

Good Roads Organizations

The good roads movement was part of the general effort to obtain improved transportation facilities which, in the United States, dates from colonial days. The toll road and canal building booms of the early nineteenth century scarcely reached Iowa. The plank road fever of the 1840's and 1850's, however, resulted in the laying of a few score miles of plank in southeastern Iowa before railroad development halted further work.

Until after the Civil War the railroad was more a dream than a reality in Iowa, but it effectively quelled the desire for road improvement. For many years it was thought that railroads would make ordinary roads largely unnecessary. Thus, although there was grumbling about muddy roads, little effort was expended to improve them.

At the end of the century, as the agrarian, rural economy began to give way to one of an industrial, urban character, a new interest in good roads developed in the United States. Railroads connected the cities, but the growing urban centers, for commercial purposes, required a more reliable means of reaching the surrounding rural areas than the existing roads provided. It was local commercial groups, therefore, together with the bicycle and

later the automobile forces, that sparked the good roads movement.

It would be difficult to say when the good roads campaign began in Iowa. A veteran good roads booster declared in 1916: "The fact is there isn't a man in the state of Iowa who is against good roads, and if I can find one who thinks he is, I'll convince him that he isn't." The question has never been should Iowa have good roads, but what were the best roads which it was possible to have at any particular time. The so-called good roads advocates have tended to be the most pessimistic in their appraisal of existing road conditions, and the most optimistic in their estimates of the kind of roads Iowa is capable of supporting.

As early as 1854 Governor Stephen Hempstead gave official recognition to certain specific defects in the road system. Governor Samuel Merrill reported in 1872 that there was "much complaint" regarding road conditions, and he felt there was "much justice in the complaint." Ten years later Governor Buren R. Sherman, in his first inaugural address, stated that it was "painfully evident" that the state's roads needed improving.

In the early 1880's more emphasis began to be placed on road building and less on railroads. The average town which was seeking its second or third rail connection "would be working far more to its own interest and profit," the Des Moines *Iowa State Register* believed, if it spent its time

and money to improve its county roads. Railroads were important, the Cedar Rapids *Republican* conceded, "but it should be remembered that the majority of our people have much more extensive business relations with the citizens of surrounding townships than they have with Chicago, Council Bluffs or Kansas City. Let us develop home markets as well as reach out for distant communities."

On January 3, 1883, Samuel D. Pryce, Iowa City businessman and chairman of the Iowa City Board of Trade's road committee, wrote a letter to the *Iowa State Register*. After vividly portraying the state of Iowa's roads and summarizing the numerous advantages to be gained through their improvement, Pryce exclaimed, "Citizens of Iowa, inaugurate at once in every school district in the State, the agitation of this question. . . . Strike out boldly for public road improvement. The people of Iowa cannot afford to be longer handicapped by mud blockades and bad roads."

Pryce's letter was reprinted throughout the state and was influential in arousing good roads sentiment. The *Iowa State Register* thought it "probable that in no previous paper has so much that is valuable and practical been given to the Iowa public on this subject" as was found in this letter. Newspaper comment was so extensive that the Iowa City *Republican* declared that rarely was "a public question so thoroughly discussed as the

road question has been during the past month. Hundreds of columns have been written on the subject."

In February, 1883, the Iowa City Board of Trade invited "the Boards of Trade, Boards of Supervisors, City and Town Councils, Farmers' Clubs and kindred organizations, to send delegates to a State Road Convention, to assemble in Iowa City, March 1 and 2." Support for the convention was expressed by many newspapers and by such citizens as Governor Sherman, Coker F. Clarkson, and Benjamin F. Gue.

The delegates assembled and organized the State Road Improvement Association. John Scott of Nevada, former lieutenant governor, was elected president, with Herbert S. Fairall, editor of the *Iowa City Republican*, as secretary. The object of the group was "to awaken an interest in favor of the improvement of the public highways, and to secure such legislation as will give us a better system of working the roads."

Sustained effort, however, has been lacking in the Iowa good roads movement. The Road Improvement Association met once more, in 1884, but seems to have passed out of sight thereafter, its members perhaps satisfied with the changes in the road laws enacted in 1884. In the years that followed at least six other groups were organized devoted to the road problem. Once gains were made, however, the organizations folded up.

In August, 1892, a second Iowa Road Improvement Association was organized at Des Moines. The founder of the group and its first president was the editor of the *Clinton Morning Age*, Edward H. Thayer, a nationally known good roads leader. John H. Gear, Peter A. Dey, William Larrabee, Henry Wallace, and John Scott were other active participants in this Association which unfortunately lasted but a short while.

Although a group sometimes called the State Good Roads Association was formed in 1899, the honor of being the first Iowa Good Roads Association probably belongs to the organization created at a convention in Des Moines in April, 1903, called by Governor Albert B. Cummins. It was almost an official organization, not only because of the support of Cummins, but because Charles F. Curtiss, one of the two original State Highway Commissioners, was on its executive committee, while Thomas H. MacDonald, Commission engineer, was secretary-treasurer in 1905-1906.

Like its predecessors, the Association was not a lasting one. As a result, a second Good Roads Association was formed in March, 1910, at a meeting called by Governor B. F. Carroll. Lafayette Young was elected president, Dean W. G. Raymond of the State University of Iowa, first vice-president, and Thomas H. MacDonald was again chosen secretary-treasurer. This group lasted apparently until 1913, when it quietly died.

It is possible that the failure of the legislature to adopt the Association's plans for building and financing surfaced roads contributed to its downfall.

During the next decade the good roads movement was guided by organizations most of which had other interests in addition to roads. The most important of these was the promotional group known as the Greater Iowa Association. Finally, in June, 1923, the third Good Roads Association arose and was at once hailed as "the leader of the good roads movement in Iowa." H. B. Allfree of Newton was elected president, E. T. Meredith of Des Moines, first vice-president, and Mrs. Henry C. Taylor, president of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, second vice-president. A permanent organization was created which, as it turned out, deserved the name. Louis H. Cook, associate editor of the *Iowa Homestead*, acted as temporary secretary until 1924 when Glenn C. Haynes, former state auditor, and a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor in 1924, assumed the position. Believing that its appointed task of seeing the state's primary roads paved was completed, the group expired early in the 1930's.

A permanent solution to the road problem proved as elusive as ever, however, and thus the fourth Good Roads Association, still in existence, was formed at Marshalltown on November 10, 1948. When a permanent organization had been

established, Claud Coykendall, for many years the administrative engineer of the Highway Commission, became executive secretary. In 1953 he was succeeded by Gerald Bogan, a veteran newspaperman, who was publicity director for the Republican party of Iowa from 1949 until assuming his duties with the Good Roads Association.

At the end of 1954 the officers of the organization, in addition to Bogan, included John W. Coverdale of Waterloo, president, Archie Nelson of Cherokee, vice-president, and H. W. Callison of Winterset, secretary-treasurer. Through such devices as a twenty-five minute color movie on Iowa's roads, the sponsorship of essay contests, talks before organizations of all types, printed policy statements, and the tireless efforts of its executive secretary the fourth Good Roads Association has proved itself a worthy successor to the groups which have preceded it.

In recent years conferences have been called by the Association in an attempt to coordinate the efforts of the many groups which in the past have played important roles in the good roads movement. Participants in these meetings have included the Associated General Contractors, the League of Municipalities, the Petroleum Industries Committee, the Press Association, the Rural Letter Carriers Association, the Farm Bureau, and the Motor Truck Association.

The good roads movement has never lacked

support, therefore, but actual progress toward its goals has been slow. The Des Moines *Register and Leader* noted in 1912 that the program of the good roads convention that year was no different from that of similar gatherings of the preceding twenty-five years. Debate had been going on too long, the paper declared. "The time has come to act. . . . There is nothing new to be said today or tomorrow. Everything has been said many times that is worth saying."

A major cause of delay was summed up by former Governor Samuel Kirkwood in a statement to the Road Improvement Association in 1883. He had worked for better roads for many years, he declared, but the results were disheartening for the roads remained bad. "The system is an old one," he pointed out, "and you will find it harder to change than you perhaps imagine it to be. It will not be sufficient that you here lay down a system that you think should take the place of the existing system. You will find the legislators in both branches slow to move and they must be moved upon."

Not only has it been necessary to overcome the conservative attachment for a road system some of whose parts originated in the middle ages, but it has also been necessary to obtain unity within the ranks of the good roads forces. This has been no easy task. Good roads conventions produce lively debates, but frequently little agreement.

Sharp disagreements have existed over particular points. Engineers have argued over the correct width of the roadbed and other technical questions of bridge and road construction. Supporters of the dirt road once disputed the claim of others that road surfacing was necessary. Costly delays have resulted from arguments respecting the relative merits of stone, gravel, brick, concrete, and other types of surfacing. The most bitter fights of all have been between the advocates and opponents of greater centralization of road authority, and between the supporters of the pay-as-you-go plan of road financing, and bond supporters.

Progress has been further slowed by conflicts between the northern counties, blessed with a plentiful supply of gravel and a level terrain, and the southern counties, not so favored in this respect, as to the proper method of distributing road funds. The relative importance of the primary and secondary roads has caused heated debate. Certain groups, such as bridge and road construction companies, and producers of road materials, have opposed changes injurious to their interests.

The farm groups generally have offered the strongest resistance to road improvements, although numerous examples of farmers in the front ranks of the good roads movement could be cited. Farm opposition has resulted, in part, from a fear that farmers would be saddled with most of the expense involved in building good roads.

This latter fear, William Steyh, noted Burlington engineer, observed in 1895, was fanned by "the utterances of some over zealous advocates of expensive paved roads, which created a distrust, nay, almost a panic among the farmers, who could see nothing but mortgaged homesteads as the result of improved roads." Until the 1920's this fear was partly justified. Prior to 1919 farmers paid a total of four mills in property taxes to support the county roads, while residents of first class cities contributed only half a mill. "A monument of inequity and unfairness," was T. G. Harper's description of this situation. Harper, president of the Good Roads Association in 1905, contended that the businessman told the farmer that he had goods to sell, but if the farmer wanted to buy he would have to build the roads over which he must drive.

More tact was needed on the part of good roads advocates, Harvey Ingham declared, after witnessing a farmers' convention in 1893 resolve that the existing roads were good enough. "We don't want any eastern bicycle fellers, or one-hoss lawyers with patent leather boots, to tell us how to fix the roads that we use," one farmer asserted. Yet, Ingham believed, the group "would probably have confessed that some changes might have been made for the better, and undoubtedly could be led to make such changes by a judicious attack upon the most conspicuous evils of the existing system."

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