

The PALIMPSEST

SEPTEMBER 1934

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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The Genesis of Planking

The need for better means of transportation has been a continual challenge in the civilization of America. From Indian trails and "dugout" canoes to trans-continental airways is a long story with many stirring chapters. Each advance seems to have moved across the country from East to West, not, perhaps, as a continuous wave, but as great eddies, radiating outward from populous centers. From the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River there has been a distinct time lag, amounting sometimes, as in the case of the railroads, to as much as twenty-five years.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, tremendous strides were being made in the development of all forms of transportation then known. Rivers and canals vied with turnpikes and national roads as main-travelled routes, and the iron horse was beginning to make its influence felt. Not, however, until the decade following the Civil

War did the great age of railroad expansion begin. Then, for more than half a century, this form of transportation expanded so rapidly that it almost crowded out other competitive methods.

Prior to the advent of railroads, the marketing of farm products was especially difficult. Hauling grain over dirt roads was expensive. As much as fifty cents per hundred weight was charged for twenty miles. Corn, even disregarding the costs of production, could not ordinarily be moved more than twenty-five or thirty miles on the highways and sold at a profit. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is said that ginseng was the only product that could be grown in Kentucky, then the most populous State in the West, transported to Philadelphia, and sold for enough to pay for the hauling. At a time when three-fourths of the country's population were farmers, clamoring for a market, cheaper and better forms of transportation were absolutely essential.

The supremacy of the "rails" was recognized and opposed by other transportation interests, which sought in every possible manner to check the intrusion of this ruthless competitor into their particular fields of operation. One of the principal advantages of the railroad over the turnpike was the fact that it was an "all weather road". When highway transportation was at a standstill on ac-

count of storms and mud, transportation by rail was practically uninterrupted. The obvious advantage was apparent to all. Those most interested in the continuance of the existing stage lines thought that, if the delays incurred by inclement weather could be overcome, they might, for a time at least, stem the tide of public favor which was rapidly swinging toward the railroads.

Two methods of highway improvement were found to be feasible. In fact, in modified forms, both had been employed for centuries in various parts of the world. The first was the construction of stone-surfaced roads, a notable example being those built by the Romans, which, it is said, to this day have probably never been surpassed either for excellence or durability. The second kind of hard surfacing was with wood. As a temporary expedient this method had been widely and frequently used, especially in swampy places.

Innumerable stretches of old "corduroy" roads were built, not only throughout the settled portions of the country, but in sparsely populated regions as well. In the construction of "corduroy" roads, the most primitive methods were often used. Small logs or tree trunks were simply laid crosswise of the road over swampy places. They furnished a solid foundation, thus preventing animals and vehicles from sinking down deep into the mud.

In some instances the surface of these roads was greatly improved by splitting the logs, laying them flat side upward, and fastening them in place by overlying stringers secured along each side of the road with stakes driven into the ground.

The coming of the power sawmill, which followed the advance of civilization throughout the middle west, made possible a distinct improvement in the construction of wood-surfaced highways. Smooth, sawed planks took the place of the round or split logs. Whereas the old "corduroy" highway fully justified its name, being decidedly more utilitarian than comfortable, the newly devised "plank road", with its smooth, even surface, seemed like perfection in comparison. Plank roads reached the peak of their development in the United States during the decade between 1840 and 1850. Thereafter they experienced a rapid decline in popularity.

Plank roads were built upon an earth embankment or grade about thirty feet in width along a predetermined right of way. Usually ditches were constructed on both sides for drainage. Where valleys and ravines were crossed, earthworks or fills of considerable magnitude were sometimes necessary. Stream beds and ditches were spanned by substantial bridges, and a high type of engineering ability and ingenuity was

often displayed in the construction of these trestles which, of course, were usually made entirely of wood, although occasionally stone was employed for an arch or culvert. Concrete, structural steel, and iron bridges now so common were then not even in the experimental stage.

The road surface proper, when built according to standard specifications generally accepted at that time, was formed by three-inch planks, eight feet in length, laid transversely to longitudinal sleepers which were imbedded in the earth road base. The dimensions of the sleepers were about six by eight inches and the usual arrangement was to place one on each side of the roadway, although it is said that upon some of the better construction a third was laid down the center.

The question of employing or not employing nether stringers seemed to be a point of considerable controversy. "The use of large stringers beneath is also an error", declared the *Prairie Farmer* in 1851. "The plank ought to rest on the earth for their support. Stringers are only useful in keeping the plank from turning; which, especially at first, they are liable to do, while the earth beneath is soft. There should be no impediment to the compact and snug bedding down of the whole superstructure of the road."

The width of the surfacing plank was not nec-

essarily uniform, being determined by the size of the logs from which it was sawed. Six inches was usually the minimum width, and from ten to fourteen inches the maximum. The kind of plank depended largely upon the variety of timber available in the vicinity of the proposed highway. In some regions hemlock and other soft woods were used, but generally throughout the middle west only superior woods were utilized. Devastating inroads were made upon the finest stands of oak and walnut timber. Ordinarily the planks were fastened to the sleepers by means of iron spikes which were of the square, hand-wrought variety. When these were not available, wooden pins or even stakes were sometimes used.

Hundreds of miles of these roads were built during the heyday of their popularity. The *Muscatine Journal* on February 7, 1852, stated that as many as seven plank roads had been built out of Detroit, connecting that city with the interior. Their aggregate length was one hundred and eighty-eight miles, and their average cost about \$1500 per mile. "Milwaukee has six plank roads in process of construction and about one hundred miles completed."

In Illinois the movement became almost statewide. Plank roads radiated from almost every important town. The first "planking" was laid in

Chicago during the summer of 1843, and according to contemporary news reports it was still good, "showing scarcely any wear", in 1851. In 1849, a general "Plank Road Corporation Act" was passed by the State legislature, whereby companies might be readily formed for the purpose of constructing and managing plank roads. Previous to this, special charters were granted for individual roads, three of which — the "Northwestern", the "Western", and the "Southwestern" — extended outward from Chicago. These roads stretching westward toward Iowa, were of considerable interest to the people of this Commonwealth, as they formed an important link in the overland route to the region beyond the Mississippi. Thousands of early settlers and immigrants came that way.

Of these three, the first to be constructed was the "Southwestern" road, which followed approximately the present route of Ogden Avenue. It was begun in May, 1848, and by 1850 sixteen miles had been completed, reaching Brush Hill on the eastern boundary of Du Page County. As extensions to this road, the "Naperville and Oswego", the "St. Charles and Warrenville", the "Sycamore", and the "Oswego and Little Rock" roads were built, thus making a continuous line of plank roads leading out from Chicago for a dis-

tance of sixty miles. These roads formed the main line which, together with the branch roads connecting it with small towns, made a network of improved roads in the section of country lying southwest of Chicago.

Supplementing the roads in this section, another company of interest to Iowans was organized under the name of the "Oswego and Indiana Plank Road Company", which proposed to build a "Plank drive" from Oswego, through Plainfield and Joliet to the Indiana State line. This would provide immigrants from the east with a more direct and convenient route to the west. A link in this highway was actually constructed, between Joliet and Plainfield, which remained in operation until March 15, 1869, when it was closed, resulting in a "complete financial failure". Those who had invested in it lost everything as was usually the case in most other ventures of like character.

A similar network of roads extended to the west and northwest of Chicago. In 1849 the "Northwestern" plank road company, following the route of Milwaukee Avenue, began building to Oak Ridge, a distance of eight miles, and the next year the road was completed to Dutchman's Point. From this main line various feeders were thrown out to the Des Plaines River. The principal objective of this route was to form a connection with

the important trading center of Wheeling and, by branch roads, to "secure for Chicago the surplus products of the entire Des Plaines Valley."

Connecting with the "Northwestern" road at Oak Ridge was the "Western" plank road, running westward to the east line of Du Page County where it joined the "Elgin and Geneva Plank Road", which ran through Elgin and terminated at Geneva, more than fifty miles distant from Chicago.

Thus it will be seen that by the time the plank-road fever struck Iowa, about 1850, such highways were not entirely an untried venture. On the contrary, the technique of plank-road construction was well advanced. The advantages of hard, smooth-surfaced highways were obvious. Moreover, several years use had demonstrated the practicability of planking immigrant and farm-to-market routes.

BEN HUR WILSON

The Boom in Iowa

The early inhabitants of southeastern Iowa were energetic, progressive, and intelligent people, anxious to improve their situation upon every opportunity. They had pushed out into this newer western country with the expectation of prospering, and, being pioneers, they were willing to take chances with new ventures, despite the doubts of a cautious and conservative minority. During the first years of settlement, most of the commerce of the region moved in a north and south direction following the course of the Mississippi, though the swelling tide of western immigration was rapidly developing cross-channels of traffic which could no longer be ignored.

Keen business rivalry sprang up between Dubuque, Davenport, Bloomington (Muscatine), Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk, as well as some of the inland towns. Each lost no chance to obtain any real or imagined advantage over another. Early sensing the importance of being located upon direct and principal lines of transportation, these embryonic cities took careful stock of the various means by which this traffic might be diverted past their doors. Ferries, roads, bridges,

taverns, each playing its own important part, were promoted to influence the westbound traveller in his choice of route.

The advantages and benefits to be derived from "plank roads" and "rail roads", already accepted by 1850 as improved forms of transportation in the east, were being actively debated in almost every growing community. The superiority of the railroad was everywhere recognized, but the excessive cost, as compared with that of the plank road, was thought by many to more than offset the advantages. In so new a country, the task of raising sufficient capital for the construction of a plank road was hard enough. Railroads were considered a luxury which Iowa would not be able to afford for many years. Besides, it was agreed that plank roads would probably prove less likely to disturb or destroy such well established transportation agencies as were then in existence, and in which large sums of local capital had already been invested.

"The citizens of Davenport hang their hopes of prosperity and growth on railroads", declared the *Davenport Gazette*, "those of Muscatine upon bridges; those of Burlington upon plank roads. Which is the best peg to hang our hopes on?" To this question the rival *Muscatine Democratic Enquirer* replied on September 28, 1850, "Why, the

plank roads and bridges for a new country to be sure! If you don't want your hopes to hang until galvanism can't revive them, give your reliance on railroads to Uncle Sam's expense and go to work for yourselves as your neighbors have done and are doing. Muscatine and Burlington are liberally spending their thousands, earned by hard work, in improving the country and extending their trade and influence. The *Davenport Gazette* seems to think that the Rock Island and Lasalle road can be built and continued on to Iowa City. We hope this undertaking will succeed, though we have our fears. If the citizens of Davenport and Iowa City had spunk enough to talk about a plank road, the scheme would look more reasonable."

This appraisal of the situation well illustrated the state of public opinion which existed at that time in southeastern Iowa with respect to transportation problems. Many acts of the State legislature confirm the fact that "plank road fever" had broken out in earnest throughout the region. Like a "flash in the pan", legislation bearing upon this subject flared up as one of the most prominent topics of public concern. While the Second General Assembly passed only three acts relative to the construction of plank roads, the Third General Assembly, which convened in 1851, enacted ten. By 1853, however, enthusiasm for this type of

highway had, in the light of actual experience, so subsided that only one belated act was sanctioned by the Fourth General Assembly.

Inasmuch as no general plank road corporation act was ever passed in Iowa, the promoters of each proposed highway were compelled to go before the General Assembly and secure permission to construct their particular road. These legislative enactments were almost all alike. In most instances it seems that a company was previously organized under the provisions of the general incorporation act, for the purpose of building a road, and then, before construction might properly begin, a legislative enabling act had to be passed granting the company authority to obtain the right of way.

Existing highways were sometimes incorporated into the route of the new road, and on other occasions an entirely new course was chosen. Most of the provisions of the plank road acts concerned the legal procedure in buying the right of way. If the officials of the company and the land owner failed to agree upon benefits and damages, the owner was usually required to apply to the sheriff of the county in which the land lay for a jury to assess the amount of damages.

Other matters included in the act pertained to toll charges and the amount of the road which had

to be completed before they would become effective; the number and location of toll-houses and toll-gates; the question of right of way for traffic; the rules of the road and penalties to be exacted for non-observance; and the restoration of the road to public use and reversion of the rights of private owners upon the expiration of the company's charter or if the road were abandoned or discontinued.

The first legislation relating to the subject of plank roads, it appears, was an act adopted by the Second General Assembly, on January 8, 1849, granting to "James Weed, of Muscatine county, John Culbertson, of Cedar county, William Abbey, of Linn county, and Thomas Way, of Benton county, and their associates," the privilege of constructing a graded toll road from Bloomington (Muscatine) in Muscatine County, by way of Tipton, in Cedar County, to the county seat of Benton County, "on the most practical route, to be ascertained by survey." This was a most pretentious undertaking, for "if the said James Weed and his associates shall at any time deem it necessary for the interest of the public, they may construct a plank track, not less than eight feet in width, in which case they shall receive an additional toll".

Due to the length of the road, the wavering

interest of the communities along the route, and the rivalry of Davenport for the inland trade, the required capital was not easily obtained. So matters dragged along through the summer of 1850. Meetings were held spasmodically, but they seem to have been poorly attended and lethargic. There was some talk of diverting the northern end of the road westward toward Iowa City. On October 1, 1850, a meeting of the citizens of Muscatine was held to appoint delegates to a Plank Road Convention to be held at the Half-Way House. The committee reported in favor of burying "all sectional and local irritations" and uniting "heartily with the citizens of Iowa City in forwarding the interests and the building of both places." Judge Williams, John A. Parvin, and George C. Stone were appointed as a committee to confer with Iowa City. Commenting upon this action, the editor of the *Democratic Enquirer* remarked that, "This looks like the result of sober second thought. Roll on the ball!" Although an act of the legislature, approved on February 4, 1851, authorized the construction of a plank road from Muscatine to Iowa City, these well intentioned plans came to naught.

It seems that nothing further was accomplished until the summer of 1851 when, on August 9th, the *Muscatine Journal* reported that a meeting

was "held in Tipton, Cedar County, Iowa, for the purpose of taking into consideration the necessity and practicability of surveying and constructing a plank road from Muscatine via Tipton, to Cedar Rapids, &c." At this meeting committees of three each were appointed from Cedar and Linn counties, to confer with a like committee from Muscatine to devise ways and means of defraying the expenses of a survey for the proposed highway.

On August 30th, a general Plank Road Convention was announced to be attended by "Delegates from all the counties interested in and favorable to the Muscatine and Linn County Graded and Plank Road," which was to "be held at the Court House in Tipton, on Wednesday, the 10th of September at 11 o'clock, A.M., to devise measures adequate to an early completion of the road. It is hoped that there will be a large attendance of delegates and citizens from all sections interested." Only lukewarm enthusiasm, however, was manifest at this convention. When the general public refused to become excited over the venture, the Muscatine papers likewise assumed an attitude of indifference. Nothing more was heard of Muscatine's super-highway to the northwest.

For a time interest turned to another route leading directly westward. On January 18, 1851, the General Assembly passed an act granting a right

of way to the Muscatine, Washington and Oskaloosa Road and Bridge Company. It is doubtful if the promoters had serious expectations of completing the entire project implied by its euphonious title. In reality the company was organized as a subterfuge for the purpose of selling stock in a visionary scheme for constructing a new type of bridge across the Cedar River nine or ten miles directly west of Muscatine. It is said that a facetious editor, discussing the subject, dropped the very appropriate remark, "what a long tail our cat's got."

After the usual campaign for the sale of stock, a contract was made with N. L. Milburn, of Paducah, Kentucky, the inventor of a newly patented suspension bridge, to supervise its construction. This elaborate structure was almost completed on April 3, 1851, when Joseph Bennett, president of the company, cautiously rode his horse across. He was compelled to turn back without touching the other side, however, because the approach was not finished. That night a severe storm totally demolished the entire structure, entailing a loss of more than \$15,000 to the stockholders. Dissension arose within the ranks of the officers regarding the future policy of the company. They were apparently unable to agree either on the type of bridge to build or its location. Meanwhile the

oncoming rumble of the "rails" so alienated public favor from plank roads that the illfated project was never revived.

Several other proposals for graded and plank roads farther south met with varying degrees of success. Some reached only the "paper" stage, while others were carried to completion. Port Louisa, a boom town on the Mississippi opposite Wapello, attained considerable prominence for a brief period as the likely point of crossing for a trunk-line railway. It was thought that so promising a place would be the logical location for a permanent road penetrating into the interior. Accordingly, the "Port Louisa, Wapello and Virginia Grove Plank Road and Bridge Company" was organized for this purpose. The act granting right of way was passed by the General Assembly on February 5, 1851, which, in addition to the usual features included in such an act, also contained provisions for erecting a bridge across the Iowa River at Wapello; "*provided*, said bridge is so erected as not to interrupt materially the navigation of said Iowa River." All these well laid plans, however, apparently came to naught. If any actual construction was ever accomplished upon this project, the available records fail to reveal the fact.

BEN HUR WILSON

Planked in Places

Burlington was the center of plank-road enterprise in Iowa. Enthusiasm for oak hard surfacing literally ran riot, sweeping all obstacles before it. Business men and farmers alike subscribed liberally, and even the municipality generously purchased stock with the proceeds of bonds floated for improvement purposes. The financial benefits received from these efforts were extremely disappointing, for the capital invested by the city and individuals was all lost. Ultimately, however, incalculable advantages accrued indirectly to the community as a result of this progressive spirit. The courage and initiative displayed was undoubtedly a deciding factor in placing Burlington upon the main line of a trans-continental railroad.

The construction of three plank roads radiating from Burlington was authorized. The first of these was legalized by the legislature on January 15, 1849. William F. Coolbaugh, of Des Moines County, Alvin Sanders, of Henry County, and their associates were empowered to build a graded road thirty feet wide between Burlington and Mount Pleasant, by way of Middletown and New London. The right of way, sixty feet wide,

was to follow the existing road as nearly as possible. Construction was to start within two years. If the company deemed it "necessary for the interest of the public," they were authorized to lay a "plank track not less than eight feet in width" on the grade, and charge additional tolls. The privilege of operating the road was granted for a period of twenty years, subject to extension if by that time the company had not received returns equal to the cost of construction, maintenance, operation, and reasonable interest on the investment.

Apparently, this company had difficulty in obtaining a right of way, for after nearly two years had elapsed, the General Assembly, on December 18, 1850, prescribed a more equitable method of acquiring "such ground as may be deemed suitable for that purpose". Meanwhile, however, work on the road was begun early in 1850 and the grade completed to the eastern edge of the city limits of Mount Pleasant late in December, 1851, a distance of about twenty-eight miles. It proved to be the most successful project of its kind ever accomplished in Iowa.

From the terminus of the road at Mount Pleasant an extension through Ottumwa to Oskaloosa was proposed. Another branch toward the northwest through Trenton and Deedsville (Merrimac)

to Brighton was also suggested. These extensions, however, did not materialize, and after a few years of more or less successful operation the plank road was paralleled by the Burlington railroad. Against such competition it could not survive, and soon fell into disuse and decay. It exists only in memory through traditions handed down from a former generation to people living in the immediate vicinity of the old right of way.

On January 21, 1851, the second of the Burlington plank roads was authorized, to be built by the "Burlington and Toolsborough Plank Road Company". Toolsborough was a promising little village located twenty-five or thirty miles directly north of Burlington near the mouth of the Iowa River in Louisa County. Interest in this road, however, seems to have shifted in favor of another running northwest, the construction of which was sanctioned by the legislature on February 4, 1851, to be built by a corporation known as the "Burlington and Louisa County Plank Road Company." While from its name the location and destination of the road appear to be indefinite, the intention of the promoters was to build directly to Wapello, the county seat of Louisa County, and possibly beyond to Virginia Grove. This was probably a strategic move to discourage the building of the Port Louisa road to Virginia Grove.

Burlington could not permit a rival town to gain any advantage which might later threaten its business supremacy.

Apparently the people of Wapello were more favorable to the Burlington outlet. The *Democratic Enquirer* of January 25, 1851, reported, "Burlington has started the project of a plank road to Wapello, by the Telegraph line, to secure the trade of Wapello, and Louisa County and of the eastern part of Washington County. The citizens of Louisa County are determined to have facilities for reaching the market and are energetic and liberal in their efforts." More than \$10,000 of the estimated capital of \$18,000 which had to be raised before a contract could be let, was said to have been subscribed by the people residing along the proposed route. The municipality of Burlington later loaned \$10,000 to the company, accepting its common stock as collateral security for the loan, which was never repaid.

That some construction work upon this project actually took place, there can be no doubt, for in the following autumn the Burlington *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* announced: "We have before alluded to the very substantial and perfect manner in which the Directors of this company are constructing their Plank Road which is going in a northwest direction from town; after reaching Virginia

Grove, it will be pushed on to Oskaloosa in Mahaska County.

"The company now has 12 miles of the road under contract, all to be completed next season. They have just finished a bridge across Flint Creek, which for exterior finish and substantial construction will equal any bridge in the west. After crossing Flint, the road follows the Telegraph Road, and the present contract will terminate not far from the farm of Mr. Kimball Chase. Upwards of a million feet of lumber are now being delivered along the route, and the entire road presents a very business-like appearance."

Just what portion of the road was ever completed can only be conjectured. Antrobus in his *History of Des Moines County* states that "some of its rotten remains existed along in the early '60's north of Flint Creek". Probably only short patches were ever finished. At any rate it was never entirely completed and placed in operation as a paying concern, for it finally ended in a financial debacle.

Farther down the river at Fort Madison, in Lee County, the "Fort Madison, West Point and Salem Plank Road Company" was organized. The right of way act, which was approved on February 5, 1851, was similar to others granted by the State, with one exception which allowed the

taking of sixty-five feet for road purposes instead of the usual sixty feet. No serious attempt was ever made to construct the road, however, as the plans were soon changed to make it a railroad similarly located, but never actually completed.

Below, at Keokuk, two roads at least were planned, upon one of which, it is said, about nine miles were actually completed. Aside from the Burlington-Mount Pleasant road, this was the most important stretch of plank road ever put into operation within the State. Legislation for the earliest of these Keokuk roads, which, it seems, was the second or third plank road project to be approved in Iowa, passed the General Assembly on January 15, 1849, the same day the Burlington-Mount Pleasant road was authorized. The act granted to William Brownell and his associates the privilege of constructing, between the towns of Montrose and Keokuk, a "graded and plank road, and to use the same" for twenty-five years. The route was to follow "the present line of road so far as may be practicable," and the grade was to be not "less than forty feet wide, and the plank or track not less than eight feet".

Another section of the act provided, "that the said William Brownell and his associates may erect toll houses, and toll gates, upon said road, and exact toll upon the same as follows: for each

carriage, wagon, cart or sleigh, drawn by two horses, oxen or mules, two and a half cents per mile, and one cent per mile for each additional horse, ox or mule, attached to the same vehicle; for every vehicle drawn by one horse, ox or mule, two cents per mile; for each horse and rider one cent per mile; for every head of horses, oxen, mules or cattle, led or driven one cent per mile; for every head of sheep, goats, or hogs, one half cent per mile; for merchandise (not including the furniture of emigrants) two cents per ton per each mile."

Inasmuch as the route of this road paralleled the Des Moines Rapids in the Mississippi, it was supposed to afford unusual promise as a profitable business venture on account of the tremendous amount of river commerce. During seasons of low water, many boats had to be unloaded and all freight, passengers, baggage, and supplies transported to the opposite end of the rapids by land on the Iowa side. Before this plank road was completed, however, the project was changed into a railroad.

The act for the second plank road to be built out of Keokuk was approved on February 4, 1851. It authorized, under the name of the "Keokuk and Des Moines Valley Plank Road Company", the construction of a graded and plank road "between

the towns of Keokuk and Birmingham in Van Buren county, by the town of Charleston in Lee county, on such ground as may be deemed suitable for that purpose, including any portion of the public highway, *provided* the travelling on such highway is not thereby interrupted." The cost of construction of this road was to be financed by a stock company, and a contract was let to the firm of Brownell and Sprott. Brownell was also the principal promoter of the earlier Montrose road.

It seems that for a time the building of the road was prosecuted with great vigor and efficiency, and that the company actually succeeded, during the remainder of the year 1851, in finishing and putting into operation a section at the lower end. This portion extended from Keokuk northward about nine miles, ending a short distance below the present Santa Fe viaduct. The graded portion of the road was completed at least as far as Charleston, ending opposite the Twenty Mile House.

So rosy did the outlook for its success seem that the officers seriously considered the feasibility of continuing it to Fort Des Moines at the Raccoon fork of the Des Moines River. These visionary plans, however, did not materialize, and after failing to operate the completed portion of the road at a profit, the company finally turned their property

over to the board of supervisors of Lee County who maintained and operated the road for a brief period. Eventually they "took up the planks and sold them for fire wood. The route, however, was not abandoned, but is still the principal highway into Keokuk from the northwest."

In addition to these plank road projects along the river, several other companies were formed in the interior, primarily for the purpose of building roads to connect with those which were already pushing westward from the Mississippi. Much enthusiasm was evidenced and many people seemed to regard the plank road as a panacea for all the ills of the country.

In February, 1850, after some previous agitation upon the subject, a plank road meeting was held at Ottumwa, "to discuss the construction of a plank road from Ottumwa, to intersect the Burlington and Mt. Pleasant Plank road at Mt. Pleasant. Uriah Biggs was appointed President of the meeting; Thomas Ping and John C. Evans, Vice Presidents, and Bertrand Jones, Secretary. There was universal sentiment in favor of such a road, and a committee of twenty delegates, prominent citizens, was designated to represent the county at a Plank road Convention to be held at Mt. Pleasant on February 27th. When the subscription books were opened, Ottumwa responded

with \$8,700, Agency City with \$5,000 and Ashland with \$4,500."

Nothing, however, seems to have come of the Ottumwa-Mount Pleasant proposal, and the following year on February 5, 1851, right of way was granted to the "Ottumwa and Libertyville Plank Road Company", which expected to become a link in the Keokuk-Des Moines road. This venture also proved to be futile and nothing further was heard of it.

On the same date, a road was authorized from Mount Pleasant through Deedsville to Brighton, upon which, likewise, little actual work was ever done. One other belated road, under the name of the "Mount Pleasant and Fairfield Plank Road Company", was approved on January 18, 1853. This was the last of the series of statutes to be enacted in behalf of the plank road movement within the State of Iowa.

It seems that the principal obstacle to the construction of this highway was the bridging of the river "Chicauqua" (Skunk) near the present village of Rome, and the construction of a long wooden trestle across the "bottoms" west of the bridge. The company immediately went to work on this project. Sawmills were moved into the nearby timber to saw out the heavy dimension material which was to be required for its construction.

One of the sawmills, owned and operated by John A. Thomas, was near the mouth of Honey Creek about a mile above the bridge site.

This wooden bridge was to be located on the township line, close to the old ferry, at a place where the stream could easily be forded during seasons of low water. When the proposed bridge was about half finished, and some work had been accomplished on piling for the trestle which was to be thrown across the low land, the entire undertaking was swept away by a flood. This so discouraged the promoters that no further work was ever done on the project.

A highway bridge was finally built, on what was thought to be a more favorable site about a mile down stream. More than seventy-five years later, the present bridge on United States Highway 34 was constructed only a few feet south of the site originally proposed for the plank road bridge. It is said that some remains of the old twenty-four-inch square, sawed oak piling intended for the trestle were still in existence though badly decayed. They were buried under the new earth fill which now extends across the lowlands on the west side of the river.

Thus, Iowa's first pretentious effort to get out of the mud came to an end. Considering the newness of the country, the meager capital available, and

the limited equipment and facilities for road building, the plank road movement was a remarkable manifestation of energy and resourcefulness. And yet the plank road companies all failed in a few years. The principal reason for the brevity of their popularity and usefulness was the swift development of the railroads which rendered less efficient means of transportation obsolete.

The Burlington *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* described the proper sphere of railroads and hard-surfaced highways prophetically on February 20, 1851. "Railways, with all their value, and they are of priceless worth to man, are yet the thoroughfare for the citizen away from his home — for the journey, the travel, the tour; but the plank road is for home use — for the transit which is begun and ended in a day or its fraction — which gives to him who uses it a double value or occupation for the hours of the day — which increases the happiness and comfort and profit of the farm, that foundation of all the institutions of society."

After eighty years, it is only necessary to substitute the word "hard" for "plank" to make that statement appropriate to the present situation. Now, even as then, waterways, railroads, hard-surfaced highways, and country by-roads, each has its particular functions in our complex modern civilization.

BEN HUR WILSON

Comment by the Editor

HARD SURFACE

Road building has some of the characteristics of a mathematical problem. Given certain facts, the master of numbers can arrange his data in such a logical order that the question is answered. Often it is essential to simplify the equation by finding a common denominator.

If various factors pertaining to traffic are known, an engineer can determine what kind of a highway ought to be built. Types of vehicles, speed of locomotion, density of traffic, availability of construction material, and economic utility all affect the solution. In reducing the problem of road building to final terms, a hard surface has always been the greatest common denominator.

Wherever the necessities of transportation can be supplied by simple, slow-moving conveyances, a highly improved roadway is neither needed nor prudential. The prairie Indians were satisfied with a beaten path, and the free-swinging Concord stagecoaches were convincing evidence of rough turnpikes. If the nature of commerce is a gauge of the complexity of civilization, then the density and mobility of population, the distribution of

goods, the means of transportation, and the nature of local resources can be measured by the condition of the highways. Extensive hard surfacing is proof of economic advancement.

Approximately a hundred years ago transportation conditions and forest resources produced plank roads. Those were the first hard-surfaced highways in Iowa. But at the time that style crossed the Mississippi, another form of hard surfacing achieved more substantial popularity. Railways for steam locomotives made plank roads for wagons obsolete. The plank-road fever might never have become epidemic on the prairie. The development of motor carriers, however, revived the demand for hard-surfaced highways. Back to private, free-steering transportation we have gone, but on roads of gravel and concrete instead of a wooden veneer.

J. E. B.

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