) and a newspaper to keep travelers up to date on many ethnic festivals, project news, and other matters. <p> Overall, Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail is a splendid achievement in historic preservation and public education. However, the project has a few important shortcomings. Most disappointing is the <cite>Visitor's Guide to Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail</cite>, the sixty-one-page traveler's handbook. The booklet contains a map, historical sketch, and a list of recommended sites for each tour, as well as lists of cultural societies, restaurants, and lodging facilities in the region. The guidebook is indispensable to the traveler, yet it suffers from some serious flaws. For one, the interpretive text requires much more editing. The possessive adjective "its" is spelled "it's" almost half the time, for example. The maps of individual tours are also difficult to follow, particularly in urban areas. WEST travelers would be wise to supplement the visitor's guide with more detailed maps or a Wisconsin road atlas. In addition, the booklet sometimes does a poor job of guiding travelers to the recommended sites. For example, the Bohemian tour text mentions an "original Bohemian stump fence," but gives no more precise of a location than "near [the village of] Slovan." <p> Beyond such technicalities, the historical interpretation could me more sophisticated. Perhaps most noticeably, the discussion dwells too much on the positive. The narrative often devolves into affirmative ethnic stereotypes rather than substantive discussions of immigrant behavior. For example, the text quite broadly describes Germans as having "frugal habits and industrious ways" (p. 40). Simultaneously, the interpretation overlooks controversial or unpleasant aspects of American immigration and ethnic history. For example, the text for Milwaukee's Bay View

neighborhood tour fails to mention the area's most notable historical event, the 1886 "Bay View Massacre" in which National Guard troops fired on a largely immigrant crowd protesting in favor of an eight-hour work day, killing five. Similarly, the text avoids such topics as Civil War draft resistance among some immigrants, the anti-German hysteria of World War I, and the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the Hmong refugees following the Vietnam War. Finally, the interpretation needs to give as much weight to the origins and history of recent immigrants groups, particularly Asians and Latinos, as it does to the older groups. In short, the guidebook text tells only part of Wisconsin's ethnic history. <p> Such criticism might seem excessive for a sixty-one-page pamphlet. However, as a visitor's introduction to the settlement trail the pamphlet must make an impression of authority and knowledge, a task it fails to accomplish in its present form. Even at its current length the work could present a more coherent discussion of the ethnic experience in Wisconsin. A brief bibliography might make an interesting and useful appendix. Indeed, Wisconsin ethnic communities have been the subjects of some excellent historical monographs, such as Kathleen Conzen's <cite>Immigrant Milwaukee</cite>, Joe William Trotter's <cite>Black Milwaukee</cite>, and Jon Gjerde's <cite>From Peasants to Farmers</cite>. The WEST project staff should not shy away from producing an informative and scholarly guidebook for their otherwise excellent program. It is unlikely that the settlement trail will draw travelers away from wax museums and amusement parks, but will instead attract an altogether different kind of tourist, one who might appreciate a more complex historical interpretation. The project staff plans to issue updated versions of the guidebook as the trail grows. One hopes the work will improve. <p> The combination of history and commerce on Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail is a qualified success. Most tours retain their focus on the ethnic history of the area, and the food and lodging information contained in the guidebook can be quite welcome to the weary heritage tourist. At times the imperatives of tourism seem to intrude on the historical integrity of the trail. The Racine and Kenosha County tours, for example, contain few sites related specifically to ethnic groups, composed instead of local museums and parks. Such instances are the exception rather than the rule, however. More often than not the tours lead into remote areas without tourist facilities where few nonresidents venture. Heritage Tourism may strike some historians as a kind of "Disney's America" approach to historic preservation, and this concern is not unwarranted. If historians make decisions about the preservation of historic sites based on their usefulness as tourist attractions not only will valuable segments of our national heritage be lost, but class, cultural, or political considerations will probably determine what is lost. Heritage tourism is a supplement to, not a substitute for, existing preservation efforts. For the most part, Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail demonstrates how Heritage Tourism can work. Local businesses, historical and cultural societies, and the cause of educating the public about history all benefit from the WEST partnership. <p> Much about Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail is an unqualified success. The WEST team has done an impressive job of locating ethnic settlement areas, cataloging the remnants of those communities, and making this knowledge available to the public. Among the settlements in the region are some of the most unique in North America, including the largest colonies of Icelanders and Luxembourgers in the United States. Some of the recommended museums on the trail are among the finest in the nation, perhaps most notably the Milwaukee Public Museum. The trail includes landmarks associated with prominent persons in American and even world history, including the home of Socialist Congressman Victor Berger and a school once attended by Golda Meier which now bears her name. Other highlights include the oldest Turner Hall in the United States and the village of St. Nazianz, founded by a communal German Catholic sect in the 1860s. <p> The highlight of each tour for this reviewer was usually a church. Traditional repositories of local culture, churches preserve more of local ethnic culture than perhaps any other institutions in the region. Settlement trail churches contain statues, paintings, and other artifacts brought from the Old World, architecture reminiscent of the immigrants' homeland, and stained glass windows in a variety of languages. This trail not only helps raise public awareness of America's immigrant and ethnic history, but it also has potential value for professional historians. The impressive list of settlements alone might lead a scholar to worthwhile sources. <p> Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail reveals much about the state of ethnic America today. On the trail historians can observe, first hand, both the efficacy of the American melting pot and the persistence of ethnicity in American life. On the surface, much of the European immigrant cultures seem to have disappeared or devolved into a nostalgic remembrance of past ethnic ties. In the village of Cedar Grove, founded by Dutch immigrants in the 1840s, an electric windmill (built in 1968) buzzes in the town center and the sale of wooden shoes appears a staple of the local economy, even though the Dutch settlers probably never used such items with any frequency.

However, a closer look shows that many in the region retain important fragments of their ethnic past. This reviewer amassed a considerable collection of ethnic newspapers, religious literature, and other ephemera while traveling on the settlement trail. A visit to a bakery or meat market demonstrates that many ethnic foodways persist. The fact that people in the American Midwest still offer prayers to Our Lady of Luxembourg (at least as implied by a flyer distributed in one church) suggests that many ethnic ways endure even among some of the region's earliest immigrant groups. Traveling the ethnic trail also shows that recent waves of newcomers, most notably African Americans, Asians, and Latinos, have formed communities not unlike those of the past, and often in areas abandoned by their European predecessors. In short, the trail shows ethnic Wisconsin to be both what it once was and what it is today. <p> The Wisconsin Ethnic Trail has two other notable strengths. First, it underscores the threats posed to the preservation of ethnic landmarks and other cultural resources. The greater Milwaukee area provides perhaps the best example. In the years since World War II many of the city's old ethnic neighborhoods have been demolished for freeways and other urban "renewal" projects, while many surviving landmarks exist in economically depressed and deteriorating areas. On the edges of the city one sometimes finds suburban developments in close proximity to historic churches, barns, and other sites. The public awareness brought by WEST may help save some precious cultural resources from demolition. Second, the trail adds a physical dimension to one's understanding of American immigration and ethnic history. Just as visiting a battlefield can provide insight into the conduct of war and the experience of the combatants, traveling Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail can give historians a feeling for the daily lives of Wisconsin immigrants–the summer heat, the winter cold, the richness of the terrain, the close quarters of urban life–that one can obtain in no other way. <p> One can travel Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail in any number of ways, from a methodical inspection of each tour to simply stopping at places of interest. For those who might tour the settlement trail this reviewer offers three traveler tips. First, one should plan ahead. Due to the region's notorious climate many facilities are open only during the summer months. In addition, many facilities are small and only open on rare occasions, such as the museum in Freistadt (Wisconsin's first German settlement), open July 4th and by appointment. Without proper planning, the settlement trail might be a disappointing experience. Second, one should make use of local historical and cultural societies. The WEST visitor's guide provides only a minimum of information for each tour. Local groups can provide literature, maps, tours, and other helpful services that nicely supplement the WEST guidebook. Finally, visitors should be courteous and respectful of local residents, their property, and their privacy. Many sites on the trail are privately owned and occupied, and most of the recommended churches are active places of worship. <p> Despite the shortcomings of its guidebook, the settlement trail furthers both the public's understanding of history and the preservation of Wisconsin's ethnic heritage. Leading to potential sources and attesting to the state of ethnic America today, the trail is of value to professional historians as well. In many ways Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail is a worthwhile adventure into America's immigration and ethnic history.

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