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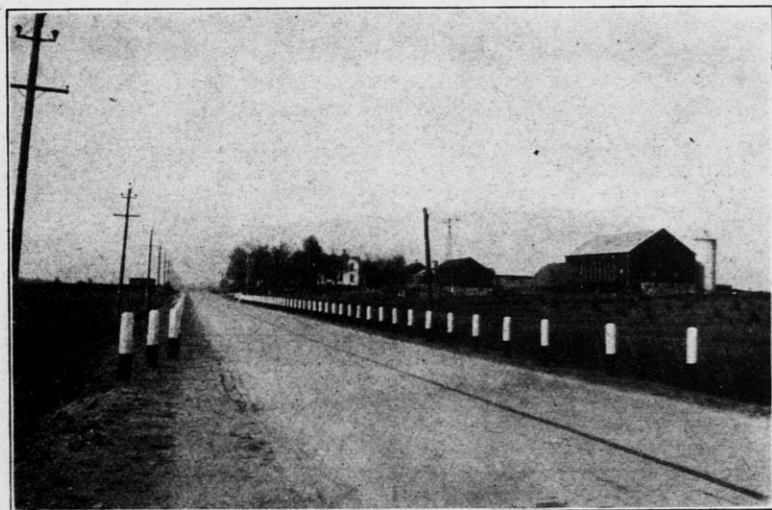
BULLETIN No. 42

MARCH, 1924

THE WISCONSIN ROAD IDEA

By A. R. HIRST,

State Highway Engineer of Wisconsin



Typical Wisconsin concrete road. If all main roads were like this our road troubles would be over—but our pocket books would be flat.

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THE WISCONSIN ROAD IDEA

By A. R. HIRST,

State Highway Engineer of Wisconsin

In order that the reader may understand "the Wisconsin road idea," it is necessary to give the briefest possible outline of American road history.

BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

It was not until about 1790 that the American people turned their attention to the construction of public highways. This was the turnpike. Surfaced macadam roads were built with private capital and a toll was charged each user of the road. In some cases these tolls were very heavy. The advent of canal building, about 1820, followed about 1830 by the commencement of the era of railroad construction, entirely stopped American highway progress for about sixty years.

About 1890 the eastern states commenced to build roads in cooperation with the smaller units or government. New Jersey, Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut and Maryland were the first movers in the enterprise. These states devoted their attention entirely to building certain stretches of road, and slowly developed longer and more continuous stretches, maintaining after a fashion only those roads which they had built.

After 1900 the road movement slowly spread west and south, each state, as it entered the road game, borrowing from the experience of the eastern states and following their practice. The sole idea was to build certain stretches of road and to take some care of those stretches after they were built. For twenty-five years after the modern revival of road building no attention was paid in any state to roads save those which had been rebuilt in part with State Aid money.

WISCONSIN ENTERS THE GAME

Wisconsin started to investigate the road situation in 1905. In 1907 there was created an investigative and advisory highway department under the Geological Survey. The legislature of 1911 passed the State Aid law and in the years 1912 to 1917, inclusive, Wisconsin built a considerable mileage of State Aid roads under the eastern system but with no great care even of the maintenance of those roads which were built.

In 1916 the national congress enacted the first Federal Aid law. The Wisconsin Highway Commission persuaded the Wisconsin legislature of 1917 to accept the terms of this law and to designate a 5,000 mile highway system in Wisconsin, on which the federal money and the state money necessary to secure it must be spent. Thus was created the State Trunk Highway System of Wisconsin.

The adoption of this system for construction was not the important thing, however. The matter which was important in this adoption was, that the legislature, again urged by the State Highway Commission, provided that the whole of the 5,000 miles should be maintained, whether it was built under the Federal Aid law, the State Aid law, or whether it was totally unimproved.

This was the Wisconsin idea. Briefly, it was to maintain a system of roads as well as it could be maintained regardless of its state of improvement or lack of improvement. Wisconsin was the first state to adopt this plan and the Wisconsin idea has since been adopted by a large group of American states.

In this same revolutionary statute of the legislature of 1917 means were provided, again at the suggestion of the Wisconsin Highway Commission, for the numbering of the system and for the marking of the roads with these numbers. This was the origin of numbered and marked highways in the whole world and this idea has not only spread to most of the American states, but abroad as well.

THE WISCONSIN IDEA

While Wisconsin's record in construction is excellent and the state's standard of performance is at least the average of the American states, its place in road history probably for all time to come will be based on these two basic Wisconsin ideas:

(1) The state should maintain a statewide system of roads regardless of its state of improvement;

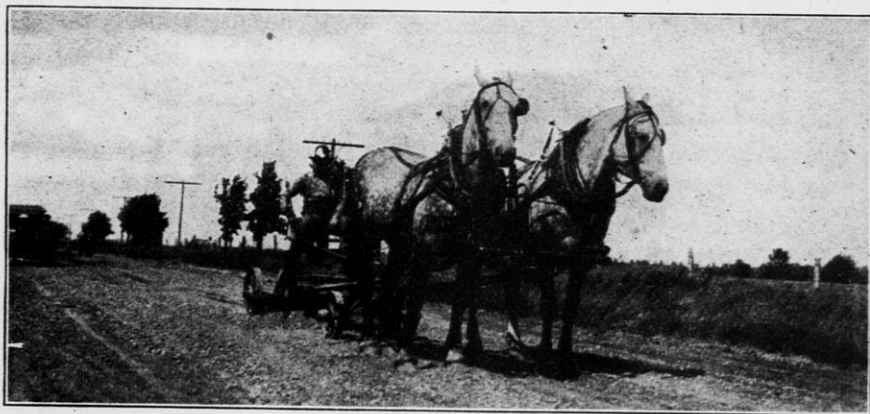
(2) This system should be numbered and shown on maps so that anyone, given a map or instructions, can follow the system.

The marking and maintenance of the 5,000 mile system started in the spring of 1918. So successful was it that the very next legislature, that of 1919, provided for the layout of 2,500 additional miles of state trunk highways, and the legislature of 1923 provided for the addition of 2,500 miles, so that in 1924 there will be 10,000 miles of numbered

and marked state trunk highways in Wisconsin maintained by the counties under state auspices. The total rural highway mileage of the state is approximately 79,000 miles, so that nearly thirteen per cent of all the rural highways of Wisconsin will in 1924 be state marked and maintained.

COUNTY TRUNKS

This is not all. The improvement in highways brought about by state patrol maintenance was so striking in 1918 and 1919, that the counties commenced to adopt systems of county trunk highways and to patrol them by methods exactly similar to the patrol



A good outfit for patrolmen's use. About 2,000 such outfits are engaged in state and county trunk maintenance in Wisconsin. These patrolmen are the boys who have made Wisconsin's roads famous.

of the state trunk highways. This county trunk highway movement has also grown, so that despite the fact that the state maintained mileage has doubled in six years, in addition to it the county maintained highways have reached a total of probably 10,000 miles for 1924, and in the two systems there will be maintained 20,000 miles, or over twenty-five per cent of all rural highways.

Each county trunk highway is marked with a letter. The state and other maps show the principal county trunks with their letters, so that the road maps of Wisconsin are a key to 20,000 miles of well marked and well maintained highways.

This is by far the largest patrol maintained highway mileage in any American state. In the maintenance of these systems in 1924 there will be spent about \$6,000,000. Of course, in Wisconsin the term "maintenance" means more than just keeping what there is. Nearly \$2,000,000 of the funds available are spent for heavy grading with tractors and surface betterments.

There is not a city or village in Wisconsin that is not at least on one state or county trunk highway. There is hardly a farmer in Wisconsin who is more than two miles away from a state or county maintained highway. It is a quite common idea that if one does not live on one of these highways he gets no benefit from them. But it is a very small percentage of the population of Wisconsin that does not travel on these highways in getting to his market town or even to his creamery or cheese factory.

One does not have to live on a good highway to be benefited by it. My father was a truck farmer on Long Island. One of my earliest recollections is that of the market wagon in the farm yard twenty miles from where he used to market his produce; a team on the wagon and an extra team to help on the poor road three miles to the Jericho Turnpike, where the extra team came back and the single team was easily able to get the load into the New York market. The Jericho Turnpike meant to my father the difference of a team for most of the time, although he lived three miles from it.

In the same way, while, of course, those men living directly on one of these patrolled highways get the greatest benefit, a man who gets to one of them from a side road gets just as many miles of benefit as the man who lives on one of them at the intersection of the off the road farmer with it.

WIDESPREAD SERVICE

The Wisconsin Highway Commission has constantly worked with the idea of giving a widespread traffic service to all the people of Wisconsin. The construction program is proceeding as fast as the taxpayers can stand, and in some counties faster than the

taxpayers feel they can stand. But rapidly as it has proceeded, it is hopeless, and has been hopeless, to give early traffic service by construction alone. Those states which have tried it have failed and have had to come to the Wisconsin idea of doing something with the roads at hand rather than waiting until all road surfaces could be perfected.

The best evidence of the success of the Wisconsin idea lies in the reputation of our marking and maintenance, and in the rapid adoption of these principles by the people of Wisconsin as represented by their county boards in supplementing the state trunk highway system with county trunk highway systems. The action of other states in following the same principles is also a certificate that we are on the right track.

Personally I hope to see the day come when every mile of public highway in Wisconsin will be definitely provided for by a patrol system designed to meet the traffic on the especial road. On the main lines it will have to be even more intense than at present. On the county trunks less will be required. On the local roads it will undoubtedly be occasional attention in times of need, but the proposition is to get every mile of road under the direct care of some person who will be solely responsible for it. What is every one's business is no one's business. Any improvement which has been made in general road conditions in Wisconsin is due to the fact that there has been responsible leadership and definite responsibility for definite stretches of highway.

ALL ROADS MAINTAINED

Carried to its legitimate conclusion, it is undoubtedly probable that within a decade all the roads of Wisconsin will be maintained by the county highway organizations. Already some counties have reached the point where nearly fifty per cent of the highways (including the state trunk highways) are maintained under the county organizations. At several county board meetings in November definite propositions were advanced to transfer all roads in the county to the county highway department. The State Highway Commission is not encouraging this movement. It needs no encouragement. It is coming rapidly enough because the county highway departments must be developed if they are to take on these added responsibilities, and this development is a process of years, not of days. The people control this matter as they should. I doubt whether there will be for many years any more state trunk highways. Our state mileage is large enough, but undoubtedly the tendency will be to adopt more and more roads as county trunks until the time will come when all the roads will be county maintained and the town, as a factor in the construction and maintenance of highways, will have been eliminated. Eliminated, not by legislation or by propaganda, but by the old law of the survival of the fittest. The counties have, so far, made good in their road maintenance operations. The towns, in general, have not. The people want economy and efficiency in road matters, and when they see it they grasp it. The people of Wisconsin have grasped the Wisconsin idea of traffic service now instead of waiting for decades for the perfection of a state built system.

WRITES ON TAXATION

The Farmer's Tax Problem is the subject of an article to be written for the April Banker-Farmer News Bulletin by Thomas E. Lyons of the state tax commission.

PURE SEEDS

The Banker-Farmer Exchange is now ready to quote seed prices and fill orders from the best and most reliable seedsmen and growers throughout the state. The Exchange hopes to make it easy for the farmer to buy the most reasonably priced seed, at the same time getting good quality, without the trouble of investigating prices and sources, himself. These seeds are of choice quality, have been carefully cleaned, and more than meet the state requirements for purity and germination tests. For prices and other information see your banker, or write to the Banker-Farmer Exchange, 520 First National Bank Bldg., Madison, Wisconsin.