VIII. THE COUNTRY ROADS OF MINNESOTA

Within very recent years a resident of a Minnesota community not long past the frontier era commented that "all of America was developed by people who lived in imperfect houses, lacked proper tools, suffered plagues of mosquitoes, toiled over boggy roads and in general had to put up with a whole host of annoyances and inconveniences." [1] The pioneers of a new country accepted the fact that upon them fell the burden of laying the foundations for society in a new setting. The generations that came after them accepted no less stoically the task of improving what the pioneer age had bequeathed to them. They had to tear down the log houses of the frontier and erect on their foundations the frame or brick homes of permanent settlement. They had to fence the fields and level the forests which the hurrying frontiersmen had not had time to conquer. All the temporary pioneer structures had to be replaced by the permanent equipment of the new age.

The program of change and improvement extended to the highway structure of Minnesota as well as to the rest of the organization built up in the pioneer stage. The winding trails of the frontier were straightened

1. Bemidji Daily Pioneer, July 10, 1935.

and made to follow the conventional lines of civilization. Where a hastily built corduroy had been thrown across a swampy area which could not be circumvented, a permanent grade was built. Where the pioneers had crossed a stream by means of a hazardous ford or a tricky ferry, the new age built a bridge.

In spite of improvements, the roads of Minnesota were far from ideal throughout the nineteenth century. Even as travelers over the pioneer trails had found them obstructed by stumps or boulders, so the travelers of the later age found the highways to be "frost laden and wet and soft and soggy in spring and fall, dry and dusty in summer, and rough the year round." The experience was as regular as the season. The summer traveler knew when he started on his journey -- whether it was to be a mile or two to an adjacent neighbor or town, or two hundred miles to the new frontier -- that the roads would be dusty, or, if a hard thundershower came up, unpleasantly muddy. One summer traveler complained of "the rough and disagreeable condition of the roads" after a period of heavy rainfall. He went on to explain that "during the recent unparalleled wet spell, the roads had been badly cut up by the passing vehicles, and now being measurably dry, the deep ruts and hardened clods make them sorry passages for either pleasure-riding or moving heavy loads." His sympathies went out to the drivers of the forty or more loads of wheat he encountered on

his trip. That rain and mud interfered with the conduct of business in the rural communities is evidenced by a statement of a representative of the McCormick Harvesting Company at Rochester, made in August, 1867, to explain his inability to sell his quota of harvesters: "All the beginning of the season up till the last of June, was of rain, breaking up the Rail Road and making the wagon Roads almost impassable so that all traveling or most of it -- & canvassing have been suspended. For awhile both Farmers and Merchants looked blue." The plaint was echoed by the firm's representative in Hastings. Occasionally a traveler was found who reveled in summer travel. A Rochester man, for instance, wrote of a summer trip from that town to Owatonna: "Staging is endurable, railroad riding is enjoyable, but for the best way of getting over a country commend us to a covered buggy and a span of good horses. It is luxury to ride along at this season and enjoy the 'sweet fields dressed in living green.'" [2]

The traveler over those selfsame roads in the fall of the year knew that he faced similar conditions, or

2. Northwestern Agriculturist, 9: 210 (July 15, 1894); Rochester Post, July 14, 1866, May 13, 1871; letters of John Rhodes and John Edgar to the McCormick Harvesting Company, dated June 10 and August 8, 1867, respectively. The originals of these letters are in the possession of the McCormick Historical Association at Chicago. The Minnesota Historical Society has microfilm copies of them.

worse. If the roads were hardened by frost before they had a chance to dry after the autumn rains, he could expect to find them "turned into nutmeg graters on a large scale which rasp the feelings . . . to the last degree." He could rest assured that such "rough and rugged" roads would "cure dyspepsia and make business for wagon and blacksmith shops." If the weather remained cold and dry, however, he knew that the deepest ruts would be worn to a semblance of smoothness before snow fell, and if it chanced to be an election year, he could jokingly attribute the good condition of the roads to the politicians who "have kept them smoking hot for the past few days." If he was young and zestful, he might think that "there was never a nicer day for riding. . . . It was the perfection of autumn weather; just cold enough to make overcoats and buffalo robes comfortable and the roads were faultless." [3]

Winter brought problems all its own, for the snow, drifting before the wind, altered the topography of the country to a dismaying degree. Where a little cut through a hillside made a depression, or where fences or hedges or trees lined the sides of the road, the snow piled up in drifts through which teams could not pass,

3. Preston Republican, November 4, 1880, October 6, November 17, 24, 1881; Rochester Post, November 9, December 7, 1867; Renville Star Farmer, November 6, 1896; Freeborn County Standard (Albert Lea), October 27, November 10, 1881, December 5, 1888.

while on an adjacent hilltop the autumn stubble might be exposed to view. Then, "the traveled roads through the country do not follow the highways, but wander across the fields in about as crooked directions as a Virginia worm-fence. Riding over the plowed ground is not so pleasant as fancy pictures a winter sleigh-ride." A little less fanciful, but equally graphic, was the following description of winter roads. "From all accounts, the condition of the roads throughout the country is anything but desirable. In fact, the roads proper, in many localities, are absolutely impassable, the late wind storm packing them completely full of hardened snow, and compelling travelers to pick their way over fields and 'across lots.' Taking the hard and irregular snow formation together with the patches of bare ground, rough and frozen, a smooth and easy sleigh track is out of the question." [4]

If the drifts were deep enough, hardship might ensue for farmer and villager alike, for the farmer could not get to the village to buy his groceries, and the villager often found that his woodpile, to replenish which he had to depend upon the farmer, faded away before the onslaughts made necessary by the cold. But beyond this danger of exhausted fuel and food supplies lay the graver one of death by freezing. The traveler

4. Preston Republican, February 24, 1881; Rochester Post, January 18, 1873.

might set out from his home on a bright winter day, to be overtaken without warning by the blinding cold gray cloud of snow and wind which so often spelled death to those who were unable to find shelter from its fury. The blizzards were the peculiar and dreaded danger of the western prairies, and countless travelers perished in them. [5]

The approach of milder weather brought more trouble to the traveler, for the warm sun of mid-February worked havoc with the winter roads. Where the runners of many sleighs had passed, the snow was packed into icelike tracks which yielded slowly to the rays of the sun, while on either side of and in between the tracks the unpacked snow melted rapidly. The result was that the winter road stood out in bold relief, a foot or two feet higher than the adjacent snow. Then "getting into

5. Fillmore County Republican (Preston), January 17, 1873; Preston Republican, February 16, 1882; L. O. Larson, "Some Early History of This Vicinity," in the Harmony News, December 13, 1928. The latter is a reminiscent account. The diary of John Cummins, a farmer living near Eden Prairie in Hennepin County, describes in numerous places the difficulties of winter travel. For example, his entry for January 13, 1873, is as follows: "Cloudy, rather cool. Went over on the road to Minneapolis to see the chance to get to town. The roads toward town is drifted for half a mile at least six feet deep." On March 6, 1874, he records a blizzard that effectively prevented travel until March 10. The Cummins Diary is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. See also the entries for March 7 to 10, 1874. E. N. Brooke of Red Wing, in a letter dated February 10, 1868, to the McCormick Harvesting Company says: "The roads are full and deeply drifted [with] snow, making traveling with a load very difficult." See also Rhodes to the McCormick Harvesting Company, January 5, 1867.

and out of town as is commonly practiced in sleighs is a labor of difficulty. . . . The roads are from six inches to two feet above the snow yet, and the loads that get here without an upset, over some of them, are the exception. Geo. Fisher, -- and he is a good teamster, too, turned over his load of wheat seven times coming in from . . . five miles south of the village." The alternate melting and freezing and the not infrequent winter rains covered the roads with ice. Then, indeed, was the traveler in difficulty, for even travel-wise horses shod with sharp-calked shoes found the footing uncertain, and sleighs and cutters slued and skidded over the glary surface. The wise man stayed home in such a season, going out only when necessity required.[6]

It was the springtime, however, which brought the greatest woe to travelers. Each year there were from four weeks to three months during which teamsters dreaded the thought of venturing on the roads. It was the season of the "mud blockade," which began as soon as the snow left the ground, and often lasted until the spring sun had dried the mudholes in which the water from melting snows and rains had gathered. "The weather has been in

6. Preston Democrat, February 5, 1885. On March 10, 1873, Cummins recorded in his diary: "Hauled a load of wood roads none of the best, as the track on the N. side cuts off, making the going rather bad." His entry for February 11, 1880, records a rainstorm. The following day he complained that "everywhere there is ice, making the travelling very difficult."

the melting mood for the last week," said the editor of a southern Minnesota newspaper in the spring of 1866, "and the rapidity with which drifts have changed to puddles is wonderful. . . . In the country, those who have had the hardihood to try them, say that the roads are provokingly horrible, giving the traveller his choice of mud, snow or water." Another southern Minnesota reporter declared that the warm weather which came unseasonably in February, 1882, "has not only brought the snow to grief, but has also brought grief to the hearts of those who are obliged to drive over the roads. The 'going' Saturday was bad, and Sunday made it worse." Jane Grey Swisshelm, editor of a St. Cloud newspaper, tells of a journey that she made at the end of March, 1862, from St. Paul to St. Cloud. Her stagecoach started out "through the snow drifts which appeared to defy wheels, and the mud which set runners at defiance." When the journey was partly completed, the stagecoach was exchanged for a sleigh, but the sleigh bogged down in the rapidly melting snow, and the passengers were obliged to spend the night on the road, waiting for a rescue party to force its way through five miles of knee-deep slush.[7]

7. Rochester Post, March 3, 1866; Preston Republican, February 16, March 2, 1882; Arthur J. Larsen, ed., Crusader and Feminist: Letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm, 1858-65, 153-158 (Minnesota Historical Society, Narratives and Documents, vol. 2 -- St. Paul, 1934).

As the snow melted away, the frost left the ground, and warm spring rains flushed away the debris of winter. Then brooks and rivers became raging torrents, which wrought havoc with bridges and roads and everything else within their reach. The incautious traveler might find, as did a Mankato physician, that no bridge spanned the stream he sought to cross, although a sturdy one had been there a few hours before. He counted himself lucky that he escaped with his life, and doubly so that he was able to rescue his team. It was a commonplace event, in some places almost an annual affair, that the spring freshets swept away the wooden bridges, and that new ones had to be built.[8]

The dangers and inconveniences to travelers from washed out bridges were minor troubles for the traveler in the spring of the year. It was the mud -- "the beautiful mud" -- that vexed him most. "A steady thaw of forty-eight hours has melted the snow, and set it running towards the Mississippi river, and the teamsters are unhappy," observed one editor during the spring of 1882. The following week, he voiced the opinion that "the roads are most awfully utter," and a short time later he defined the condition of the roads as "almost a mud blockade." Another editor, after gazing at the April scene,

8. Mankato Daily Free Press, April 8, 21, 1888; Preston Republican, March 3, 1871; Glencoe Register, June 16, August 18, 1870; Mapleton Enterprise, March 10, 1893.

declared, "This part of the world is one vast sea of mud." Mrs. Swisshelm, on a tour of southern Minnesota during the spring of 1860, found that "about half the road [from Chatfield to Preston] was so bad we had to get out and walk around the worst places, but it was only 15 miles and we got there before dinner." The stage had left Chatfield in the early morning. [9]

For weeks after the snow had left the ground, "mud, measels [sic] and puzzles" were "staple articles" as the muddy roads held traffic to a minimum. "Nobody in these parts has found out just how deep the mud is now," a correspondent for the Preston Republican declared after the country had experienced a siege of rainy weather, and more than one teamster sympathized with the disgusted driver of a stagecoach plying between Chatfield and the near-by town of Fountain, who threatened "to trade off" his "stage for a steamboat," if that vicinity was visited by another rain that week. [10] "A report has reached us that it is quite muddy about Amboy," wrote the editor of the Mapleton Enterprise in the spring of 1891. "The stuff is also reported quite plenty in and around Minnesota Lake. As for our own sweet locality -- why a good four horse team seldom gets stuck on business

9. Preston Republican, March 2, 9, 23, 1882; Hutchinson Leader, April 28, 1893; Larsen, ed., Crusader and Feminist, 75.

10. Preston Republican, April 8, 1880.

streets." [11] A central Minnesota resident, returning from a trip to Albert Lea and the southern portion of the state, declared that he had seen "enough mud to run a dozen old-fashioned political campaigns. . . . Teams become mired in the main streets, farmers cannot leave their homes and travel except by foot or horseback is suspended." [12] The editor of the Blue Earth City Post, describing the roads in the vicinity declared that "The roads in the country surrounding Blue Earth City are in a very bad condition. Perhaps not as bad as they were last season, but they are getting there as fast as possible." And this followed in close succession his boast that "never in our recollection has winter vacated the lap of spring with greater alacrity than he did during the past week. The alliance is apparently declared off and there doesn't seem to be much mud-slinging in connection with the affair either. In fact the roads that usually have a great deal to do with the 'lap-lingering' business have effectively dried up." [13]

Even when spring definitely had arrived, the troubles of the travelers were not over, for, during the month or two months that had intervened between the disappearance of the snow and the arrival of summer weather, the passage

11. Mapleton Enterprise, April 17, 1891. Amboy is a village in Blue Earth County, and Minnesota Lake is in the neighboring county of Faribault.
12. Hutchinson Leader, May 13, 1892.
13. Blue Earth City Post, April 6, May 11, 1893.

of numerous vehicles had cut deep ruts in the roads. Mudholes, which were formed in every depression, lingered on for weeks after the remainder of the road became passable, and vehicles churned the mud into a gluelike substance from which teams scarcely could extricate themselves when hauling an empty wagon, and in which they were hopelessly bogged when drawing a load.

During the pioneer period of Minnesota's development, bad spots of this kind had been avoided by passing around them. With the growth of settlement, however, the government lands were transferred to individuals, and farmers took full advantage of their rights to the land by cultivating it almost to the limits of the wagon track, or by fencing off the old trails which led around the bad spots, leaving the traveler "to make his way" as best he could "through and around sloughs, often getting his team down in the mud, and suffering great inconveniences otherwise." One abomination to travelers could have been eliminated if grass had been planted along the side of the road, for they found it very "annoying to have to travel along with main track a sea of mud, and both sides made up of freshly plowed land, which is even worse to travel over." [14] More than one of them agreed with the poet who gave voice to this

14. McLeod County Register (Glencoe), June 4, 1868; Glencoe Register, May 8, 29, 1873; Carver Free Press, June 4, 1885; Hutchinson Leader, May 5, 1893.

lament over the condition of the roads:

> The pathway of life may be narrow and steep
> But the road through the country is steeper
> The pitfalls and snares that beset us are deep
> But the mud that surrounds us is deeper.
>
> There are fence rails for bridges and mudhole[s] for drains,
> And hard heads and bowlders for gravel;
> And broken down buggies, on hillside and plains,
> Give warnings, like ghosts, as we travel. [15]

It was not that Minnesota's pioneers failed to appreciate the value of good roads. As a matter of fact, they thought that the roads over which they traveled were, generally speaking, good ones. They had no concept of any different kind of roads, save only the still rougher roads of an earlier era. A pioneer of southern Minnesota describes the situation in these words:

> The first roads were laid out where they could go without doing any work on them. But when the country became more settled the roads were put on the lines. Enough work was done on the side hills and the roughest places to make them passable. Where they went thru a grove the timber was cut close to the ground and that made a very rough road. The stumps were hard, the ground between them soft, so the wagon cut a deep hole or rut between the stumps. Over that kind of road it was pretty hard to rock along at the slowest pace. But after a few years the stumps were grubbed out and the road plowed. And that we called a great improvement which it was. [16]

In another account of pioneer roads, the following description is given:

15. The poem, entitled "The Country Road" and written by Wilder Grahame, appears in the Aitkin Age for December 17, 1892, where it was reprinted from the Good Roads magazine.

16. Larson, in Harmony News, December 6, 1928.

> The first settlers . . . knew that to build a good road, drainage was a first essential. But . . . what can be done to make roads when there is no money, and a dollar is as big as a cart wheel. . . . To grade, and fill and bridge across the many sloughs taxed to the utmost the energies and pocket books of the settlers. . . . We thought we had done a great thing . . . when we were able to lay down a stretch of corduroy and get a thin streak of dirt across it. Then we kept filling it from year to year as we could. [17]

These two accounts show the attitude of Minnesotans toward the roads of the post-Civil War period; they felt that they were making as good roads as their facilities permitted. The evils of winter snow and ice, of spring and autumn mud and water, and midsummer dust were accepted with as much equanimity as was the weather. They were heaven-sent, and as the farmer accepted the effect of the weather upon his work in the fields, so he accepted its effect upon the roads. "Went to Minneapolis," commented one farmer in his diary. "The rain yesterday did not interfere with the roads." A short time later he wrote, "Quite a heavy rain this morning, got started to town but was lucky enough to get under shelter. The roads were very muddy." [18] That was all he had to say on the subject. It was the townspeople who were inclined to be most critical. The farmer, on his part, considered the country roads as his roads. They were taken from his land; he worked on them and traveled on them. If taxes were levied for their upkeep, they were paid from

17. Wadena Pioneer Journal, December 15, 1927.
18. Cummins Diary, June 5, July 8, 1874.

his pocket, and he excused the condition of the roads by comparing the large area over which his money and labor had to be distributed with the restricted area of the city streets. [19]

If the roads of Minnesota were bad, it must be remembered that very real difficulties beset those who sought to improve them. Minnesota in many respects was in the earliest of the post-frontier stages, and much of its area was in a wilderness condition until the end of the nineteenth century. Such a region scarcely could have been expected to be wealthy, and the post-frontier problems of "putting the roads on the lines," involving the expenditure of comparatively large sums for the payment of damages to the owners of property affected by the changes, and of building bridges over the numerous and troublesome streams of the state exhausted the available funds.

It cannot be said that the local units of government did not use their power to tax. The editor of the Mapleton Enterprise in Blue Earth County, reviewing the tax history of his community, found that the only tax ever levied had been for roads and bridges. All other revenue came from license fees. A citizen of Alexandria, in Douglas County, boasted in 1872 that "the people of Alexandria taxed themselves liberally for roads." In

19. Hutchinson Leader, April 15, 1892.

1878, when the county commissioners voted a county tax for roads and bridges amounting to fifteen hundred dollars, the editor of the Alexandria Post praised them, saying, "The action of the County commissioners in making sundry appropriations . . . for the improvement of the principal roads leading to the county seat, commends itself to the public. . . . Good roads are a prime necessity, no longer to be overlooked." The people of Aitkin County, just emerging from the frontier stage in the early eighties, likewise appreciated the need for spending money liberally for roads. "Of equally as much importance to Aitkin as her railroads and steamboats," said one of them, "are the wagon roads which are now being built into the country in every direction. It takes both time and money to build good wagon roads." In McLeod County the action of the county commissioners in increasing the road and bridge tax from one thousand to three thousand dollars was hailed as a manifestation of good sense to which "farmers will say amen." [20]

The road tax was not a heavy burden in itself -- the law carefully prescribed its maximum -- and a certain amount of cash income was always flowing in from delinquent labor poll tax payers. Yet to poverty-stricken, debt-ridden farmers who were beset at not

20. Mapleton Enterprise, April 24, 1891; Alexandria Post, May 4, 1872, July 26, 1878; Aitkin Age, December 29, 1883; Hutchinson Leader, July 29, 1892.

infrequent intervals by financial panics, drouths, hail-storms, or grasshoppers, any tax at all often was regarded as too much. Only the year before the citizen of Douglas County boasted of the high taxes levied, the editor of the Alexandria Post had declared that only six townships in the county "levy any road taxes," and during the year in which he spoke there were but five of the twenty townships in the county that assessed any money tax at all. During the decade of the seventies, in fact, no township except Alexandria appears to have levied a money tax every year, and for most of them road taxes were assessed during but three or four years of the decade, while three townships failed to exact any form of money tax for roads and bridges. The amount of the tax varied widely in the different townships, with three-tenths of a mill being the smallest recorded assessment in Douglas County for that period, and six mills, the highest. That was typical of the state. One township, as was the case in Preston Township of Fillmore County in 1880, might levy a cash tax of six hundred dollars, while its next door neighbor, with similar problems, sought to raise only a hundred and fifty dollars, or, conceivably, nothing at all. No township taxed itself for roads and bridges unless it had to, and, unless emergencies arose in the form of bills for materials for bridges, or for the payment of damage claims because of

the location of roads, it was the usual practice to levy no tax.[21]

When ordinary tax avenues were insufficient to provide the funds for necessary roads or bridges, a community sometimes got legislative sanction to levy a tax for such purposes. Thus, five townships in Fillmore County were authorized in 1865 to levy a special six-mill tax for constructing a bridge over the Root River at Rushford.[22] Township and county often worked hand in hand to provide the needed facilities. In Douglas County, for example, when a new bridge -- 260 feet in length -- was to be built over the Chippewa River at a cost of eight hundred dollars, the county contributed a hundred and fifty dollars of the cost, and the township raised the remaining sum by taxation of its own property. Sometimes the amount available through taxation fell short of that required for road or bridge construction, and in such cases the township or county, or both, not infrequently contributed a portion of the cost, and left the remainder to be raised by private subscription. In 1882, when a new bridge was constructed over the Root River in Fillmore County at Peterson, the county contributed three hundred dollars toward the cost of a twenty-five hundred

21. Alexandria Post, February 4, December 16, 1871, December 4, 1872, November 29, 1873, November 27, 1874, December 3, 1875, December 15, 1876, December 14, 1877, December 20, 1878, October 3, December 12, 1879; Preston Republican, April 8, 1880.

22. Special Laws, 1865, p. 178.

dollar structure, and the balance was raised by subscription. When funds were not available in either township or county treasuries, the expedient to which the frontiersmen had resorted -- construction entirely by private contribution -- was again brought into use. McLeod County afforded an illustration of that practice as late as 1891, when almost three hundred and fifty dollars was contributed to build a road for which no town or county funds could be obtained. [23]

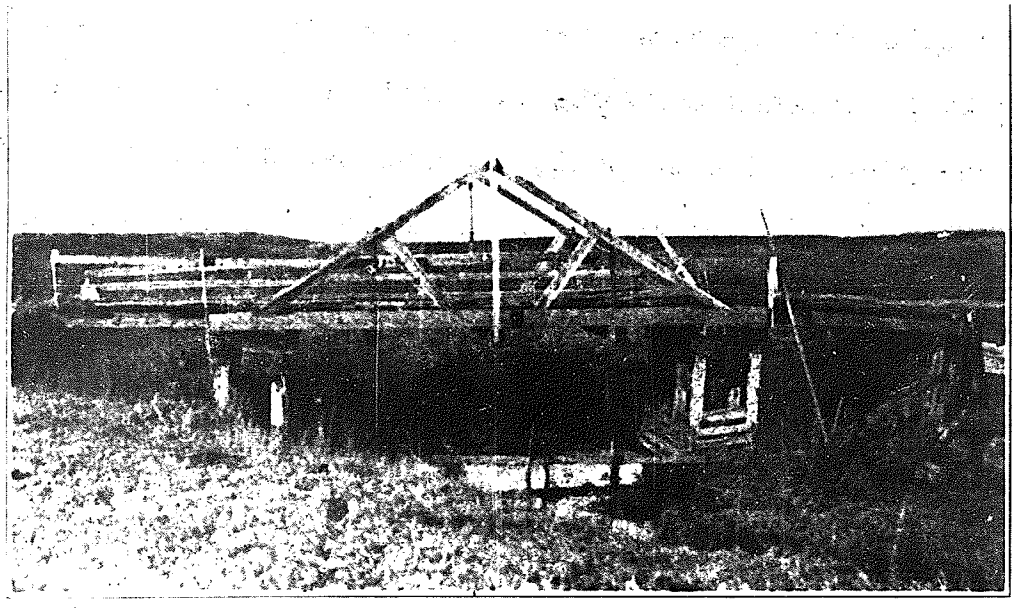
The major item in the cash road and bridge bill of the local units of government in Minnesota was the cost of building and repairing bridges. The structures thrown across streams by the frontiersmen were generally makeshifts, which lasted but a year or two, or at most a dozen years. They were made of wood with foundations so insecure that the first spring flood was likely to wash them away. The next generation built bridges a little better to look at, but with understructures as crude and makeshift as those made by the pioneers. Because wood continued to be the principal material used for bridges, they were not a great deal more durable than those thrown hastily across the streams in the hurrying frontier age. But wood was cheap and plentiful, and in many cases the beams for a bridge might be

23. Alexandria Post, December 10, 1870; National Republican (Preston), November 30, 1882; Hutchinson Leader, July 24, 1891.

taken from a farmer's wood lot for the asking. Farmers, working out their road taxes, could erect a wooden bridge of sorts without difficulty, and they could repair such a structure readily. "Culverts and bridges were built in the simple ways of the backwoodsman's art," one veteran of early road-building days recalled. The type of structure was built which could be put up with the least initial cost and which could be maintained with the least trouble and expense. Even so, the cost of materials for bridges in many portions of rural Minnesota must have been great. One township in Blue Earth County -- Medo -- had no fewer than seventeen bridges to build and maintain. Two of them were more than eighty feet long, and the average length of the remaining fifteen was thirty feet.[24]

The inadequacy of the type of bridge erected during the early years of Minnesota's history was not overlooked by the people. The matter of expense, however, was the deterrent factor in the construction of better ones. In the United States as a whole, however, the use of iron in some form or other as a material for bridge construction had increased during the nineteenth century, and after the middle of the century it was used extensively. Iron bridges did not appear in Minnesota until the early seventies, but during 1872 at least two bridges

24. Mapleton Enterprise, March 10, 1893; Farm, Stock and Home, 18: 264 (June 1, 1902).



Built in 1880.

MINNESOTA BRIDGE BUILDING BY POLL TAX LABOR
[From State Highway Commission,
Reports, 1912-13, p. 16).]

with iron frameworks were put up in the state, and by the end of the decade the more substantial material was used in lieu of wood in almost every large structure that was built.[25] Experience showed that, while the initial cost of the new material was greater, the durability of iron bridges, the cheapness of their maintenance, and their resistence to the ravages of floods more than made up for the difference in first cost. Yet, advocates of iron bridges constantly had to fight not only those who honestly favored wood because of its initial cheapness, but "narrow-minded political demagogues, who, assuming that a large portion of the public are not posted on the subject, are trying to make political capital out of it, and a hobby upon which to ride into public favor." One adherent of iron bridges made a comparison between the two types of bridges in these words:

> In 1866 -- just 19 years ago -- the first bridge was built over Crow river in that town [Frankfort Township in Wright County]. Since then the town alone expended in repairing and rebuilding these bridges nearly, if not quite, one-half of the entire cost of the projected iron bridges, and even then was part of the time without safe or passable bridges. . . . Substantially built wooden bridges . . . would cost more than their advocates claim, and with the necessary repairs during the 10 or 12 years that they would last at the utmost, would

25. Encyclopedia Britannica, 4: 131 (fourteenth edition -- New York and London, 1929); Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, 1: 351 (New York and Chicago, 1895); post, p. 308n.

> be nearly, if not quite, equal to the cost of iron bridges, when the latter would be as safe and as good as when first built. In all well managed towns, cities and counties, wherever the means admit it, iron bridges take the place of wooden ones, from the fact, no doubt, that they are safer, more durable and in the end cheaper than wooden bridges. [26]

The practice of building iron bridges spread rapidly. During the seventies and early eighties, for example, Blue Earth County engaged in a campaign of bridge building which involved the expenditure of almost $163,000. During the sixteen-year period from 1869 to 1885, twenty-nine bridges were built by the county, five of which were wood, and the remainder, iron. The first iron bridge was completed in 1872 at a cost of $5,558, and during every year of the period, with the exception of 1871, at least one bridge was built. The program involved the levying of a special one-mill tax, authorized by the people at a special spring election in 1869, and it gave the county the "largest and best system of bridges of any county in the State." If other counties failed to engage in programs as extensive as this, it was because their needs were less, for few counties had to cope with topographical difficulties as great as those in Blue Earth County. [27]

26. Delano Eagle, May 21, 1885.
27. Review (Mankato), November 27, 1883, March 31, 1885. The latter issue contains the report of the county commissioners for the year ending March 1, 1885, in which is published an "Appendix Showing Cost of Bridges Built in Blue Earth County up to March 1, 1885." The appendix shows when bridges were constructed, their locations, their cost, and the type of material used in building them. See also Mankato Union, April 2, 1869, March 24, 1871.

Although numerous toll bridge companies were organized to build bridges, most of the bridges in Minnesota were built and paid for by the people themselves, and for the most part it was the counties and townships which had to assume the burden, for the state constitution forbade the state to engage in works of internal improvement or to contract debts for that purpose. Congress, however, had not been unmindful of the difficulties which beset new states in making internal improvements. When statehood was granted to the territory, the government agreed to give the state five per cent of the proceeds from the sale of public lands within the state, if the state would promise never to tax lands within its confines owned by the federal government. That money was to be spent for the construction of roads and other internal improvements. The idea behind this grant was not a new one. Every state which had been admitted to the Union from the time Ohio became a state had made a similar bargain with the federal government. In some instances the amount allowed the states was reduced to two or three per cent, but it was an established procedure that Congress used to forestall the taxing of unsold lands. On the part of the state, the bargain was a good one, for the amount of revenue to be gained from taxing wild lands would have been inconsiderable. [28]

28. Thomas Donaldson, The Public Domain, 238 (46 Congress, 3 session, House Executive Documents, no. 47, part 4 -- serial 1975).

In addition to the five per cent fund, there was another source of income which potentially was available for internal improvements. As a part of the grand gesture made by Congress upon the attainment of statehood by Minnesota, the title to all overflowed or swamp lands within its borders passed to the state. The only string attached to the gift was that the proceeds of the sale of swamp lands should be devoted to making them arable. It was estimated at the time that more than a million acres of Minnesota lands would be eligible for selection under the terms of this grant. Governor Ramsey, in his message to the legislature in 1860, advised that at least a portion of the proceeds from the sale of these lands be set aside as a road fund for the counties, "in proportion to the amount of the fund received therefrom." His recommendation was not followed, but it provided the germ of an idea, and in 1862 ten thousand acres of swamp lands were offered in payment for opening a road from Madelia -- then on the frontier -- southwestward to Sioux Falls. The road was opened, but the contractors never received their full pay, for only slightly more than forty-five hundred acres of swamp lands could be located within the limits of the grant along the right of way. That was the only swamp land grant made by the legislature to aid in opening wagon roads. Most of the balance was deeded to railroad com-

panies and corporations which, presumably, promised to make the lands arable.[29]

Minnesota received its first payment from the federal government under the terms of the five per cent grant in 1861 after Governor Ramsey had urged the legislature to take steps to see that the payments were made.[30] The first payment amounted to a little more than thirty-five hundred dollars, and when the second payment was made in 1863 it added less than a thousand dollars. Thereafter, an annual income varying from a little over a thousand dollars to almost sixty-five thousand dollars came to the state from this source. At first it was restricted to a payment of five per cent from the proceeds of lands sold for cash. Minnesota and other states receiving the same sort of payments felt, however, that the percentage should apply to all lands sold, whether for cash or for land warrants. They also contended that, when lands formerly included in Indian reservations were sold, the states in which the lands were located should receive

29. Statutes at Large, 9: 519, 12: 3; messages of Governor Ramsey to the legislature, January 9 and 26, 1861, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1860, no. 1, p. 23, no. 14, p. 12; Special Laws, 1862, p. 315; reports of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1874, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 51, 1876, p. 334; Folwell, Minnesota, 3: 119n. In 1881 an amendment to the state constitution provided that the income from the swamp lands should be added to the school fund of the state. Anderson and Lobb, History of the Constitution of Minnesota, 183.

30. Message of Governor Ramsey to the legislature, January 9, 1861, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1860, no. 1, p. 13.

the regular five per cent payment. In 1874 the legislature authorized Governor Cushman K. Davis to appoint an agent to negotiate with the federal government for these funds. He appointed General John B. Sanborn of St. Paul and contracted to pay him five per cent of the money that he could obtain without contest from the government, and fifteen per cent when payments were disputed. In all, during the thirty-five years from 1861 to 1896, Minnesota received from the federal government as a royalty on lands sold within the state a total of $361,263. To a state but little beyond the frontier stage, the sum was a very respectable nest egg. [31]

31. The receipts by Minnesota from the five per cent fund from 1861 to 1896 were:

1861	$ 3,555.17	1879	$ 4,144.68
1863	948.07	1880	4,121.10
1866	4,595.19	1882	17,938.39
1867	2,500.53	1884	31,507.06
1868	2,475.67	1885	64,416.03
1869	2,710.79	1886	46,804.83
1871	14,801.87	1888	33,213.54
1872	13,009.58	1889	11,898.09
1873	18,861.50	1890-91	17,500.32
1874	14,413.61	1892-93	14,961.09
1875	5,067.93	1893-94	7,677.60
1877	3,940.82	1894-95	13,100.53
1878	1,154.70	1895-96	5,944.69

Total $361,263.28

The figures for 1861 through 1880 were obtained from Statement of Appropriations and Expenditures for Public Buildings, Rivers and Harbors, Forts, Arsenals, Armories, and Other Public Works, from March 4, 1789, to June 30, 1882, p. 306, 307 (47 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 196 -- serial 1992). The figures for 1882 through 1896 were obtained from the reports of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1882, vol. 1, p. 320; 1883-84, vol. 4, p. 25, 42; 1886-87, vol. 3, p. 643; 1888-89, vol. 1, p. 389; 1890, vol. 1, p. 305; 1892, vol. 1, p. 85; 1894, vol. 1, p. 200; 1896, vol. 1, p. 362, 377. The sum reported by the state

The first use of the five per cent fund was made in 1863, when the legislature distributed the proceeds among the counties in amounts proportional to the taxes assessed in 1861. On that basis Ramsey County received the lion's share -- a little more than $600 -- while Jackson County, on the remote frontier, got the least -- $1.70. Eight counties received more than $200, and seven, including Jackson, received less than $5.00 each.[32] In the years that followed, the legislature made a practice of making appropriations for specific roads and bridges, rather than distributing the funds on a pro rata basis. During years when the proceeds were great, much more could be done to aid the construction of roads and bridges than during lean years. Whenever there was money in the fund to be appropriated, there was a race to see which portion

auditor for 1882 does not agree with the total reported by the United States secretary of the treasury for that year because of the differences in the fiscal years of the state and national governments. The total sums from 1861 to 1880 as reported by the two officers, however, do agree, and the figure reported by the secretary of the treasury for 1880 is the same as that reported by the state auditor as having been received. In the report of the state auditor for 1885 and 1886 a clerical error evidently was made, for the years are indicated as 1883 and 1884. According to the state auditor's report for 1881-82, the state received $31,623.04 from the federal government as a five per cent payment from the sales of Indian lands under the claim prosecuted for the state by General Sanborn. This money, however, was placed in the general revenue fund of the state instead of being added to the internal improvement fund. Report of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1882, vol. 1, p. 320, 331.

32. General Laws, 1863, p. 92-95; report of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1863, p. 448.

of the state could obtain the largest share. In a sense, the internal improvement fund developed into a "pork barrel" from which ambitious politicians could draw to obtain the political support of their constituents, and the rural statesman who could "point with pride" to the great number of bridges which he had made it possible for his supporters to build with state aid had a much better chance of gaining the favor of the populace than had the one whose rivals "viewed with alarm" the meager aid that the state was giving the district. [33]

An informal understanding appears to have existed whereby the appropriations from the internal improvement fund should not exceed one-half the cost of the proposed bridge or road. [34] One purpose that such a scheme served

33. The comment of one Minnesota political observer illustrates the uncertainty of an annual income from this source: "Those who are expecting Bridge appropriations are likely to have their hopes disappointed, as the appropriations of last year cover all that is in the fund to date." Alexandria Post, January 21, 1876. In 1893 the fund was again low, and on April 26 the editor of the Freeborn County Standard remarked that "neither Freeborn nor any other county will receive any [funds] through the legislature." The same year Robert C. Dunn, representing Mille Lacs County in the legislature, wrote home to his constituents that it was doubtful that the seven thousand dollars which they sought for a road from Milaca to Mille Lacs could be obtained, "but if there is any money appropriated for roads and bridges Mille Lacs county will have its share." Princeton Union, February 16, 1893.

34. A typical illustration of the distribution of the cost of building bridges between the state and the counties is that of a bridge in Bergen Township in McLeod County, for which the state appropriated three hundred dollars, or one-fourth of the total cost of twelve hundred dollars. Hutchinson Leader, May 7, 1897.

was that it prevented communities from drawing indiscriminately upon the funds. It insured that each road or bridge built was actually needed, for a community would think twice before it would tax itself needlessly. In particular, the internal improvement fund was a blessing to the newer counties. They were confronted with the problems of constructing roads and bridges during times when their financial resources were inadequate for the task, and state aid, though often small, meant the difference between building roads and bridges and not building them. The fund, however, was not used entirely for the frontier counties. Every county shared to some extent in its benefits, though the share of the older counties was less than that of the frontier counties, considering the population and the value of the taxable property. In 1881, for example, the legislature distributed a little less than $21,000 for roads and bridges. Of the fifty-five acts providing for this distribution, about twenty-five appropriated funds for work in the older counties, while the remainder applied to frontier areas and those in the earliest stages of post-frontier development. In 1885 the legislature in eighty specific grants apportioned more than $80,000 for roads and bridges for the next biennium. Thirty-one of them, totaling a little less than $15,000, were for work in the counties which had passed the frontier stage before statehood was achieved. The largest share went to the

newer districts, although many of the western counties were no longer helpless frontier communities. The simple justice of this form of distribution was recognized by most persons, for the five per cent fund came from the sale of lands in those counties which likewise contributed the greater share of the lands selected for railroads, swamp lands, and other special grants. The editor of the St. Paul Dispatch in 1870, when a bill had been introduced into the legislature to appropriate five thousand dollars for building a bridge across the Minnesota River at Redwood Falls, remarked, "Many of the older counties desiring the benefit of the Internal Improvement fund contribute no land and none as much as Redwood."

The application of the proceeds of the internal improvement fund to the construction of roads and bridges was not unaccompanied by protests. As early as 1874 the state auditor advocated that "as soon as practicable this fund should be devoted to some object that will generally benefit the whole State." In 1880 he reiterated his belief that "the circumstances justifying this distribution . . . no longer exist, and the fund should be devoted to some general purpose." The rapid disappearance of public lands within the state for some time had been a cause for concern on the part of those who wished to

35. Reports of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1881, p. 439-444, 1886, p. 872-885; St. Paul Daily Dispatch, February 19, 1870.

perpetuate the fund. In the seventies it was affirmed that the internal improvement fund "will never amount to very much more, though formerly large sums were annually received." [36] This pessimism was not justified, however, for it was during the eighties and nineties that the fund received its largest annual increments. In fact during the first score of years that the payments were made the United States paid the state less than $100,000; during the sixteen years from 1881 to 1896 the payments from the United States government reached the total of almost $265,000. By the middle of the nineties, however, it was becoming evident that the public lands remaining in Minnesota soon would be sold. But, though the income from the internal improvement fund might end, it had made an indelible mark on Minnesota. Tangibly, it had enabled the people of the state to build many of the badly needed roads and bridges. Its intangible contribution was no less important. For forty years Minnesota's citizens had been accustomed to the existence of a fund upon which they might draw when they were faced with the necessity for building the avenues of communication. It was that habit of expecting aid which helped the apostles of the good roads movement to achieve one of their aims -- a state road and bridge fund. [37]

36. Reports of the state auditor, in Minnesota, Executive Documents, 1874, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 26; 1878, vol. 1, p. 276; 1880, vol. 1, p. 199.
37. Ante, p. 312n; post, p. 373-378.

In spite of the fact that considerable money and effort were expended upon the roads of Minnesota, the road system was bad. Its principal fault was to be found in the method of road making and road maintaining. Little attention was paid to the fact that the soil of the state varied widely in different localities. The black clay of southeastern Minnesota received the same treatment in the making of roads as did the black prairie soil of the Red River Valley, or the gumbo mud of the southwestern counties, or the sandy soil of central Minnesota. Along almost any road in the state the traveler was likely to encounter short spaces where the soil differed radically from that on the remainder of the road -- a road through a swamp was made of soil quite different from that on an adjoining highland, and a gravelly hillside varied greatly from either. Yet, rural Minnesota felt that it had achieved the maximum in road improvement after the stumps and boulders had been removed and the roads plowed. "In the matter of roads our people have displayed . . . energy and enterprise. They have graded hills, bridged streams and ditched swamps and marshes in order to make the roads more direct, until now well-graded thoroughfares run in every direction from the town," boasted one Minnesota resident. [38] But the practice of relocating the pioneer roads so that they

38. Letter from a Glenwood, Pope County, resident, in the St. Cloud Journal, September 12, 1867.

followed section lines involved engineering problems with which the later road makers were unable to cope. The pioneers who, in laying out their roads, followed the contours of the land and avoided swamps and precipitous slopes were infinitely wiser, though, perhaps, unwittingly so.

The country roads of Minnesota were under the care of elected officials, and in selecting these officials the voters of the rural districts did not use a criterion of scientific or technical qualification to perform a difficult and important piece of work. Instead, the road supervisors were chosen from among the voters themselves, and the basis for election was personal popularity, or the absurd but none the less often resorted to procedure of finding men who would do the work. They were small townsmen, small farmers, or farmers who had families of grown sons to care for the work of the farm, who seldom knew any other way of performing the work than the traditional way, and the only authority to superintend their work -- the town board -- was equally untrained and unqualified to perform a technical task. [39]

The road law of Minnesota prescribed that at least seventy-five per cent of the road work had to be performed before August 1 of every year. Custom decreed that it should be done during that in-between season in

39. Ante, p. 260-263.

late spring or early summer when it would least interfere with the work of the farmer. As a consequence, almost all the work was concentrated into a two or three weeks' period during the last part of May and the first of June. During that brief time an attempt was made to heal the scars left by traffic during the long months when the moisture from melting snows and spring rains had softened the surface.[40]

Accordingly, when the corn had been planted, and the spring work of the farmers completed, the supervisor sent out his notices to the men of poll tax age -- that is, between twenty-one and fifty years -- to appear at a specified time and place with implements to work on the roads.[41]

40. Ante, p. 262. References to working on roads indicate that the work was done almost invariably during the last part of May or in June. In 1872, for instance, Cummins worked on the roads on June 3 and 4, although he was also called to labor one day late in October. In 1873 he worked on June 9 and 13; in 1874 he worked only one day, June 23. In 1880 he worked two and a half days, from May 31 to June 2, and in 1881 the same amount of labor was exacted from June 6 to 8. See the Cummins Diary.

41. A sample of an "Overseer's Notification," printed on page 18 of Booth, Township Manual (Rochester, 1873), follows:

To Hiram Barnes:

You are herby notified to appear on the 14th day of June, A.D. 1873, at (designate the place of labor) with a spade and pick (or state the implement needed) to work on highways.

And you are hereby required to furnish (at said time and place) a plow with a pair of horses (or whatever else is required) and a man to manage them. Dated this 11th day of June, A.D. 1873.

John R. Stevens,
Overseer of Road District No. 4.

The Supervisor has set the day --
He did the same last year --
To plow and scrape, and time to play
At making roads, O dear!

And when the east wind calls for rain,
The work-boss calls for us
To stir the highway up again
And make another muss. [42]

On the appointed day, the men would appear with a miscellaneous collection of implements. Often their shovels were old and worn, their plows were aged relics which no longer could be used in the fields, and the wagons were the patched-up wrecks such as every farmer had in his barnyard. Nor were the workers a great deal more useful than their tools. One critic of the system commented:

> As June approaches the . . . overseer goes around and warns out the people in his district to work. The next day, all the way from 7 to 10 o'clock, you will see all sizes and ages of people assemble. The preacher's son and school master bring along their weapons of slaughter. The Irishman brings his old ox Dime and the colt (a well matched team) but "jist the tame fer to work out the road tax." After a time the plow and scraper are started, begin to rend and tare [sic], fill up one mud hole by making another. . . . Care is taken that the ox and colt don't sweat. The sun is closely watched. The other people lean on their shovels while the old men tell stories. [43]

This description of road working may be slightly exaggerated, but the time spent in working out the road tax does seem to have been made the occasion for farmers to gather with their neighbors and spend a day or two in

42. Farm, Stock and Home, 18: 264 (June 1, 1902).
43. Freeborn County Standard, May 11, 1892.

swapping stories, exchanging political views, and, in general, having a good time. "The road workers in charge of pathmaster Is[e]nour," stated a southern Minnesota newspaper, "were encouraged last week by a generous donation of a full keg of Yager & Eberlein's exhilerator, presented by Mr. Pooler." As often as not, the work was inadequately and listlessly done. [44] "Uncle Charlie McEwen was in town yesterday and remarked that as usual the road workers have succeeded in making first rate water troughs and placing them right in the middle of the road." That was one man's opinion of the work that was done. [45]

In a farm magazine about 1900 a picture was published which bore the expressive title "Too Common 'Road Working.'" Of the eleven men and two teams pictured, only one man and one team are working, hauling a scraper full of dirt down the middle of the road. Three men are holding a conference in the road around a plow, and two other men near by are leaning indifferently on their shovels. Three tax payers are lolling in the shade of a tree, while two others watch the proceedings from their seats upon a rail fence. [46] The fact that this picture was published during a period of intense agitation for better roads does not detract from its truthfulness. In

44. National Republican, June 19, 1884.
45. Hutchinson Leader, June 26, 1891.
46. Farm, Stock and Home, 17: 72 (January 15, 1901).

possesses a ...

...ed his excellencies he can go from home with his wagon and pick up in a neighboring district young sows that will develop into suitable mothers of pork pro-

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following are suggested:

Do away with the office of pathmaster and substitute the road engineer ... general charge of all the ... of the ...

[From Farm, Stock and Home, 17: 72 (January 15, 1901).]

the seventies John Cummins, a reticent farmer who rarely confided his emotions to his diary, broke out with a condemnation of the labor tax system. "It is certainly discreditable to the people of this town," he stated, "that they are so slack in turning out to fix the road." Another entry records that he was "at work on the road to Minneapolis. There was not many out nor did they work very hard." The day following this last entry, however, he remarked that "today we did something better than yesterday." In general, he seemed to be disgusted with the working of the poll tax system, although his diary fails to record any method for improving it.[47] In the spring of 1882 the editor of the Preston Republican, who likewise disapproved of the way in which the roads were maintained, expressed his disapproval in no uncertain words.

> As a rule no money is expended by towns or counties, with so little value received as in the usual method of repairing highways.
>
> As soon as the ground gets settled in the Spring, every one seems to forget the embargo under which they were laid for so many weeks. It is like the old negro whose cabin leaked so copiously, and on being asked why he did not repair it, replied that he couldn't because it rained. But why not when it don't rain? Because then, he replied, it don't need it![48]

Most of the criticism of the roads came, naturally, when they were in the worst condition. Under the heading "Notice!" the Alexandria Post for May 20, 1881, called

47. Cummins Diary, June 3, 4, 1872, June 23, 1874.
48. Preston Republican, April 20, 1882.

attention to a bad road condition.

> The town supervisors of the town of Alexandria are hereby notified that the public road, commonly known as the Crooked Lake road, from the point where it leaves the main road to the town line between the towns of Alexandria and Osakis, is in a dangerous and almost impassable condition. If repairs are not made on said road, damage is likely to result for which the town will be held liable.

The notice was signed by a resident of the community, and was printed in type large enough to catch the eye readily. "Somebody is responsible and censurable for the failure to keep this road in proper condition," another citizen declared in describing another road near Alexandria.[49] On the other hand, people were quite willing to give credit for good work done. The editor of the Rochester Post wrote in 1873:

> From an intelligent and observing citizen, who has recently made the trip, we learn that the road leading west from the city, known as the Town Line Road, is in splendid condition all the way to Kasson. This route lays over some low, marshy lands, and through the enterprise, labor and good taste of residents on the road, it has been put in superb condition for travel. It is not only exceeding pleasant to have a good road to travel on, but it is gratifying to note instances of proper improvements of the highways.[50]

Lavish praise, however, was not given as frequently as damning criticism.

Although many people perceived the shortcomings of the road system, they were individuals battling against the inertia of custom and tradition. Their only claim

49. Alexandria Post, June 3, 1881.
50. Rochester Post, July 19, 1873.

to unity lay in their common recognition of the need for changing the methods of making and maintaining roads. The editor of an Albert Lea newspaper heartily endorsed an editorial on this problem which was published in the Chicago Inter Ocean during the eighties. An unnamed Iowa newspaper editor had remarked that "a town in the west with good wagon roads extending thirty miles out from it in every direction would have a better trade and be richer than railroads could possibly make it." To this the Chicago paper replied:

> Abating somewhat for overstatement, . . . the truth remains that the bulk of commerce of the interior towns is carried by farmers' wagons over country roads. So the question how to secure at least cost the best and most servicable wagon roads is a phase of the transportation problem that effects [sic] the larger number of people. While Congress is discussing the inter-state commerce measure town meetings and city councils would do well to apply their wits to the solution of the country-road question.[51]

At least one Minnesota man had been considering this problem two or more years before this editorial appeared. In the village of Mapleton, a country town with a population of less than 450 people, Charles Brown, the proprietor of a general store, had established a newspaper which he published monthly and distributed free of charge. In the spring of 1885 he began to express his views regarding the not too happy road situation in Minnesota. He started a good roads movement all his own, and, although it was more than a decade before his ideas gained

51. Freeborn County Standard, February 9, 1887.

any great popularity, he succeeded in making his community, and wherever else in southern Minnesota his paper circulated, road conscious.

Brown's first broadside against the road system appeared in the issue of the Mapleton Enterprise for June, 1885.

> We believe that the present system of collecting and working out the road tax is wrong in every particular. It is a relic of the past age and it is time it was abolished. We but repeat what is a well-known and conceded fact, when we say that men when working on the high way to work out their poll tax or property tax, will not work worth a continental, and the result is that very little is accomplished. We would abolish the poll tax entirely and levy a cash tax on all property sufficient to put the roads in each township in proper shape. We would have every road surveyed and a grade established. The contract of making the roads and keeping them in order we would let to the lowest bidder. Much might be said on this subject, but this brief hint may set some to studying the subject. [52]

The editor of the Mankato Review caught up the subject, and in an editorial of his own summed up the objections to the poll tax system, which he declared was inequitably distributed since it fell more heavily upon property owners than others. The work on the roads, he went on, was ill-timed and suited only the convenience of the tax payers and the overseers. He advocated the contract system on the ground that the community would receive

52. Reprinted in the Mankato Review, June 9, 1885. A file of the Mapleton Enterprise from 1885 to 1891 is in the possession of the publisher of that paper at Mapleton.

"a full return for the money expended," and that repairs would be of an enduring character. "That our roads are not in better condition is due largely to the system, and if we would remedy the complaints that come to us from all parts of the county, and with it the constant demand upon the county road fund for repairs that properly pertain to the towns, we must first abolish the defective and unjust system of township road taxation, and substitute something radically different." He pointed out that most cities had long since abolished the poll tax system as being inequitable and unprofitable, and asserted that "many intelligent farmers in this county" favored the abolition of the system.[53]

The response to these two editorials was not great in quantity, but it indicated that many thoughtful citizens were making a study of a system which had become thoroughly established in the life of the people. "I think much good has been derived by agitating the subject," a Blue Earth County farmer declared. He ventured to question Brown's unequivocable condemnation of the system, however, on the ground that "we have a good deal more road to build than you have in the village, and a great deal less tax to build it with. This is especially true of poll tax. . . . No one can deny that our present road system has been merely a failure. It is

53. Review, June 23, 1885.

now nearly thirty years since we commenced to work our roads and until quite recently, the best roads we have are those that have been worked the least." [54]

Brown's good roads agitation was premature, for opinion had not yet crystallized sufficiently to unify those who offered positive criticism of the existing system. His editorials and the comments upon them, however, served to bring out the ideas of the more progressive farmers of his community. It is not to be doubted that many road overseers, who never before had thought of the necessity for providing adequate drainage for the roads under their care, surveyed them critically after reading the letters which Brown published on the subject. It is probable also that the thoughtful analysis of the road problem and the caustic criticisms of the work of the road overseers may have led them to exercise a little more care in working their roads, in a determination to disprove the charges. It cannot be said that the campaign of the Mapleton editor had any immediate or far-reaching effect upon the road system of Minnesota. Like many another prophet, he was ahead of his times. Whether he, or any member of the community reached by his paper, realized that Minnesota was on the threshhold of a new era is to be doubted, but the fact remains that other

54. Reprinted, from the Mapleton Enterprise, in the Review, April 27, 1886.

influences were at work which made an improvement in the road system imperative and inevitable. Those influences were broader than the community, the county, or the state. They were national in their scope.