

Post-War Road Problems

The many miles of concrete paving laid by 1932 did not, as many seemed to think, solve Iowa's road problem. Since that time road officials have sought to prevent the primary roads from becoming obsolete, while, at the same time, providing more adequate secondary roads.

The depression of the thirties sharply reduced road receipts. The primary road fund's income dropped from \$18,116,000 in 1931 to \$14,514,000 in 1934. After bank closures in 1933 tied up over half the available funds, no primary road contracts of any magnitude could have been let that year without increased federal aid. In 1935 and 1936 the Highway Commission still relied upon federal help to provide two-thirds of the money it spent.

In 1940 the Commission reported an urgent need for extensive primary road improvements. Since 1920 motor vehicle registration had increased from 437,000 to 790,000. During this same period the average cruising speed and mileage traveled had doubled. Buses and trucks presented problems in 1940 that had not existed in 1920. Curtailment of railroad service left many small towns entirely dependent upon highways to meet their transportation needs. The Commission,

therefore, proposed to spend at least \$116,000,000 in order to modernize the primary road system.

Before any action could be taken, World War II intervened, virtually halting all road construction. In the year ending June 30, 1945, less than \$600,000 was spent on primary road construction, the smallest amount in the history of the system. The normal maintenance force of 1,400 men was reduced to 971 by June, 1945. Equipment which would ordinarily be replaced had to be repaired and used again. Some relief was gained through the reduction of highway traffic by nearly one-half during the war.

It took years following the war to reorganize and equip the highly trained engineering and construction forces built up in the 1930's but scattered by the war. Critical shortages of materials halted construction for months at a time. The wartime cut in construction left a surplus of almost \$13,000,000 available for the primary roads, in addition to the annual income. At the same time, however, inflation forced the costs of such items as standard concrete pavement up from \$1.95 per square yard before the war to a peak of \$4.23 in 1948. Maintenance costs rose from an average of about \$4,000,000 in 1940-1944 to nearly \$7,000,000 in 1949, and yet the Commission admitted that the general condition of the roads did not improve.

Road work was also delayed by arguments between supporters of the primary and secondary

road systems. The fact that over 90 per cent of the roads were secondary made it appear that they should receive the most attention. In reply, primary road supporters pointed out that at least 60 per cent of the state's highway traffic was on the primary roads. Unless the main highways were in good condition, they argued, the side roads could not adequately fulfill their chief function as primary road feeders.

During the 1920's, as a result of the haste to pave the primary roads, the complaint that not enough was done on the secondary roads was justified. By 1929, however, Governor Hammill optimistically declared, "We may now consider our primary road problem solved and turn our undivided attention to the solution of our secondary road problem." Whereas in 1929 less than half the county trunk roads were surfaced, by 1939 fewer than 2,000 of the 13,800 miles of this group were dirt roads. During the same decade surfaced mileage on the old township roads quadrupled.

These gains were financed chiefly by local property taxes, but the state came to play an increasingly important role. Beginning in 1923, when a county's primary roads had been improved, part of its share of primary road funds could be used on its secondary roads. Additional state aid was received after 1925 from gas tax proceeds.

In 1939, in order to obtain the aid which Congress now furnished for secondary roads, the

farm-to-market road system was created, consisting of 10 per cent of the most heavily traveled secondary roads. A special fund was established to consist of all federal secondary road aid and, after 1940, all primary road fund receipts in excess of \$16,000,000. In 1941 the ceiling was raised to \$17,000,000. Postwar federal legislation increased the farm-to-market system to 35,000 miles, over a third of all secondary roads. These roads remained part of the secondary road system, but in order to obtain federal aid, the Highway Commission controlled the funds and supervised construction work.

After 1945 it became obvious that some changes would have to be made in the method of road financing. Ample funds were available to match federal secondary road aid, but in 1947 it was necessary to transfer \$3,736,000 from other sources to avoid losing precious federal primary road subsidies. By 1948 primary road fund receipts from state sources alone were more than \$29,000,000, but about 40 per cent had to be diverted to the farm-to-market roads. After July 1, 1948, the fund was so low that the Commission could not let any new contracts for primary road construction during the remainder of the year.

In an effort to find a solution to these problems the legislature in 1947 set up a road study committee of eight lawmakers and four private citizens, with Senator Jans T. Dykhous of Rock

Rapids as chairman. The committee was ordered to submit a plan to the next General Assembly for obtaining a balanced program of primary and secondary road improvement.

Late in 1948 the committee recommended a twenty-year, pay-as-you-go program which, at existing prices, would cost almost a billion dollars. Of this amount, \$482,000,000 would be required to pave the 2,200 miles of graveled or unsurfaced primary roads and to widen and rebuild the remaining mileage. The rest would be spent on secondary roads with the object to provide every reasonably located farmhouse with a surfaced road outlet, and reduce maintenance costs by resurfacing wherever necessary.

To raise the additional \$14,211,000 required annually to finance this program, motor vehicle registration fees would be increased and taxes already collected from highway users but not used for highway work would be added to the road revenues. All road taxes collected by the state would be placed in a single fund to be divided on the basis of 48.5 per cent for primary roads, 6.5 per cent for municipal streets, and the remainder for secondary roads.

With the earnest support of Governor William S. Beardsley, who had been a legislative member of the study committee, and the newly formed Good Roads Association, this twenty-year program was adopted in 1949 with few changes. One

important revision allotted only 42 per cent of the proceeds of the new Road Use Tax Fund to the primary roads, instead of the amount asked for by the Dykhouse committee. Farm-to-market roads received 15 per cent and other secondary roads 35 per cent, 5 per cent more than suggested. Despite these changes, the new law increased primary road funds from the limit of \$17,000,000 in 1949 to \$27,400,000 in 1950.

The new program was well received. The Des Moines *Register* asserted: "We can now begin to recover from the long period of stagnation in highway improvement in this state." Claud Coykendall of the Good Roads Association, who had written the report of the Dykhouse committee, declared that the 1949 General Assembly "had to its credit more sound, constructive highway legislation than had ever been enacted by a single session of the Iowa legislature." As a result, Governor Beardsley said, Iowa was now "at the head of states in highway modernization."

Progress on secondary road work from 1948 to 1953 proceeded at a rate which, if continued, would provide all-weather surfaced roads to every rural home five years earlier than scheduled. Completion of the farm-to-market system seemed probable before 1960. Nearly three-quarters of the secondary road system were surfaced by 1954.

Primary road work, however, was far less satisfactory. By 1954, when work should have been

one-fourth completed, actually only about 12 per cent of the primary road program was finished. By 1954 about \$130,000,000 had been spent for primary road construction, yet it was estimated that \$767,000,000 would be needed to complete the work. The 1949 program had counted on a 33 per cent traffic increase by 1960, whereas in reality traffic in 1954 was already 38 per cent heavier than it had been five years earlier. The task of estimating future road needs, W. Earl Hall, *Mason City* editor, observed early in 1955, "calls for an imagination that just doesn't seem to be present in the human animal."

No matter what happens in 1955, however, the road problem will continue. Discussions regarding ten or twenty-year road programs are deceiving if they imply that the road problem will be at an end when these programs are completed. Pavements wear out and future road needs are unpredictable. The dilemma of the road maker was clearly stated by Fred R. White in 1920 at the start of the campaign to pave the primary roads. "By the time we get those roads paved," he forecast, "the first of them will be worn out and ready to start again. So let's go into it with our eyes open that we are starting something we will never finish." Much has changed since 1920, but time and experience have proved the wisdom of White's advice.

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