

## Road Administration

Administrative reforms, which, it was hoped, would result in more efficient road work, monopolized the attention of the early good roads movement. The chief object of the reforms was to achieve a greater degree of centralized control of the roads. After the federal government and private turnpike companies ceased to exercise much influence upon road policy in the 1850's the states permitted the roads to fall entirely under the administration of local governmental units. Not until the end of the century did the states, led by New Jersey in 1891, begin to assume a responsibility for their highway systems.

In Iowa in the early 1880's the state government exercised no administrative control over the roads. County supervisors had the authority to determine locations of new roads, to change the course of existing roads, and, in certain instances, to levy a county bridge tax. Township trustees each spring determined, within prescribed limits, how great a property tax was to be levied to support the township roads during the coming season, and how much of this tax could be paid with labor rather than with cash. In the fall they divided the township into as many road districts "as they may

deem necessary for the public good." Each district, in turn, had a road supervisor who was elected annually before 1880, biennially thereafter. The supervisor was the official actually in charge of the roads since he spent the money and directed the road work, which was performed by men working out their road taxes.

There was some logic to this system in pioneer days when virtually the only use made of the roads was local in character, but as the state grew and traffic steadily increased in volume doubts arose as to the wisdom of permitting thousands of separate road systems to exist with no unifying standards. Most frequently denounced, perhaps, was the wastefulness of the system. "It is not an extravagant statement," Governor William Larrabee asserted in 1890, "that the taxes collected for the care of highways in Iowa yield a smaller return proportionately than any other imposts. The manner in which these taxes are used is a reproach to people ordinarily provident in private matters."

Under the system of working out taxes "all able bodied male residents" between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five were required to perform two days' road work between April and September in payment of the poll tax. In addition, depending upon the trustees' decision, it was possible to receive credit for part of one's property tax in the same manner.

The system was attacked primarily for its in-

efficiency. In a corn state such as Iowa the farmers were needed in their fields during most of the road working season. The result was that road work was done in the late summer when the farmer could best be spared, but when the least effective work could be performed, or it was left to old men and young boys, despite the legal age limits. This was not the way to keep roads in first-class condition, William Steyh argued. Constant care was required "by a force of men specifically trained and employed for this purpose."

To be sure, working out one's road tax was a source of diversion. John Scott declared that it "left us many pleasant recollections of agreeable gossip and invigorating rests under the shade of neighboring trees and fences. To make this event one of the greatest possible utility and enjoyment, the old brown jug had its place in the fence corner, to which was frequent resort." The supervisor's authority, he said, "was more nominal than real. Doubtless, he was often elevated by his followers to this responsibility because of his capacity and disposition to make the period 'a good time.' "

Chaotic as the entire system may appear, however, it had strong support at the time from those who saw positive virtues in decentralized control. Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter in 1874 even suggested that the road districts be made completely independent of all township control. Such a step would result in better roads, for, he believed, "if

one enterprising district, for the honor of the neighborhood, secures good roads, the adjoining district is stimulated to like enterprise." A group of Warren County farmers begged the legislature in 1884 to "give heed to the call of human rights and equal justice and the great principle of free Government which will leave the road laws and management as they now are in the hands of the People and not under the control of a centralized one man power and moneyed despotism."

Progress toward correcting these defective administrative methods was slow and gradual. In 1884, after Governors John H. Gear and Buren R. Sherman and the State Road Improvement Association had strongly urged changes in the road laws, the first step toward greater centralization of power was taken with the passage of "An Act to Promote the Improvement of Highways." This law marks a turning point in Iowa road history, but it was hardly the "radical change" which Governor Sherman declared was needed. The county supervisors were authorized to levy a one-mill county property tax to be paid only in cash. The tax's proceeds would form a county road fund to be spent "only on the order of the board of supervisors for work done on the highways of the county, in such places as the board shall determine." In addition, township trustees, on petition of a majority of the voters, could organize the township into one road district. Road taxes would then be

paid in cash, and all road funds would be spent by the trustees.

Virtually no townships chose to consolidate their road districts. In 1894 the one-mill county tax was made mandatory in all counties, but aside from this change, road administration in 1900 remained no different than it was prior to 1884.

As a result of increased pressure the Anderson Act of 1902 made the adoption of the township system and the payment of property taxes in cash compulsory. Charles F. Curtiss termed this "the most important step that has yet been taken looking to the improvement of the public highways of this state." The old district system was partially restored in 1909 but was abolished for good in 1913. Until 1929, however, it was still possible in some townships for a man to work out his five-dollar poll tax on the roads.

In 1913 the power of the county supervisors was greatly increased with the establishment of the county road system, which was to include "not less than ten per cent nor more than fifteen per cent" of the total road mileage in the county. These were to be the "main traveled roads" linking the principal market places. Administration of this system was placed in the county supervisors' hands. They also received complete control over all bridges and culverts in the county.

In 1921 the legislature provided that upon a majority vote of the people in any township its road

work could be turned over entirely to the county supervisors. It was obvious that the days of road work on the township level were limited, and in 1929 the Bergman Act eliminated the township as a road administration district as of January 1, 1930. All secondary roads came under control of the county supervisors. By this step the number of officials in charge of the state's secondary roads was reduced from 5,500 to about 400.

The most important reform promoting efficient and expert supervision of the roads on the county level was undoubtedly the creation of the office of county engineer. As early as 1883 Samuel D. Pryce declared that road work should be "under the supervision of a competent civil engineer." In 1892, the legislative committee of the engineers' society presented the General Assembly with a bill establishing the office of county engineer.

No action was taken for many years, however. The opposition's reasoning was revealed in March, 1910, when Governor B. F. Carroll asked the Good Roads Association to support the establishment of a county engineer. The delegates defeated the proposal 315 to 168. One delegate called it a plan for "giving places to a lot of boys from college without accomplishing anything." The idea that trained experts were needed to manage road work was an affront to many local road officials. A Monroe County delegate contended that "they did not have to go to college to get men

capable of using the level." Most of these men would not think of erecting a large public building without competent engineering advice, but they stubbornly refused to regard highway construction as presenting an analogous situation.

As a result of this opposition, good roads forces were compelled to accept a compromise in 1911 whereby the supervisors could, if they desired, employ "a competent person" to draw up plans and specifications for county road work. The general shift in sentiment toward more advanced road administrative methods finally resulted in the creation of the office of county engineer in 1913.

Much opposition remained. Senator A. L. Ames of Traer reported that "probably no part of the [1913 road law had been] criticized more frequently than that part relating to the work done by the county highway engineer." In 1923 the critics succeeded in making the county engineer an optional position. Few counties took advantage of this act, however, and in 1929 the Bergman Act not only repealed it, but also gave the county engineer greater responsibility over the county's road work. By this time most supervisors had come to recognize the engineer's value as they saw him save the county thousands of dollars. One county board chairman declared that if the counties had to choose between the engineer and the supervisor "it would do well to give up the latter because the engineer could do the work of the supervisors but

the supervisors could not do the work of the engineer."

The most important of all administrative reforms was the creation of the State Highway Commission. Samuel D. Pryce, in his prophetic letter of 1883, foresaw the need for some form of state road supervision when he called for the appointment by the governor of highway commissioners in each county. A decade later, Seth Dean, Mills County Surveyor, proposed the division of the state into road districts with boards in charge of their roads. These boards, in turn, would be under the general supervision of a five-man state highway board appointed by the governor.

Finally, in 1904, the General Assembly, at the suggestion of the Good Roads Association, considered setting up a state highway department at Iowa State College, where experimental road work had been conducted for several years. Not enough support could be obtained to establish a separate agency with its own funds, but, through the efforts of Representative F. F. Jones of Villisca, the college itself was directed to act as a Highway Commission. The college was to serve chiefly as an information center for road officials of the state on any questions which they might have regarding highway construction and maintenance. Demonstrations in proper road working methods were to be conducted at least once a year.

The board of trustees of Iowa State College ap-

pointed Deans Charles F. Curtiss and Anson Marston to serve as Commissioners, with Professor Thomas H. MacDonald as full-time assistant. The Commission at first received only \$3,500 a year. This was later increased to \$5,000 and then in 1910 to \$10,000. Despite such limited funds the Commission managed to conduct an annual road school for county and township road officers, launch several important investigations of road conditions, and provide information and advice as directed, although at times it was unable to buy the postage stamps necessary to answer inquiries sent to it. The Commission contended that if its powers and funds were increased it could correct "the record of incompetent and frequently flagrantly dishonest handling of contracts, special bridge contracts, pools and agreements in restraint of competition and the erection of flimsy and inefficient structures and disorganized methods of work," which existed in the state.

The exposure in 1912 of wasteful and even corrupt expenditure of funds, particularly in Polk and Clinton counties, forcing the resignation or removal of several supervisors, aroused greater public support for a stronger Highway Commission.

As a result, the Commission was reorganized in 1913 and its power increased. Despite some belief that the Commission should be located in the state capital, it was retained in its existing offices at Ames. The number of Commissioners was in-

increased to three. The Dean of Engineering at Iowa State College was automatically a member of the Commission. The other two were appointed by the governor. The Commission was granted the power to remove county engineers for reasons of incompetency. All plans for improvements of county roads had to receive its approval before work could begin. Finally, the Commission exercised general supervision over all road work through its power to investigate and to report to the attorney general any delinquencies in the performances of county or township road officials.

The office of Chief Engineer was created to handle this increased authority. Only four men have held this office. Thomas H. MacDonald, the first Chief Engineer, resigned in 1919 to become director of the Bureau of Public Roads. Fred R. White, who had been an assistant engineer since 1910, was Chief Engineer from 1919 until 1952 when he was succeeded by Edward F. Koch. Upon Koch's resignation in 1954 John G. Butter became the fourth Chief Engineer.

Anson Marston, as Dean of Engineering at Iowa State College, continued as Commissioner in 1913. The two appointive Commissioners were James W. Holden of Scranton, Greene County Supervisor, and former president of the Association of County Supervisors, and H. C. Beard of Mt. Ayr, a lawyer well known for his good roads activities.

Powerful opposition to the Highway Commission existed for a number of years. Although official representatives of the county supervisors had asked for many of the increased powers granted to the Commission and although county and township officials retained the power to initiate all road work, many of these officials objected to the Commission's new supervisory powers.

A bill sponsored by Representative James F. Johnston of Lucas County in 1915 would have abolished the Commission but was defeated in the senate after the house approved by a vote of 64 to 43. A similar effort in 1917 by Johnston and Speaker Milton B. Pitt of Harrison County failed in the house after a series of 54 to 54 tie votes. During the bitter fight Woodworth Clum of the Greater Iowa Association referred to Pitt and Johnston as "political pirates who are endeavoring to scuttle the ship of state." Earlier, in 1915, the *Manchester Press* called the anti-Commission movement "an insult to the intelligence and progressive spirit of Iowa people. . . . After years of blind road and bridge patching and tinkering, Iowa has for the first time an authoritative body of men who are proceeding along definite, sensible and economical lines, and now it is solemnly proposed to drop back into the wallow and bog along with a discarded and discredited system."

The Highway Commission's power was strengthened when, in 1916, Congress enacted the

Federal Aid Road Act appropriating \$75,000,000 to be distributed among the states during the following five years as assistance in important road building projects. This action almost restored the federal government to the position with respect to roads which it held early in the nineteenth century.

The creation of the Office of Road Inquiry in 1893 was the start of this reassertion of power. This agency, the forerunner of the modern Bureau of Public Roads, served largely as an information center until 1912 when Congress appropriated \$500,000 to be used to aid in the construction of post roads and gave the office supervision over the expenditure of these funds. The federal government allotted each state \$10,000 for the improvement of a road over which "rural mail service had been or might thereafter be carried," if the state provided \$20,000, and the plans for the road and the finished work were approved by federal officials. Iowa received \$30,000 from this fund.

The much more ambitious act of 1916 required the states to match federal aid with an equal amount of money. In addition, each state had to have a state highway department capable of handling and overseeing the expenditure of the money. Governor Harding called the aid "a form of lottery." Not to accept the money, however, would be unjust to the taxpayers of Iowa, so the Governor asked the legislature "to choose a course in this respect which will not lend encouragement to

this wasteful form of appropriation and expenditure, while securing to ourselves some crumbs from the feast we have been forced to spread." The General Assembly in 1917 accepted the proffered aid, matching it with motor vehicle license fees.

At the same time, the Highway Commission was directed to select a system of roads on which federal aid would be used. In 1919 this became the primary road system under the provisions of the primary road law which created a twofold division of the state's roads. The primary road system comprised about 6,400 miles of road connecting every city and town of more than 1,000 inhabitants in the state, while the secondary road system was made up of the 10,000 miles of the county road system and the township roads, comprising about 87,000 miles. With regard to the primary roads, although the counties initiated and carried out all construction work, the Commission now exercised control over the purse strings as well as over construction plans. A primary road fund was established, composed of Iowa's share of federal aid and the proceeds from the motor vehicle license tax. Counties did not receive the money, but submitted bills for approved projects, which, if passed by the Commission, were then paid by the state.

To meet the demand for a more connected system of interstate highways, Congress in 1921 passed a new highway act which forced drastic changes in Iowa's road administration. The State

Highway Commission was now required to have complete control over both the construction and maintenance of all federal aid roads before aid would be granted. Single counties were no longer to be permitted to block the establishment of continuous paved roads. The states were given five years to comply with these requirements.

Both Governors Kendall and Hammill, together with the Highway Commission and good roads organizations, urged the legislature to make the necessary administrative changes in order that Iowa might not lose federal aid. Governor Hammill admitted that he was "not very enthusiastic about federal aid," yet to abandon it in this case "would be a short-sighted policy." Representative John P. Gallagher of Iowa County, however, called such aid "unwise, dangerous, unpatriotic and openly and offensively antagonistic to the spirit and genius of the American form of state government."

In 1925 a compromise measure was adopted whereby the minimum federal requirements were met. A primary road development fund was established, composed only of federal aid funds and the exact equivalent in state funds, which the Commission was to use, on its own initiative, for primary road construction work. In addition, the Commission was given final authority in determining maintenance policies on primary roads.

Two years later this stopgap measure was replaced with a comprehensive administrative re-

form. Senator J. O. Shaff of Camanche introduced a bill transferring complete control of the entire primary road system to the Highway Commission. In order to secure its adoption, good roads forces had to agree to changes in the Highway Commission. A five-man appointive Commission was created, with the Dean of Engineering at Iowa State College no longer an ex officio member. This terminated the long years of service of Anson Marston, dating from 1904, and broken only by a leave of absence for war duty in World War I.

Prior to the enactment of the Shaff Act the primary road system, Governor Hammill later recalled, had been like a car with two steering wheels. "The Highway Commission had hold of one wheel and the county board of supervisors had hold of the other. . . . Sometimes one of our chauffeurs was looking backward and the other looking forward. We were unable to dodge the mud holes. All we could do was puddle through." By 1929 the process of centralization begun in 1884 was completed. Responsibility for road administration had been removed from the hands of the many and placed in the hands of a few who could more easily be held accountable. Authority over the roads was clearly defined between state and county with the Highway Commission exercising general supervision over all the roads, and direct control over the state's primary highways.

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