

Country Roads and Motor Cars.

From owners of motor cars in Iowa, from the sojourners within her borders, from the passing motorist, protests over the Iowa country roads rise to the high heavens. They are another maranathed to all classes alike; no longer does the frontier farmer struggle with his panic-stricken horse while his urban neighbor sweeps by in his car, but with glittering, high powered six ~~the~~ sails down the road, scattering dust in the faces of slower drivers and fervently denouncing the state of the roads. Iowa roads have been compared, always to their disadvantage, with velvet-smooth French chaussees straight and white between their poplar rows, with the level turnpikes of England, both alike the legitimate descendants of those wonderful channels of commerce with which the greatest road builders of history bound together their flourishing empire and made all roads lead to Rome.

These unflattering comparisons are also unfair; true, the rich black soil of Iowa is more adapted for the production of bumper corn crops, than for the creation of permanent roads, but the Iowa farmer is more successful in his original role of farmer than in his secondary character of road maker. but it is a scant fifty years since Iowa was roadless prairie, while it is two hundred years since the days when the traveller

on English roads needed six horses, not for show, but to drag his coach through the mud and at that was obliged often enough to abandon his coach.

To the Oldest Inhabitant it seems but a short time since people moved from one place to another in our scantily settled state in prairie schooners drawn by lumbering yokes of oxen; he shudders even yet with the sense of advancement felt when the oxen were supplanted by horses; the prairie schooner, by a lumber wagon; while the men who first afforded "democrat wagons" had attained incredible heights of luxury. In those days, it is true, fences and roads were few and the traveler was free to drive in that axiomatic straight line which is the shortest distance between two points. In dry weather the lack of roads was less felt, since the wagons moved easily over the tough sod, but when the wet season came and the sloughs filled travel became a problem; sometimes the wagons were pulled through by hitching an extra team to a long rope and letting them pull as the firm ground lay at the slough, sometimes the wagons must be unloaded and the unfortunate driver, wading hip deep in mud and water, must struggle to dry ground with each separate package.

Such conditions did not long endure, spite of

Indians and grasshoppers the settlers came and stayed. As more land was homesteaded the need of a survey became imperative and the government surveyors ran the painfully straight and regular section lines which the future roads were to follow, roads monotonously alike, only most rarely diversified by trees or hills or rivers. The roads were still ungraded, the rivers and the deeper sloughs were bridged, but the lesser ones remained to become the deeper portions of the vast mud hole to which spring rains and thaw reduced the Iowa roads. With each team that struggled through, the mud became stickier, the firm bottom seemed farther away and by the time that the horses reached the farther side, their drenched coats and palpitating flanks showed how hard the struggle had been.

There is no condition more surely productive of the deepest depression of spirit than a drive over such roads when the chill winds of early spring penetrate robe and wrap and even the most delightful scenery seems dull and gloomy. It was undeniable that in the first phases of its settlement the state had lost much of its natural beauty without a corresponding gain from the improvements which had been made. It had exchanged the grandeur of the untouched prairie for that aspect of sordid poverty and struggle so often seen in

a newly settled country, and which no uninhabited region, however bleak and desolate, ever wears. The houses were small and unattractive, the outbuildings equally small and uncared for, the newly planted trees stood in slim unhealthy rows; where the breaking plow had seen the prairie flowers had vanished and in their stead had sprung up the ugliest of weeds.

These first steps in road improvement remained for long the only ones, the roads which were much traveled became deeply rutted, and as most people drove two horses they were sometimes so worn as to be almost impassable for a single horse, the less frequented roads grew up to grass and flowers, tall, strong stemmed plants which thudded against the buggy box as one drove. Where the deepest mud holes stood, narrow plank culverts were built, the wooden bridges received the most necessary repairs but otherwise the work of the road commissioner was light and road grading and dragging were almost unknown.

Custom had brought about a placid acceptance of these disagreeables, they were regarded as inevitable and the attitude of the general public implied that if the Lord had ever intended Iowa to have good roads, He would have provided such essentials

as stone and natural drainage.

So for many years in lumber wagons and in buggies, in spring wagons and in surreys, the people of Iowa jolted and bounced on swans and wallowed over these amazingly bad roads with a resignation so deep that they no longer perceived that they were resigned and came to accept bad roads as a natural evil, like even as they accepted blizzards and cyclones. But the first man who traveled over these roads in an automobile woke up; he was no longer resigned, he was profane. To be sure, measured by present standards, it was not much of an automobile nor did it travel very fast but it went enough faster than a horse so that ever bump and rut was doubly and triply emphasized on the long-suffering spine column of its driver. For forty years the country physician had taken his weary drives over roads cub-deep with mud during the wet weather, and cut into the deepest of ruts in dry; on Wednesdays and Sundays the country lad struggled over them to visit his rose bride; on Sundays the family went to church, on week-days the farmer hauled crops and produce to town, and lumber and furniture back to the farm and of all those people in all those years no one had been found to suggest the possibility of better roads.

When that first autoist bumped the bumps, when he pictured the effect of that possible mud on his not too efficient machine, then and there, like Minerva from the head of Jove, the idea of better roads for Iowa sprang full-fledged into being. The time since then has not been long, ten years ago an automobile was a novelty and a curiosity; neighbor women telephoned to those farther down the road to look out and see the strange contraptions. Cowed drivers, who saw death staring them in the face, clutched, with desperate grip, the reins which restrained their frantic horses; chickens, with motions gauged to the slower speed of horse drawn vehicles, made futile rushes and died under the wheels of juggernaut; barking dogs miscalculated the time necessary for retreat and barked no more forever. So the occasional motorist was hated by the farmer with an interest fostered.

There was another side to the picture when the inferior engines stalled or balked and the motor must be hauled ignominiously to town by a team of the despised horses. Such moments were some recompense to the farmer for the anguish he suffered and in studying the automobile advertisements of a decade ago one wonders only that these incidents-

came so infrequently.

With each year the number of motor cars increased, the grieve between the motorist and the farmer was soon made up since he himself soon became the most ardent of motorists and, with his knowledge of machinery, among the most capable. At this point city man and country man alike turned their attention to the roads. Roads must be graded, bridges must be put into shape, culverts must be widened so as to carry away the water, for with a machine whose average speed quadrupled and quintupled that of a team of horses all defects in the road were magnified to an even greater degree.

At first only the main roads between the towns received attention, the King drag, most efficient of simple tools and simplest of efficient tools, was used, and straightway people began to speak of the excellence of that particular stretch of road and to traverse it whenever possible. The contagion spread, the drag became common throughout the state and its effect is amazing, roads which formerly made driving a penitential process for days after a heavy rain are smoothed into shape directly they begin to dry, and as, with

each dragging the road is properly crowned up a slope which before meant ruin to a road is now an actual step in its improvement.

From main traveled roads the improvement has spread to every cross road. More and more the villages realize how tremendously the motor has increased their sphere of influence, and if they wish their share of the new business thus made, they must provide good avenues of approach. Where ten or fifteen years ago people came to fairs and Chautauques and circuses from five and ten miles away, now, as a matter of course, they come from distances of twenty miles, thirty miles and even farther.

The movement will not stop with proper grading of roads, nor with regular draggins; every where there are "Good Roads Conventions," Commercial Clubs and County Improvement Societies take up the question. There is a strong movement in favor of graveling the roads or surfacing them with cement and on some of the main roads and numerous marked "Highways" this has already been done to a limited extent. In view of our present rate of progress it would seem that those who have any

affection for the old order must enjoy it while they may for it is at the very point of disappearing. No longer does the country doctor make his laborious rounds with a team, he skims over the fine firm roads in his light runabout, the mailman on the rural route, that autocart for whose use and behoof the roads must be kept in order, glides swiftly by in his car, the lover, too, tho' surely nothing which must be so closely watched as a car, can ever take the place of the comprehending hooves in such a case; all the long processions for so many years struggling through seas of mud and clouds of dust may see the time near at hand when over the smoothly surfaced road, unaffected alike by rains and sun, they may glide smoothly and easily, to return at nightfall with wheels unsoiled and tempers untroubled.