

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. Dykhouse 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."

The average age of concrete pavement in 1954 was 23 years; less than 500 miles of paving in the primary road system were under five years old. A 22-foot pavement with four-foot shoulders for roads carrying less than 400 vehicles a day, on up to special four-lane highways for roads carrying over 4,000 vehicles per day, were the Highway Commission's standards for construction in 1954, but at that time about 3,300 miles of pavement were still the 18-foot model of the 1920's; only 150 miles were wider than 22 feet.

"Few if any of Iowa's licensed drivers living today will see an adequate primary highway system in the state during their lifetime," G. J. Timmerman of the Motor Club of Iowa declared, "if we continue to depend upon the present 'pay-as-you-go' plan." In 1953 his organization favored a

state road bond issue. "Good Roads — In Our Lifetime!" was its slogan. The right of counties to float road bonds was repealed in 1949, but a constitutional amendment in 1942 seemingly overcame the objections which the Supreme Court earlier had raised with respect to state bonds. A bill sponsored by Senator D. C. Nolan of Iowa City submitting a \$300,000,000 bond issue to the voters passed the senate in 1953, but was not acted upon in the house. Clyde Herring, Democratic nominee for governor in 1954, called for a \$175,000,000 state bond issue which would, he contended, permit the modernization of the primary roads within seven years.

The Good Roads Association, however, opposed bonds, using many of the same arguments which had been employed in the 1920's against the good roads forces when the latter were supporting bonds. In view of the similar opposition by most Republican leaders there appeared to be no chance of action favorable to road bonds in 1955.

The answer of the Good Roads Association to the road problem in 1954 was to increase the gas tax. In 1945 this tax had been raised from three to four cents on the gallon. As a temporary measure to last only until July, 1955, a fifth cent was added in 1953. After a lengthy debate between primary and secondary road supporters it was ordered that the proceeds from this increase be used to pave the graveled section of the primary road system.

The Good Roads Association in April, 1954, proposed to retain this one-cent increase, and, furthermore, to add two cents more. A fourth of this increase would go for secondary and urban roads, while the rest would be spent for primary road construction. In this way the Association hoped to increase annual primary road construction expenditures to \$50,000,000, which "competent authorities" declared was needed if the system's modernization was to be completed by 1969.

This increase was opposed by the powerful Farm Bureau Federation. The Petroleum Industries Committee also disapproved, contending that if existing funds were used to modernize the most heavily traveled highways instead of the entire system, no tax increase would be necessary. But, as Chief Engineer John G. Butter candidly observed about a similar suggestion, "nobody would last long on a commission that did that."

Leo Hoegh, Republican nominee for governor in 1954, supported the retention of the fifth cent added in 1953, and, in addition, proposed to raise the gas tax to six cents, in order to accelerate the primary road program. He declared that Iowans should not think "that we can get roads without paying for them." With strong Republican support Hoegh's modified version of the Good Roads Association's proposal appeared most likely to be enacted in 1955.

Additional hope for relief of the state's road

problem came from two other sources in 1954. In August the Highway Commission reported that a toll road was "economically feasible" in Iowa in 1959 if bonds could be issued and sold at 3.5 per cent interest. The road's suggested route would roughly parallel Highway 6 from Council Bluffs to Davenport, where it would join a system of such turnpikes which eventually might stretch continuously into New England. The Commission and two cooperating engineering firms estimated that such a super-highway would cost \$180,000,000. It would be financed through the sale of bonds by a toll road authority which would also build and operate the road. The bonds could be paid off within 21 years by tolls collected from the road's users.

The report, the result of a study authorized by the legislature in 1953, evoked few expressions of disapproval. Senator Charles S. Van Eaton of Sioux City and Representative Ernest Kosek of Cedar Rapids sponsored senate and house bills in the 1955 General Assembly which would create a toll road authority. Kosek declared that 75 per cent of the cost of the road would be paid by trucks and cross-state traffic. Primary roads would benefit by the routing of heavy interstate truck traffic over the toll road. Gas taxes collected from toll road users, Kosek pointed out, would help to develop Iowa's other highways. In addition, this toll road would qualify as an interstate

highway, and under the new national interstate highway program proposed in 1954 Iowa might receive federal aid equal to the amount spent on the toll road for use on other state highways.

Kosek's and Van Eaton's bills provided that as soon as the last toll road bonds were retired and thirty years had elapsed, the road authority would donate the road free and clear of all encumbrances to the State of Iowa. As long as no state funds were involved in this self-liquidating project, the general feeling was that Iowa had nothing to lose and everything to gain if a toll road was built.

Some were less enthusiastic, however, pointing out that such a road was no substitute for continued improvement of free roads, since the toll road would handle only 4 per cent of the total state highway traffic. Others declared that in states which had toll roads, the state highway commissions had been weakened and work on public highways had suffered as a consequence of the influence wielded by the toll road authorities. Since concessions along the turnpike would be leased to the highest bidder, who would have exclusive rights to serve motorists, several groups, notably the Motor Court Association, Restaurant Association, and Independent Oil Jobbers, who feared for their own interests, formed the Iowa Free Roads Association to oppose any toll road.

More directly beneficial was the prospect of greater federal aid which 1954 brought. From

1913 through 1954 Iowa received from this source over \$140,000,000 with annual receipts increasing from the modest \$10,000 of 1913 to the \$12,400,000 allotted forty years later. Many Iowans pointed out, however, that this figure was less than one-half of the \$30,000,000 drawn annually from Iowa by the two-cent federal gas tax and automobile excise taxes. Governor Beardsley, Representative Fred Schwengel of Davenport, and groups such as the Motor Club of Iowa were active in the national campaign to correct this situation. It was hoped either to force the federal government to allot a larger share of the taxes collected from highway users for road work, or to repeal the federal gas tax altogether, thus allowing the states to increase their own road taxes.

In 1954 Congress increased federal aid so that beginning in July, 1955, Iowa would receive \$18,760,000 annually. In November this amount was dwarfed by a proposal of President Eisenhower's highway advisory committee headed by General Lucius Clay that \$25,000,000,000 be spent in the next decade to provide a national network of modern highways. These funds would be used on the interstate highway system drawn up in 1947 which included some 700 miles of Iowa's primary roads. Initial appropriations for this system were authorized in 1952, but at the end of 1954 only a small amount had been spent in Iowa due to federal insistence on a 300-foot right-of-way and limited

highway access. The Highway Commission had difficulty in meeting such requirements.

The Clay committee's plan was certain to arouse considerable opposition from those who feared it would greatly weaken the states' control of their roads. In addition, matching the allotments, which in Iowa would amount to about \$40,000,000 annually over and above regular federal aid, would be a formidable task, even though the states would probably have to provide no more than 40 cents for every 60 put up by the federal government. On the other hand, it would release more funds for use on other primary roads.

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.

GEORGE S. MAY