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OUR NEW CONCRETE STREET

By BENN BLINN, '32

One hears a purring whine, punctuated by rough oaths; a truck has mired down in the sticky clay. A small child cries — he has lost his prettiest toy in the muck. A demure young lady mumbles a swear word, and blushes. There are hideous splotches on her chic little dress.

But then one day a trim young man with his assistant appears on the scene. The engineer looks through a complicated instrument and waves noncommittally to his helper, who carefully drives a stake. Everyone is happy. The street is coming through.

The children run to the windows to watch a Gargantuan monster of steel, enveloped in a cloud of its own sooty breath, creep jerkily up to a stop at the end of the pavement. It is a steam shovel. They know that tomorrow work will begin.

And it does. The shovel bites into the stubborn clay with its untiring jaws of steel, and big trucks, manned by hilarious college boys who sing songs of their Alma Mater, haul away the debris. But soon their work is done, and the steaming creature of iron waddles away and is replaced by slip scoops and picturesque old men who shout "Whoa, gee, haw" to their horses. To them is assigned the task of trimming the banks and leveling the embryo street.

Before the old men and their horses are quite out of the way, piles of pipe and huge rolls of cable appear in stacks about the smooth yellow clay. Gangs of laborers are already working steadily digging the trenches until the channels reach a convenient depth, then the work slows down. Unfortunately the overseer does not possess X-ray eyes. Water dripping from unseen leaks in the newly installed mains often causes cave-ins that mean extra work and more delay.

As the summer grows older and the work progresses, other men are to be seen working with irregularly shaped sheets of metal, black and oily. They lie prone as they "sight" and measure from the new stakes the engineer has driven. These new men are setting forms that will act as molds for the malleable granite that will form the curbs. The curbs will not only act as a means of carrying storm water to the sewers, but will also serve as forms for the street proper.

A new machine is here today. It seems like a huge knife — on wheels — and has the explanatory name of "grader." It creeps along pulled by a tractor, slicing off the clay from the high spots and along the curb and pushing it into the center. It is making a grade and performs its work with almost mathematical precision.

Today is Saturday. Today the street is to be poured. The children are out of school watching the men laying pipe to "Bess," as the big mixer is called. They know that she will be thirsty when the pouring starts and nothing less than a two-inch pipe will appease her appetite. But they wonder about the water boy. "Has he gone crazy?" He is busy sprinkling the dusty clay. But the inspector tells them, as he pauses to light

his pipe, that if this weren't done, the dust would draw moisture from the concrete and weaken it. They watch other laborers laying a net of steel rod behind the mixer. These, they reason, give the finished slab extra strength and help prevent cracks.

One little girl tells another that she heard a man saying a prayer about reenforcing as he stumbled over the mesh. A little shaver reluctantly gives up his choice seat, when he is requested to do so by the foreman. "They're just old tarry board things," he mutters, "ain't good for nothing." But his brother, who goes to high school, tells him they are placed along the curb to take up the expansion caused by the heat of the intense summer sun. One youngster, more observing than the rest, sees a man tinkering with Bess's big gasoline motor. Suddenly he spins the crank and there is a sputter as the big engine leaps into life. And then a steady staccato of reports — "just like an aeroplane."

The same trucks that helped the steam shovel are seen again, piloted by the same young men, only they have acquired a deeper coat of tan. The trucks are heaped with specified amounts of sand and gravel, which are crowned by five grey gobs of cement.

The truck dumps its burden into Bess's paw. The children stare as she elevates this twenty-one-cubic-foot morsel to her yawning maw. Her operator tilts a lever, there is a gush of water on the rattling mixture, and the hoist drops back and is filled again. A bell jingles, the operator leaps to his place, and the drum is emptied. Out flows the fresh concrete, a bilious green. A hopper carries it out over the reenforcing. Skilled men spade it into the cavities and tight along the curb. There must be no holes. These, the children are told, would gather water and freeze, and cause ugly fissures to appear in a substance that grows stronger for twenty years — theoretically. With long-handled tools, workmen pat and caress the concrete until it is almost smooth — not quite. It must be a trifle rough to afford traction on wet days for the motorist's rubber-tired wheels.

The pouring is finished at last. We wonder if big Bess has a superior feeling as she lumbers away, thinking, perhaps, of the numerous men and days of time that would be required to mix all that concrete by hand.

Red lanterns are placed to warn unwary drivers of a closed street. The workmen trudge wearily home, and a little boy sneaks out and makes the imprint of his tiny hand in the still soft concrete.

But the work is not yet done. Even though the next day is Sunday, there are men there before the sun who cover the street with wet straw to prevent the mix from drying out too fast and causing cracks and hair checks. The water boy will keep the straw wet for thirty days and then one of these fine Autumn evenings, the children will race with their fathers over a strip of the most modern kind of paving.