

PAPERS FROM THE HISTORY SEMINAR OF KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

No. 25. THE GOOD-ROADS MOVEMENT  
IN SOUTHWESTERN MICHIGAN

1900 to 1925

(As Exemplified in Cass and Kalamazoo Counties)

by

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## Chapter I

### The Demand for Good Roads at the Turn of the Century and After -- 1900-1910

The good roads movement in America is part of the larger story of improved transportation and communication. It is the story of the drawing together of the people, of rural and urban populations. It is part of the economic story of distribution and trade. But principally it is the story of man's ageless fight against mud. This paper is concerned with a small portion of this fight--as it occurred in two of Michigan's southwestern counties.

In 1900 the typical southwestern Michigan road was a deeply rutted, one lane, mud or sand affair. Impassable for wheeled vehicles in the winter, and almost impassable to all travel in the spring, these roads were far from satisfactory, even for the horse-drawn vehicles of that day. When an improved road was mentioned the general reference was to a road constructed of gravel, it was this type of road toward which the good-roads demand was directed.

The automobile was not the father of the good roads movement, as seems to be the general, mistaken belief, but rather the honor belongs to the lowly bicycle. The agitation of thousands of bicyclists for better roads through the national, state, and local chapters of their organization, the League of American Wheelmen, was the first trickle of what later was to become a torrent of demand after the advent of the automobile.<sup>1</sup>

1. Horatio Sawyer Earle, The Autobiography of "By Gum" Earle, The State Review Publishing Co., Lansing, Mich., 1929, p. 61.

The bicyclist who rode for pleasure found little enjoyment in jolting over ruts or in plowing through sand whenever he went for a ride in the country. Beginning with a campaign for bicycle paths alongside the roads, they soon expanded their efforts into a general demand for the improvement of the roads themselves. The local chapters of the League of American Wheelmen in Michigan acted under the leadership of Horatio S. Earle, an ardent and hard working advocate of good roads. Numerous good-roads meetings were held throughout the state in an effort to win the support of the people.

About 1900 economic conditions added impetus to the demand for better roads. "A need was seen to get the farmer out of the mud--to get him to the nearest railroad"<sup>1</sup> The growing population of the cities required more food from the farms, but the high cost of transportation made food prices almost exorbitant. Therefore, there was a growing demand for good roads from two to five miles in length radiating from the railroads.<sup>2</sup>

The appearance of the first automobiles on the roads only served to demonstrate even more forcibly the inadequacy of the existing type of roads. Every automobile owner became in fact a good roads advocate.

The farmer, despite the advantages accruing to him through the construction of better roads, was not always a good roads supporter. In fact, in many districts the farmer was openly hostile to any program for road improvement. He was frankly contemptuous of the bicyclists and an open enemy of the automobiles

1. Highway Practice in the United States of America, Public Roads Administration, Washington, D. C.--U. S. Government printing Office, Washington: 1949. p. 4

2. Loc. cit.

or "red devils" as he called them. If the city people "wanted any better roads they should buy the right of way and build their own roads, and not use the farmers roads and scare their 'hosses'",<sup>1</sup>

It took a long and intensive campaign to win over the farmer; he had to be shown that better roads would enable him to transport heavier loads more quickly. But once he became convinced of the value of good roads to him, the farmer was one of the staunchest supporters of the good-roads movement.

By 1910 a number of tangible accomplishments could be pointed to be Michigan good-roads enthusiasts as having resulted from their persistent demands. As early as 1893 the state legislature had passed the County Road Commission Law, which provided that any county wishing to do so could set up a body of road commissioners to supervise the construction and maintenance of county roads and the levying of taxes. However, this law, being optional, had been adopted only very slowly.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901, pressed by the demands of the League of American Wheelmen, whose state leader, Horatio S. Earle, was also in the State Senate, the state legislature established a special committee (under Earle) to investigate problems of highway improvement. A report of this committee urged the adoption of a constitutional amendment to remove a provision of the 1850 state constitution which forbade the state from "Being a party to or interested in any work of internal improvement".<sup>3</sup> This barred the state from the use of state funds for road improvement. The committee also

1. Earle, p. 90.

2. Michigan, A Centennial History of the State and its People, Vol. II, George N. Fuller, ed.; The Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1939, p 112.

3. Michigan Constitution.

recommended the appointment of a State Highway Commissioner and the establishment of a state aid system.<sup>1</sup>

The 1903 legislature enacted a law creating a state highway department with Senator Earle at its head.<sup>2</sup> However, since no constitutional amendment had as yet been submitted to the people, the state attorney general declared the act void.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, Senator Earle continued to act as unofficial highway commissioner at his own expense.<sup>4</sup>

In 1905 a constitutional amendment authorizing the state to build or aid building "public wagon roads" (this wording was used instead of the term "highways" to avoid confusion with the railroads) was approved unanimously by the legislature and ratified by every county in the state.<sup>5</sup>

This same year the legislature passed a bill "to create a separate and distinct bureau in the State which shall be known as the State Highway Department" which would be charged with giving instructions in building and repairing roads.<sup>6</sup> Once again Earle was appointed highway commissioner, this time legally.<sup>7</sup> He chose as his deputy Frank F. Rogers, another long standing good-road enthusiast.<sup>8</sup>

The 1905 legislature enacted a motor vehicle registration law and, more important, set up state aid for road construction. Under the State Aid Law the Highway Department was authorized to cooperate with townships and counties in improving leading public

1. Journal of the Senate of the State of Michigan, Lansing, 1903.
2. Public Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, 1905.
3. Highway Needs In Michigan, Michigan Good Roads Federation, 1948.
4. Horatio S. Earle, Autobiography, p 97.
5. Public Acts, 1905.
6. Ibid.
7. In 1909 the office of State Highway Commissioner was made elective.
8. Earle, op. cit. p 97.

wagon roads (outside of towns) by furnishing plans and advice and by paying rewards. These rewards were on a graded cash basis, varying according to the type of road constructed. That is, a reward of \$250 per mile was allowed for five-inch deep gravel construction, \$500 per mile for eight-inch gravel, \$750 per mile for a three-inch gravel surface laid over four-inch stone base, and \$1000 per mile for six-inch macadam. These were all on the basis of a nine-foot wide wagon track, plus shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

In 1907 a cash road tax law was enacted authorizing townships to levy a "road repair tax" on rural property and a "highway improvement tax" on all property in the township.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the adoption of the county road commission in the counties of southwestern Michigan, all road construction was in the hands of the local townships or highway districts. All affairs concerning road building were handled by the township officials. A state law required payment of a road tax, but this tax could be worked out by a day or so of labor on the roads. This system was far from efficient and was responsible for a wide variation in the quality and condition of the roads from one district to another.<sup>3</sup>

Kalamazoo County was an early and vigorous supporter of the good-roads movement. This was probably due to the presence of the sizeable city of Kalamazoo, to the manufacture of automotive parts, and to the good farm land found in the county. As early as 1904 "the question of improving the public highways" was a subject for favorable editorial comment in the Kalamazoo Gazette.<sup>4</sup>

1. Public Acts, 1905.

2. Public Acts, 1907.

3. Michigan, A Centennial History, cited above, p 111.

4. Kalamazoo Gazette, March 18, 1904.

In the 1905 vote on the proposed constitutional amendment, Kalamazoo County displayed its interest in good roads. An editorial from the Gazette of that year said:

"The citizens of Kalamazoo County put well their stamp of approval on the good roads amendment. Here is where good sense was shown. The amendment carried in the state, but no county gave it stronger endorsement than did Kalamazoo. The majority on the amendment is more than four thousand...."

"In Kalamazoo County, there is great need for improvements. Many roads are nothing more than sand, and it is extremely hard to travel over them, while others resemble lanes. There are but two or three good roads out of the city."<sup>1</sup>

Numbered among the good-roads backers in Kalamazoo County were the farmers! In 1909 a group of twenty-eight Richland farmers started a movement for better roads. They declared their determination "that the present condition of the roads through the county shall exist no longer, and that good roads shall take the place of those which are proving detrimental to the countrymen's interests."<sup>2</sup>

It was in this same year that Kalamazoo County voted to adopt the county road commission plan, becoming approximately the twenty-seventh county in the State to do so. Men appointed to this first commission were W. M. Bryant, Bryon S. Carney, and Charles E. Clark.<sup>3</sup> The new commissioners made a tour of inspection, shortly after their appointment, to determine those roads in the county most in need of improvement.<sup>4</sup> Also during 1909 Kalamazoo County's first state-aid gravel road was constructed

1. Gazette, April 5, 1905.

2. Ibid., March 28, 1909.

3. Supervisors Report, Cass Co., 1909.

4. Gazette, May 12, 1909.

on a stretch east of Kalamazoo near Recreation Park.<sup>1</sup>

Cass County was somewhat slower in seeing the value of good roads. The farmers of the section were opposed to what they believed were roads for the city people. Nevertheless there was some progressive sentiment in the county (mostly in the towns) and as early as 1903 two farseeing editorials appeared in the Dowagiac Daily News, one of the leading newspapers of the county. The editor, commenting on the road-maintenance systems, said:

"Several townships in the State have done away with the old system of 'working out' the road tax and hereafter the road tax will be paid in cash and the money will be intelligently expended in the manner to accomplish results...."

"In some sections of the States the road tax has been 'worked out' for 75 years, and the roads are no better today than they were when the pioneers first began scraping, except perhaps that stumps have disappeared."<sup>2</sup>

In another editorial a new problem of the dawning automotive age was treated. The editor stated that, "Automobiles and horses are both necessary adjuncts to private locomotion, and while one has no right to infringe upon the privileges of the other both are entitled to the public highway....In this connection it might be a wise hint for automobiles to look out for horses and for horses to look out for automobiles."<sup>3</sup>

Road construction activity in Cass County before 1910 was not too extensive. Much of the work done was carried out at the instigation and cost of the towns concerned. In 1905 an article in the now defunct Dowagiac Republican began the agitation for the construction of a gravel road between Dowagiac and the neighboring

1. Gazette, January 24, 1937.

2. Dowagiac Daily News, May 25, 1903.

3. Ibid., June 11, 1903.

village of Cassopolis. The article stated in part that:

"Probably no road leading into Dowagiac is more traveled than that from Cassopolis through Whitmanville to Dowagiac, and certainly no other road is harder to traverse either by loaded teams or for driving horses.... A large part of the distance is so sandy that a buggy with two persons is a good load for one horse."

The construction of this road was carried on by farmers living along it, with the city sharing expenses. Gravel from pits adjoining the road was used for surfacing.<sup>1</sup>

The period which ended in 1910 was more one of agitation than of accomplishment. The public was just awakening to the need for improved roads brought on by a changing economy and the growing popularity of the motor vehicle.

Thus, although some important victories had been won on the legislative front for the good-roads cause, the tangible results (ie., roads) were negligible.

1. Dowagiac Republican, May 12, 1905

## Chapter II

## The Demand Grows -- 1910-1917

The years from 1910 to 1917 saw an almost unbelievable increase in the pressure of the demand for improved roads. Automobiles began to appear in greater and greater numbers, and the autoist of that day was of the opinion that his mechanical troubles were enough without adding to them any troubles with poor roads.

But the automobile was both the culprit and the injured party when it came to bad roads. While the mud, ruts, and rocks of the roads were not good for the automobile, on the other hand the automobiles did not improve the condition of the roads either. Up to this time two general types of improved road had been satisfactory, that is, gravel and macadam.<sup>1</sup> However, as autos became more numerous their tires increasingly sucked the dust binder from the roads and the breeze created by their speed blew it away; thus, the roads began to break up. This brought on a need for roads with stronger binder materials or, better yet, for hard-surfaced roads.<sup>2</sup>

The farmers during this period became increasingly concerned with the drive for better roads. Numbers of them became owners of automobiles, while others saw that better means of transportation could directly improve their standard of living by a ratio which would far offset any taxes that might be levied.<sup>3</sup>

The pressure for better roads was not localized, but was on a nation wide scale. Thus it was that in 1912 the Federal

1. Macadam roads were constructed of a number of layers of closely packed crushed rock laid over a rounded road bed.

2. Highway Practice, cited above, p 6.

3. Earle, op. cit. p 91.

Government stepped in to give the good roads program a boost financially. In that year Congress made its first motion toward aiding the states with their road building by authorizing the expenditure of \$5,000,000 to cover one third of the cost of improving roads over which the mails were carried.<sup>1</sup> This of course would include almost all roads, since the mails went everywhere.

Although the 1912 appropriation proved to be only a small drop in the bucket, Congress saw the value of the measure and in 1916 followed it up with the Federal Aid Road Act. This act set aside a seventy-five million dollar sum to be spent over a five-year period, to be used for the improvement of any rural road over which the mails were carried, and definitely prohibited improvements in towns of more than 2,500 population. Federal aid was allowed up to 50% of the total cost of construction, but it was not to exceed \$10,000 a mile.<sup>2</sup> This aid was available only to those states with a highway department organized and ready to assume responsibility for the construction work.<sup>3</sup>

Michigan expected to receive \$2,259,750 in five years as its share of the Federal aid, a like amount, of course, being required of the state.<sup>4</sup>

To raise money for its road building program Michigan tapped an ever increasing source of revenue--the automobile. The 1913 legislature passed a bill placing a "horsepower tax" on motor vehicles. This was in line with the idea that those who used the roads should be required to pay for them. The tax was for

1. Highway Practice, cited above, p 8.

2. This limit was later raised and finally was abolished altogether.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Kalamazoo Gazette, May 10, 1916.

fifty cents per horsepower.<sup>1</sup> In 1915 this act was changed in an act to "provide for the registration, identification and regulation of motor vehicles", and a tax was placed on weight also. A charge of twenty-five cents per horsepower, and twenty-five cents per 100 pounds of weight was levied, fifty per cent of the proceeds to go to the State and the rest to return to the counties and townships.<sup>2</sup> The following year the state supreme court handed down a decision confirming the validity of this tax.<sup>3</sup>

The 1915 Legislature also passed a measure which was happily welcomed by the financially-pressed counties. This was the Covert Act. It provided for the construction improvement, and maintenance of the highways and for the levying, spreading, and collecting of taxes, and authorized the borrowing of money and the issuance of bonds to cover the cost of road construction. The provision permitting the issuance of bonds was of prime importance to the counties, but this act also made clear that the responsibility for local roads still rested on those who owned property benefited by such roads.<sup>4</sup>

The Michigan legislature did not confine its efforts merely to the financial side of the highway program, however. In 1913 it passed an act setting up a 3,000 mile state trunkline system, under which certain roads were designated as state trunkline highways and the payment of double rewards was authorized thereon.<sup>5</sup>

1. Public Acts, 1913.
2. Public Acts, 1915.
3. Kalamazoo Gazette, May 13, 1916.
4. Compiled Laws, Michigan, 1915.
5. Public Acts, 1915.

The object of this act was to unify the road building programs of the various counties in order to produce continuous stretches of improved road traversing the state in various directions.

The year 1915 also saw the passage of a traffic law which required that "in passing [horses or cars] the person in charge of such motor vehicle and the other male occupants thereof over the age of fifteen years, shall give such assistance as they are able, to the occupant, or occupants, of the vehicle they are passing if assistance is asked." In conjunction with this, a state speed limit of 25 miles per hour was established.<sup>1</sup>

Another 1915 law required that all state-reward roads not named as yet should be given appropriate names by the county road commission; this policy was later discontinued in favor of the numbering system.<sup>2</sup>

The 1917 Legislature approved three measures concerned with the finances of road building. An annual payment of \$225,000 was authorized to match Federal-Aid funds, the cash reward on paved roads was doubled, and counties with assessed valuations of over one hundred million dollars were granted the right to levy a two mill tax for road building instead of the former one mill tax.<sup>3</sup>

All these state and national laws were directly responsible for increased road building activities in southwestern Michigan, or at least served to give impetus to an always growing demand.

1. Public Acts, 1915.

2. Compiled Laws, 1915.

3. Kalamazoo Gazette, May 3, 1917.

Kalamazoo County was extremely active in this period. The county was fortunate in that two of the new state trunk lines passed through it, crossing at the city of Kalamazoo. These were the highways running from Michigan Avenue, in Detroit, through Kalamazoo to New Buffalo (now U. S. 12), and from Three Rivers through Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids (now U. S. 131).<sup>1</sup> By 1915 Kalamazoo County residents owned 1,300 of the 90,000 automobiles owned in Michigan.<sup>2</sup> The demand for good roads in the county was never at a higher pitch.

When Governor Ferris, a good-roads advocate himself, issued a proclamation in the summer of 1915 setting aside two days as "Road Bee Days" for the State, that is, two days in which every interested person, city business man and farmer alike, could get out and work on the roads of the county, Kalamazoo County was ready to respond. An editorial from the Gazette of that date states--

"Governor Ferris' proclamation should be received with practical enthusiasm in Kalamazoo County. This county has long led the procession of good roads enthusiasts in Michigan. An enviable distinction has come through the efficient system of road-building which has been in force here for five years."

"The 'road bee days' are a proper start and a great deal of work can be done in the way of filling, draining, and crowning. Let the neighborhood form a 'road bee' and get at the long neglected task."<sup>3</sup>

Although a great deal of work had been done in the county since the establishment of the county road commission in 1909, it had been on scattered stretches of road, with no one road

1. Public Acts, 1913.

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, May 29, 1915.

3. Ibid, June 4, 1915.

being improved from end to end. It was this condition which prompted the Kalamazoo Chamber of Commerce, Good Roads Committee, at a meeting in June, 1915, to put forth the proposal that roads be constructed in one or two long stretches rather than in numerous short unconnected pieces.<sup>1</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce was a strong force for good roads in Kalamazoo County and acted as a relieving center for complaints on road conditions, as is shown by the following Gazette article, for example. "Complaints were entered before the executive committee of the Chamber of Commerce retail trade division Tuesday, that the roads leading into Kalamazoo are in a deplorable condition just outside the city limits. While it was admitted in the complaints that it is only natural that the roads should be more or less out of condition at this season of the year (April) it was declared that a vast improvement could be made with but little effort."<sup>2</sup>

Kalamazoo County, as might be expected, had a large membership in the Michigan Good Roads Association. At the 1916 meeting of the Association (its 13th annual convention), held at Battle Creek, Kalamazoo was represented by 100 delegates out of a total attendance of 500. Incidentally, it was at this meeting that Governor Ferris presented one of the newer arguments for good roads. In a speech delivered at the meeting he said that better roads were needed to help education in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

In April, 1917, Kalamazoo was host to a meeting of sixty

1. Kalamazoo Gazette, June 12, 1915.

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, April 19, 1916.

3. Ibid. May 11, 1916.

or more roads officials from southwestern Michigan. The delegates advocated better and more permanent highways even if they were at the sacrifice of mileage constructed, and were told that poor drainage was responsible for a great share of the expense in road maintenance. Mayor Balch of Kalamazoo spoke at the meeting and said, "cheap" roads were not economical, and the he "would rather have 1 mile of pavement built to last 20 years than 3 miles of poorly constructed roads." State Highway Commissioner Frank F. Rogers also spoke at the meeting. He pointed out that even though a road lasts only five years, all is not lost, since grading, ditches, culverts, etc., represent 25 per cent of the cost of any highway. He also cited figures showing that in 1901 Michigan expended \$2,419,511.24 on its highways, in 1905, \$3,292,041.27 (first rewards were paid in this year), and in 1916, \$11,643,586.76 (including township and county taxes, state rewards, and auto tax) was spent.<sup>1</sup>

In the five years after the adoption of the county road system, in 1909, Kalamazoo County constructed 86.5 miles of gravel road, 19.8 miles of macadam, and 1.2 miles of concrete. However, as has been pointed out, the road built was in often unconnected sections. In 1915 construction consisted of 9.8 miles of gravel and 2.8 miles of macadam, while 15.75 miles of road was resurfaced with gravel.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of 1916, Kalamazoo County had 115 miles of improved roads. During the year 1916, twenty-two miles of road had been

1. Kalamazoo Gazette, April 25, 1917.

2. Official Proceeding of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Kalamazoo, 1916.

resurfaced. This included 11 miles of macadam coated with thin clay, 5.8 miles of gravel, and 2.5 miles of macadam.<sup>1</sup>

In 1917, \$160,000 was raised by taxation in the county for road construction. In that year new road construction included 6.6 miles of road resurfaced with gravel, 1.3 miles coated with "tarvia", 3.5 miles of new gravel completed, and 1.5 miles of macadam. At the end of the year 13.4 miles of road were still under construction. Also in this same year a one-half mile stretch of gravel trunk-line (M-17) running east was covered with a two inch coat of asphalt-concrete as an experiment.<sup>2</sup> This proved to be very satisfactory.

In the spring of 1915 Southwestern Michigan good-roads people engaged in an inter-sectional battle of no little magnitude. This was over the location of part of a proposed new highway stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Straits of Mackinac. This highway, which was to be known as the "Dixie Trail," was intended to establish a continuous improved highway connecting the North and South. The idea was being forwarded by private groups, since this was before the time of the National Highway System.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that it was not certain that the road would pass through Michigan, as the proposed route was only tentative, Michigan boosters were quickly engaged in a fight as to where it would run, if it did pass through the state. There were two main factions in the fight. One faction was composed of the lake shore interests, which were organized as the West Michigan Pike

1. Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Kalamazoo, 1915.

2. Ibid., 1917.

3. The reference for this and the following paragraphs on the Dixie Highway is The Kalamazoo Gazette, May 14, 1915 to May 25, 1915.

Association, while the other group was composed of interests representing the center of the state, principally Kalamazoo.

Each of these groups wanted the "Dixie Trail" to pass through their section of the State. Thus, the central state interest wanted the route to be from South Bend, Indiana, through Niles and Dowagiac to Kalamazoo, and thence to Grand Rapids, Muskegon and the Straits. Those along the lake wanted the route to run from South Bend through St. Joseph, Holland, and Muskegon to the Straits.

Delegations representing both factions were sent to a convention at Chattanooga, Tennessee, where the route of the Dixie Trail was to be decided. Kalamazoo's delegation was instructed to present the argument of better hotel facilities and larger cities for the inland route, but it was not believed that they stood much chance against the Michigan Pike Association, which was represented 500 strong at the convention. However, both sides were dealt a better blow when no Michigan delegates were invited to sit in on the meetings and strong pressure was seen to route the highway through Chicago, thus killing Michigan's chances.

The convention finally selected Miami, Florida, as the southern terminus of the highway and Chicago, Illinois, was chosen as the northern terminus. But it was tentatively proposed that Michigan might be included as a branch. With this in mind, Michigan's delegates descended upon Indianapolis for another conference. Here, it was at last decided that the road would divide at that city, part going to Chicago and part to pass through South Bend, Niles, Dowagiac, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rapids to the Straits, where another section would pass down the far side of the state forming a loop. The only requirement was that the road should be placed

in first class condition by those counties through which it passed. Thus it was that the inland interests and Kalamazoo had won the battle for the "Dixie Trail."

Cass County did not adopt a county road commission until 1913, and even after the establishment of such a commission very few worthwhile improvements were carried out. In 1915 the county board of supervisors, realizing the lack of achievement, passed the following motion:

"Whereas, the building of long stretches of trunk lines could be accomplished at much less proportionate expense than by the present method, and

"Whereas, it is only fair that those who will have the use of the roads in the future should bear a portion of the expense of their construction, therefore be it

"Resolved that it is the concensus of opinion of the Board that it would be better for Cass County to bond itself for the construction of good roads--"1

Because of opposition among some of the supervisors, no action was taken on this motion until the following year, when the Board decided to place a \$200,000 bond issue at 4½ per cent interest before the voters at a special election. However, they neglected to prepare the people for such a step. The voters failed to see the advantages of taxing themselves and their posterity for a few mere roads. Thus the bond issue went down to overwhelming defeat, failing to carry in any section of the county.<sup>2</sup>

Good roads supporters received some consolation even in defeat when William M. Bryant, chairman of the Kalamazoo County Board

1. Record of Board of Supervisors, Cass County Michigan.  
2. Dowagiac Daily News, April 4, 1916.

of Road Commissioners, said that he believed that the defeat was a good thing since not enough money had been asked for to do any good. It was his opinion that the amount asked should have been nearer five or six hundred thousand dollars.<sup>1</sup>

That money for roads was needed is evidenced by such newspaper items as the following, which was published in April of 1916 in the Dowagiac Daily News:

"As late as Saturday there were reports of auto drivers being stuck in the mud in some of the roads within two or three miles of this city---reward roads are in better condition but need dragging and grading up again."<sup>2</sup>

Determined that the poor condition of the Cass County roads should continue no longer, the county good-roads association, made up of some of the most prominent men in the county, in 1917 petitioned the Board of Supervisors for a special election to approve the issue of bonds amounting to \$600,000.<sup>3</sup> Over 700 names appeared on the petition, which urged that the Board "submit the proposition to the electors, not as an additional burden to the public, but as a better and more economical method of obtaining desirable and necessary public improvements."

The petition went on to point out that, although the county road system had been adopted four years before, not much had been accomplished, because no continuous line of roads had been improved. Thus, although the county had appropriated large sums each year for road construction, the work done had been so scattered and plans so divided that the expense had been too great for the improvements obtained.

1. Daily News, April 5, 1916.

2. Ibid., April 4, 1916.

3. Supervisors Report, Cass County, 1916.

Figures were quoted showing that during the years 1913, 1914, 1915, and 1916 the county had levied \$133,711.77 for highway purposes and in this same period the townships had levied \$109,235.87 for improvements and \$83,310.49 for repairs, a total levy of \$326,258.13 for both county and townships, or an annual average of \$81,314.53. These figures did not include the state highway tax of over \$20,000 or the auto tax, which for 1916 was \$12,659.16 in Cass County. It was further shown that the average amount levied yearly for improvements alone in the county and townships was \$60,491.27.

Presented with the petition was a road map showing the proposed connected system of roads. The map outlined about 270 miles of road, 80 miles of which had been built. Included on the map was a 17  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile stretch of concrete paving on the Detroit to Chicago trunk line which ran through the county from the Van Buren to the Berrien County line, passing through the city of Dowagiac. This road was also a part of the Dixie Highway.<sup>1</sup>

The supervisors acted upon the petition and a special election was called for Monday, April, 7, 1917. A sum of \$178,000 was specifically designated for paving the Detroit-Chicago highway (now M-40).<sup>2</sup>

The good roads backers did not stop merely with presenting the petition. They were determined that the issue would not fail this time because of indifference on the part of the voters.

1. Supervisors Report, Cass County, 1917.

2. Loc. cit.

As early as March 2, good roads enthusiasts assembled in the village of Cassopolis for a big booster road meeting, at which it was decided to secure the facts and place them before the public in a "spirited campaign."<sup>1</sup>

In the ensuing campaign the "word" was carried to every corner of the county and numerous good road's meetings were held. The editor of the Dowagiac Daily News, being a strong good road's man, gave his wholehearted support to the issue. In a series of editorials such as the following, he preached the doctrine of good roads to the public:

"'Well', said the Doubting Farmer, 'If these road bonds carry what is to become of the side roads not included in the system shown on the map?'

"'If the road bonds carry,' answered the Good Roads Booster, 'each township will be relieved of the expense of maintenance and repair of about 16 miles of road. The money spent on these roads in the past can be spent on side roads in the future--'."<sup>2</sup>

All these efforts achieved the desired results and the bond issue passed by a vote of 3,016 to 1,960.<sup>3</sup> The result brought forth this comment from the editor of the Daily News:

"But few campaigns have been waged more cleanly, systematically or with better purpose than the campaign in behalf of the bond issue."<sup>4</sup>

Cass County, although not as intensely interested in the Dixie Highway as was Kalamazoo County, nevertheless saw the advantages of such a highway and was eager to start construction on its section. Work was already under way on the stretch between

1. Daily News, March 3, 1917.

2. Ibid., March 19, 1917.

3. Supervisor's Report, Cass County, 1917

4. Daily News, April 3, 1917.

the neighboring cities of Niles and South Bend.<sup>1</sup>

An editorial in the Benton Harbor News Palladium presented another reason for Cass County to hurry construction of its section of the highway. Commenting on a route laid out by the Detroit-Chicago Good Roads Association for travel between those cities, which followed the Dixie Highway through Cass County, this paper said:

"You can lead a horse to water but cannot make him drink. You can tell people to go by a certain route---but when they find that the route is laid out over poor roads and is a longer distance, then they use their own good judgement and go the short way, the stone paved way, and the easy way---"<sup>2</sup>  
 (Which was, of course, to go through Benton Harbor.)

In answer to this the Daily News had this to say:

"When this improvement (the Dixie Trial) is completed the Twin Cities can hang up their fiddles so far as attracting any considerable amount of traffic away from the Dixie or Detroit-Chicago Highway."<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, all such high hopes as this were temporarily shattered when the Board of Supervisors voted on October 17, 1917, to defer issue of the bonds until later because of the advent of World War I, which they believed should receive the nation's full support.<sup>4</sup>

At the close of 1917 road-building might be said to have reached the crest of the hill, ready for fast easy downhill rush. Since 1910 progress had been by jerks and starts, with much experimentation and many mistakes, but now many of the answers

1. Daily News, April 2, 1917.

2. Ibid., April 10, 1917

3. Loc.cit.

4. Supervisor's Report, Cass County, 1917.

had been found and with the full support of the people the road-builders were poised ready to plunge ahead at full speed.

### Chapter III

#### --And Still Grows -- 1918-1925

The period from 1918 to 1925 saw a steady increase in the demand for good roads. The number of automobiles on the road increased almost daily. It had once been thought that the demand for automobiles would reach the saturation point, but this did not prove to be the case, instead the demand continued to grow.<sup>1</sup> In the last three years of this period, for example, the number of motor vehicles in Michigan increased from 578,980 in 1923 to 730,659 in 1924 and to over 900,000 by 1925.<sup>2</sup> From these figures it is easy to see why road building lagged far behind the demand.

It has been estimated that while motor vehicle traffic increased more than 1900 per cent in the years from 1910 to 1921, road construction and maintenance increased only a little over 200 per cent, or one tenth of the traffic's increase.<sup>3</sup>

The farmer was by this time a definite factor in the good roads demand. As was pointed out by a joint congressional commission in a report to Congress in 1922, the motor vehicle had come to be an indispensable "farm implement" and good roads which helped the farmer to get his products to the best markets were essential to the "agricultural life of the nation."<sup>4</sup>

1. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1923, 24.

2. Kalamazoo Gazette, January 8, 1923, March 28, 1924, January 25, 1925

3. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1923-24.

4. Ibid.

Before the automobile the farmer was limited in his market by the short haulage range of the horse. With the advent of this new mode of transportation the farmer's markets were greatly extended, at less cost, and the farmer was brought closer to the city and an easier life. By 1923 forty-seven per cent of the automobiles in Michigan were farm-owned.<sup>1</sup>

In the period after 1918 the demand became increasingly one for hard surfaced roads. The Kalamazoo County Road Commission took cognizance of this fact in its 1921 report when it stated:

"Not only has the demand become more and more insistent but it has also become more and more determined for the construction of higher types of road construction...."

"The reasons for this insistent demand are very apparent to those of you who are at all familiar with the increased motor vehicle travel and especially to those of you living along our main traveled highways. The dust nuisance alone is sufficient reason for such a demand."<sup>2</sup>

New methods of road construction and maintenance were being tried constantly in an effort to keep pace with the growing traffic requirements. The experimental stretch of asphalt concrete paving which had been laid over the old gravel on M-17 in Kalamazoo County in 1917, was found to be in perfect condition after four years of use. This was the first road of this type in Michigan, and its success was encouraging to all those connected with road building.<sup>3</sup>

At this point it might be well to define briefly the three main types of hard surfaced road in use at this time. These

1. Gazette, March 18, 1923.

2. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1921-22.

3. SUPERVISOR'S REPORT, Kalamazoo County, 1919.

were: asphalt concrete, which is a mixture of asphalt, a black bituminous product found in natural beds or produced as a residue from petroleum, and crushed rock; macadam, which is merely layers of closely packed crushed rock, in some cases held together by an oil binder; and cement concrete, which is a mixture of Portland cement with sand and gravel.<sup>1</sup>

The success of the asphalt concrete road led the state, in 1924, to build the first of a number of this type of road, which also were \$4,000 a mile cheaper to construct than cement concrete.<sup>2</sup>

By 1925 it had become evident that rigidity was not the complete answer in road construction, as even a nine inch slab of concrete would crack under the pressure of traffic above and frost below. It was found that asphalt laid over concrete helped to lessen the strain by giving the road more flexibility.<sup>3</sup>

Great improvements were also made in the line of road maintenance. The replacement of horse drawn vehicles by motor vehicles on road work, greatly speeded up work and reduced costs. The development of such machinery as the Fordson Tractor equipped with a grader was a great boon to road maintenance.<sup>4</sup>

In 1923, Michigan adopted the policy of using convicts with short sentences to work on the roads at the rate of \$1.25 per day.<sup>5</sup>

1. Highway Practices, op. cit., pp. 149 and 162.

2. Gazette, March 19, 1924.

3. Ibid., January 4, 1925.

4. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1924-25.

5. Gazette, March 19, 1924.

Kalamazoo County experimented with a new type of road maintenance in 1921. Previous to that time the roads throughout the county were maintained by what was called "local patrol maintenance" and "gang patrol maintenance." That is, about 35 or 40 farmers with teams, living in various sections of the county were hired to keep up those roads near their homes. This system had been found to be very inefficient, because in the summer the farmers were inclined to neglect the roads for their farm work, or, if they were given enough road to make it a full time job, those roads furthest from their homes were found to suffer. In addition to this it was found that a great deal of time was wasted, since only one kind of maintenance could be carried on at one time.<sup>1</sup> This system was replaced by five motor patrols (medium-sized trucks equipped with scraper driven by full-time employees) an arrangement found to be much cheaper and more efficient, since over 40 to 60 miles of road could be covered in one ten hour working day.<sup>2</sup>

Another new maintenance measure was used by the Kalamazoo County road commission during this same year. Oil was spread on gravel roads as a dust palliative and resulted in a cut in maintenance costs of from 35 to 60 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

By 1925 a number of safety devices in connection with the highways had been generally adopted. The painting of a white center-line on hard surfaced roads had been tried and had met with the instant approval of motorists. Special warning signs had been erected along most roads, and road marking signs were

1. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1922-23.

2. Ibid.

3. Loc. cit.

placed on all trunk lines. Snow fence had been tried with good results in keeping highways free of drifts in winter. Wire cable guard-rails protected all dangerous places on all trunk lines. With the perfection of a motor driven snow plow, all main lines were kept reasonably free of snow.<sup>1</sup>

In 1921 the national government stepped in to rectify two evils of its Federal-Aid program. Much of the Federal-Aid money had been spent on unconnected bits of highway, the upkeep of which in many instances had been left to the counties. The Federal Highway Act of 1921 established a Federal Highway System by requiring the state highway departments, with federal approval, to designate a system of the principal interstate and intercounty roads, not to exceed seven per cent of the total rural road mileage then in existence, upon which all Federal aid would be spent. Full responsibility was placed upon the state for maintenance, but federal money and supervision were provided for.<sup>2</sup>

Michigan was also active on the law-making front during the years after 1918. In 1919 the state legislature placed before the people at the spring elections a \$50,000,000 bond issue to finance road building. The issue was passed by a three to one majority.<sup>3</sup> In the same year laws were enacted giving the State Highway Commissioner power to initiate trunk line roads and to take full charge of their construction. Also, triple rewards were authorized on trunk lines.<sup>4</sup>

1. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1924-25.

2. Highway Practices, op. cit. p 10.

3. Gazette, April 8, 1919.

4. Highway Needs, op. cit. p 36.

By July of 1923, \$32,000,000 of the \$50,000,000 bond issue had been expended and a need was seen for raising more money. With this in mind a bill was introduced into the legislature proposing a tax of two cents per gallon on gasoline. The bill was passed by the House and Senate but was vetoed by Governor, Alex J. Groesbeck, on grounds of unconstitutionality and discrimination (by not taxing the producers); also, he contended that the money was not needed.<sup>1</sup>

By 1925 there was a serious lack of funds for highway construction and once again the gas tax bill was introduced into the legislature and this time it passed and was signed by Governor Groesbeck, who was now convinced of its need. The bill levied a tax of two cents<sup>2</sup> per gallon on all gasoline sold or used in the state, and the old horsepower tax was abolished, weight being accepted as the sole basis for license fees.<sup>3</sup> Another 1925 state law relieved the counties and townships of the need for paying a share of the cost of Federal aid roads. The state assumed the entire 50 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

As with all measures concerned with good roads, Kalamazoo County was vitally interested in the passage of the state gas tax bill. In January of 1925 the Kalamazoo County Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution in favor of the two cent gas tax and auto weight tax, and sent same to the State capital.<sup>5</sup> When the

1. Gazette, April 17, 1923.

2. This was increased to three cents in 1927.

3. Public Acts, 1925.

4. Ibid.

5. Gazette, January 10, 1925.

measure finally passed it brought forth this favorable comment from the Gazette: "The highway compromise bill just worked out at Lansing is one of the most important pieces of legislation ever drawn up in the State, marking a legislative milestone of which its framers may be justly proud."<sup>1</sup>

As stated before, World War I put a serious crimp in road building programs. Not only were labor and materials scarce, but there was a hesitancy to spend money on roads, since it was believed that all support should be behind the war effort. Therefore, at the end of the war there was an additional backlog of road work which needed urgent attention. Although, some construction work had been carried on in Kalamazoo County, much work had still piled up. For this reason the county was more than glad at the passage of the state bond issue in 1919. However, there was an additional reason for pleasure, as was indicated by the editor of the Gazette:

"---But while the State may well congratulate herself on the outcome of this particular phase of the election, Kalamazoo County should feel particularly happy, for to this section of the State will accrue peculiar advantages and benefits. Situated as Kalamazoo is, at the hub of three great trails, she will in a few years, be the center from which magnificent highways will radiate into all sections of Michigan."<sup>2</sup>

Road construction in Kalamazoo County went forward rapidly in the years from 1918 to 1925. The total mileage of improved road increasing from 130 miles at the beginning of 1918 to approximately 356 miles by 1925.<sup>3</sup>

1. Gazette, January 21, 1925.

2. Gazette, April 8, 1919.

3. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1918-19, 1925.

In 1918 road construction in Kalamazoo County was slow. That work, completed consisted of 1.25 miles of gravel road resurfaced, 4.393 miles of new gravel constructed, .844 miles of macadam, and 2.8 miles of concrete.<sup>1</sup>

By 1919 the county had about 200 miles of improved road and 143.7 miles of unimproved road. Of the improved road, almost 10 miles was of concrete construction. This year saw the completion of 4.834 miles of covert road,<sup>2</sup> 11.5 miles of non-trunk line road and 9.2 miles of trunk line.<sup>3</sup>

In 1920 almost 53 miles of construction activity was begun, twelve and one-half miles of this consisting of cement-concrete highway forming a part of the Dixie Highway.<sup>4</sup> However, only about 12 miles of work of all types was completed.

By 1921 work was in progress on three primary highways of cement construction all of which passed through the city of Kalamazoo. These were: the Dixie Highway, which passed through Niles, Dowagiac, Paw Paw, and Kalamazoo; the Mackinaw Trail, which went from Three Rivers to Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids; and Michigan highway, 17, which led from Detroit, Jackson, and Battle Creek to Kalamazoo and Benton Harbor.

At the end of 1922 Kalamazoo County had a total of 47.69 miles of trunk line and Federal-Aid roads, and 221.48 miles of non-trunk line roads. In that year 38.32 miles of covert road, 12.5 miles of non-trunk road, and 6.5 miles of trunk line highway

1. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1918-19.

2. Covert roads were those roads financed by the issue of bonds under the Covert Act.

3. Ibid., 1919-1920.

4. Gazette, January 2, 1920.

were constructed. Of this construction 16.6 miles was of cement concrete. For a time during this year all concrete highway building was halted due to nationwide rail and coal strikes.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-six miles of road were built in 1923, of which 12½ miles were concrete laid in numerous short strips throughout the county.<sup>2</sup>

About this time it was becoming ever more apparent that the roads constructed in the years before 1920 were entirely too narrow for the faster and increased traffic of the 20's. For this reason it became necessary to widen many of the concrete roads in the county. In 1924 widening was begun on M-17 west from Kalamazoo. This road, which was the nearest completely paved road in the state, was only 16 feet wide, so a two foot strip was to be added to each side, 75 per cent of the cost being born by the state. Approximately 7 miles of this work was completed by the year's end. During the same year 28 miles of gravel road was resurfaced, and 5 miles of gravel-tar surface was laid. A total of 50 miles of cement concrete, and 20 miles of asphalt concrete road was to be found in the county.<sup>3</sup>

In 1925 about 13 miles of new road was built; this included 8 and 1/3 miles of 20 foot wide concrete and brought the total mileage of improved roads of all types in the county to 356 miles.<sup>4</sup> The County Road Commission reported that all new roads being

1. Report, Kalamazoo County, 1922-23.

2. Ibid., 1923-24

3. Supervisors Report, Kalamazoo County, 1924-25

4. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1925-26.

constructed had a 26, 28, or 30 foot grade, with a metal track of 12 feet wide and 12 inches deep, and these roads were built for the same cost as roads with a 20 to 24 foot grade with 9 foot width and 9 inch depth had been ten years before. This was despite increased material and labor costs.<sup>1</sup>

After halting all activity, except vital maintenance, for the duration of the war, Cass County began an ambitious program of road building in 1919. It was decided to begin immediate construction of new road at the rate of 55 miles per year. Although none of the \$600,000.00 bond issue had been used, \$3,000 had elapsed by this time. The Board voted to issue the remainder immediately to cover construction costs.<sup>2</sup> Increased costs used up the money faster than had been expected and in 1921 work was almost halted due to lack of funds. To meet this situation the Supervisors voted to place a 2 mill tax levy before the voters at the next election. This tax was approved by the voters and thus the county was able to continue its program.<sup>3</sup>

By 1925 Cass County was traversed by one good gravel road running east and west (M-60), and by another running almost from north to south (M-62). There were also almost 15 miles of new concrete highway cutting across the county (M-40, the Dixie Highway). These roads were connected by a system of secondary roads of gravel.<sup>4</sup>

The year 1925 ended a quarter century in the fight for better roads. Although this date did not mark the end of the good-roads

1. Supervisor's Report, Kalamazoo County, 1925-26.  
2. Supervisor's Report, Cass County, 1919.  
3. Ibid., 1925.

movement, since the demand for better roads is a never ending one, it did signify the termination of a major phase of this great movement.

The twenty-five years after 1900 witnessed the growth of road-building from a local spasmodic enterprise to a nationwide billion dollar industry. These years saw the typical road change from a rutted lane to a gravel throughfare, and finally, in many cases, to a smooth concrete or asphalt highway.

Accompanying, or rather preceeding, this growth in road construction the automobile developed from a sputtering undependable toy to a practical machine which could whisk over the roads at almost sixty miles an hour.

Thus, by 1925 road-building had grown out of its infancy and had reached a full blown maturity. Good-roads pioneers could look with well founded pride on the results of twenty-five years of continuous struggle against that age-old enemy of mankind-- mud.

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