CHAPTER XIV

POLK COUNTY HIGHWAYS

Polk County, at the end of its first one hundred years of history, has an excellent system of roads and highways. Cities and towns of the county are connected by a fine network of concrete or bituminous paving. A network of well maintained county roads with black-top or good gravel surfacing, connect with the township roads to give all farmers easy access to excellent market roads. This modern road condition has not always prevailed. The early settlers on the clay loam prairie soils had excellent roads during summer when the soil was dry but after rains or when the frost was going out of the soil in the spring, the roads took on the epithet “gumbo”. Heavy traffic on the dirt roads was possible only when the roads were dry or frozen. Most of the heavy hauling on country roads was done when the ground was frozen, November through March. After the first snow-fall, before farm fencing was common the bob-sled and cutter traffic seldom paid attention to roadways but cut across country to make the shortest distance to its destination.

The first settlers in Polk County settled along the streams and watercourses, with the cabins and farm buildings in the shelter of the woods adjacent to the farm lands and roads went around the marshes, sloughs and lakes. As the townships got organized, roadways were laid out along section lines generally. A number of diagonal roads have been developed in the county and state trunk highway system to eliminate dangerous corners or curves or unnecessary mileage and construction expense.

As the townships throughout the county got organized and road and bridge fund tax levies were made, the first concern of the town boards was to develop the arterial roads of the township to connect with other township roads and county roads to give each farmer access to a market road. Today, with the exceptions noted, land locations can be easily found by the section line roads.

Polk County is fortunate in having an abundance of gravel for road building purposes in the old beach lines of Lake Agassiz and in numerous gravel pockets or islands in the prairie section of the county. The length of haul of gravel for the western townships of the county varies from a few miles up to twelve or fourteen miles. The length of haul of gravel has not been a deterrent factor in road improvement.

Highway engineers and township supervisors learned early that the roadways should be built up above the level of the surrounding land, for drainage and snow clearance. High roadways also served as barriers to divert water into ditches at the time of the spring run-off.