

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF A NEW HIGHWAY COMMISSIONER

By Col. A. P. Melton, Member, Indiana State Highway Commission, Gary

As the junior highway commissioner, it may be presumptuous for me to do more than sit back and listen. I may say that my confreres do not let me lose sight of the fact that I sign all official documents on the bottom line, and take my proper place otherwise, as occasion demands. However, this is only part of the training which I hope will make me a good commissioner in due time.

It has always been my ambition to have one of those high-up jobs, such as president of a railroad or bank, mayor, commissioner, or something where a fellow has little work and lots of leisure, and does not have to know much, but can hire people to know things for him.

Being a Democrat, I could not aspire to public office in Lake County; so I moved into Porter County a few years ago and started a little residential village on Lake Michigan and had myself made mayor. But my wife had herself elected clerk-treasurer; so in this case I did not get a speaking part.

So when his excellency, Governor Leslie, offered me a place on the State Highway Commission, I felt that at last I was in a position to realize my ambition, provided I served my apprenticeship prudently.

An engineer in any line cannot stray far from the beaten path in discussing technical questions, unless he is in a position to go into a good deal of research work and be able to maintain his statements. Engineers must, therefore, be cautious and cannot speak with the freedom and poetic license that the ordinary public speaker may employ.

My remarks will, therefore, not be from the standpoint of an engineer, but rather from that of a neophyte giving his impressions more from the standpoint of policies than of technical work.

Location

Of the things that seem uppermost, outside of the engineering problems involved, perhaps details of location take up the most time. One line of thought seems to be the ultra engineering point of view in Indiana, that a road should be

the most direct and economical route, avoiding all towns possible and providing the shortest and least obstructed highway for Illinois people to get to Ohio and vice versa. The other argument would have a road pass along the main street of all cities and towns, making detours from the best alignment in order to do so.

My impression is that neither policy solves the problem, but there is a medium that must be reached by a study of each individual case. I believe that the statutes contemplate that state roads shall be conveniently located with respect to existing towns, because they speak of connecting county seats and market centers. It seems certain that the roads are primarily for the benefit and convenience of Indiana people.

A state road is undoubtedly an asset to a community, but if it is badly located with reference to the town, business property values will decline and the town will not be benefited. It may be argued that a new business center will be built up adjacent to the new road, but this is hardly possible within any reasonable time.

On the other hand, when the highway goes down the main street, traffic becomes a dangerous nuisance; and after a few personal injury cases, a number of stop-and-go lights are installed, which in turn are a nuisance to the traveling public.

In my opinion, the best location for a highway through a town is a wide side street, located near the business center, with little traffic other than that of the state highway.

In the early days, it was the fashion to have railroads run through the streets of a town. They were a novelty and people wanted everyone to know that they had a railway. This fashion has changed. At the beginning every town wanted the state highway down the main street, but the trend is now changing and the commission is being asked to go entirely around in some cases. A new road which will no doubt carry the greatest traffic of any road in the United States was projected to run along the southern city limits of Michigan City, but the Chamber of Commerce and business men petitioned the commission to move this highway a mile farther away and thus avoid touching the city at all.

I believe a ride through Lafayette on State Road 52 (following a street car) from the southeast part of the city to the river, would cure anyone of advocating a through route on a main street. If not, just drive through Kokomo on

Road 31 some time when you are in a hurry. In this case you detour a mile off a straight line to get on this street, then back a mile to get off it, and while in town you are entertained seemingly by about twenty-five stop-and-go lights.

A through road on a main business street disturbs and in conveniences the local traffic probably as much as it benefits the town. The trend is away from such routings.

Size and Weight of Vehicles

Another matter of vital importance is the character of commercial vehicles using our state highways. With the coming of hard roads, we first had trucks, and now three-car freight trains of increasing width, length, and carrying capacity. It is not unreasonable to expect that the future will bring longer freight trains. It is said that three trucks bring their loads from Michigan to the Indiana state line and load their combined cargoes on two trucks to cross our accommodating state. We must have more stringent regulations of these freight trains and their loads, or our roads will soon be destroyed.

Not only is the weight of these trucks objectionable, but the width of trucks and busses seems to increase as we increase the width of our roads; and it is rather natural for these immense commercial vehicles, whose interest it is to make time and give service, to hog the road and drive the lighter craft into the ditch more often than is necessary.

While it is not prudent to throttle progress, or not to take advantage of any new invention or system, it does seem that the commercial vehicles operating over our state roads in competition with railroads are getting the best of it at the expense of the taxpayer—and yet they do not and cannot operate when we have big snow storms, like the one just past. At such times they throw the entire burden back upon the railroads.

This question of commercial vehicles is an important one and awaits a solution. Shall they pay adequately for the use of public roads, or shall they build their own private roads, as the railroads have done?

Maintenance

Another problem confronting us at all times is that of maintenance. The regular maintenance can usually be handled so

that traffic can move, but in emergencies, such as our December snow storm, it becomes a serious problem indeed.

People have come to depend on the automobile in many ways, and the blocking of roads by extraordinary snows is a serious matter. The roads must be opened in a reasonable time. If the Highway Commission had sufficient equipment to take care of major emergencies, the chances are that some of it would not be used once in five years and the commission would, therefore, be accused of extravagance in purchasing unnecessary machinery.

On the other hand, enough equipment was not available to take care of the late storm (which was the worst in eleven years), and the commission was criticised for not opening up the roads sooner, although our men worked night and day until the work was done. There is an economic and reasonable medium and we hope to be near to it in the future.

As indicated in the beginning of this paper, the engineer must proceed into new fields with caution, but it must be borne in mind that the modern highway is a creature of the automobile and many innovations may be expected. Its purpose is much different from that of a generation ago and we must be receptive to radical changes.

Perhaps no state has had a better education as to roads than has Indiana. Before the auto we had good stone and gravel roads, and now when you leave one of our concrete roads you do not drop off in the mud as in Illinois and other states, but can depend on finding a good secondary road to take you where you want to go.

Indiana is blessed by having a law that requires the application of a "pay as you go" policy on state roads. When a road is built, it is paid for and provisions are made for its constant maintenance.

Indiana is further blessed by an absence of politics in its road program. Not long ago, a Chicago paper criticised our policy of laying out state roads, stating that none of them went anywhere and were merely for local and political benefit and to perpetuate in office the powers that be. It referred to the Anti-Saloon League, Ku Klux Klan, and Mr. Politics as dominating the situation. These assertions were so absurd that they do not merit even a denial. Governor Leslie has passed the full responsibility of the highway department to the commission and in no uncertain terms. His only refer-

ence to politics was that the best politics was a good administration and that was what he expected of our department.

The 2,000-mile tentative additions to the state system, which were decided on in November, 1929, caused considerable comment, mostly favorable, but that action was just what caused the article referred to in the Chicago paper. This article referred to the addition as being 96 widely separated local roads.

Perhaps one of the best means of checking on the road system as a whole would be to take a railroad map of Indiana and a state road map and compare them. The two maps look much alike except that there are more railroads. The railroads were built for profit and service consequent thereto. The highways are built for service and it is logical that the network should resemble that of the railroads.

There has been great advancement in road building and the uses of roads during the past twenty years and, with the many experts working on the problems connected therewith, we may expect some revolutionary developments within the next like period.

PROTECTION AGAINST STREAM EROSION

By John L. Stewart, Franklin County Engineer

Erosion has caused, up to the present time, more than \$10,000,000 worth of damage to the farm land in the United States, and the earth, stone, gravel, etc., from this erosion being deposited on other land has caused more than \$3,000,000 worth of damages. The U. S. Department of Agriculture is now carrying on actual work throughout the United States to stop erosion and damage to farm land. The method most commonly employed is the benching method. No figures are available at this time as to the amount of damage caused to roads and bridges by erosion, but I am sure it would run well into the millions. The Department publishes a bulletin which deals with the selection of bridge sites in reference to erosion.

Before going into the matter of protection against stream erosion, let us consider some of the causes for stream erosion and the conditions which now exist along the streams. The natural tendency of water is to flow in a fairly straight line. The stream could easily be made to flow on long easy curves