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.
Great progress has been made in highways across the county since pioneer days. The Red River Trail, a north and south route across the county, is the first recognized trail used by whites in the county. Because it was used for the most part by fur traders when the ground was frozen, the trail was not as well marked as the all season Pembina Trail. The Red River Trail paralleled the Red River from Pembina south through the western part of the western border counties toward Lake Traverse before turning southwestward toward Mendota and later St. Paul. This trail was used from 1844 up to about 1860. The trail came from the north near Tabor, south and east of the Marias, and crossed the Red Lake River approximately one mile west of Fisher, thence south-eastward to avoid what was called the swamp to about where Beltrami now stands, thence south. The Pembina Trail, or Ridge Road, was a more or less all season road which followed the Campbell and other higher beaches of the glacial Lake Agassiz from Fertile north and west through Huot, Dorothy and on north and west to Pembina. This trail carried its heaviest traffic during the sixties and in the early seventies when steam boats and railroads took over the hauling of freight. Early settlers used the Ridge Road in Polk County until the township and county roads were developed so that today the identity of the Pembina Trail in Polk County has been quite largely lost. The last trail road of importance in the county, the trail over the gravel ridge east of Crookston through Benoit, Tilden Junction, and Dugdale, was replaced with a straight road to Mentor in 1917-18.

The county is fortunate today in having two transcontinental highways, with concrete paving, crossing the county. U. S. highway No. 2, seventy five miles in length, bisects the county from east to west, entering the county about one-half mile north of Lengby, proceeding west northwest connecting the principal towns of the county paralleling the Great Northern Railway (Duluth branch), through Crookston, and leaving the county at East Grand Forks. U. S. Highway No. 75, a route from Winnipeg, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico, enters the county from the north some six and one-half miles north of Angus and proceeds south through Crookston and southwest through Climax, leaving the county south of Nielsville.

The first rural concrete paving in Polk County was laid between Crookston and the Northwest School and Experiment Station north of the city. The paving one and one-half miles in length was laid in 1920, which was before the Babcock plan for state highways was adopted. The pavement was paid for by joint assessments against the University of Minnesota, Polk County and the City of Crookston.

The network and condition of the township, county, state aid, state and federal highways in Polk County is a source of pride to the residents of the county. A detailed map of the roads in the county, prepared by the County Engineer, is attach-
ed to this county history as Plate No. 1. A diagonal road of some historic interest is county road No. 13 from Shirley northeastward to Dorothy in Red Lake County. This road was built on an abandoned railroad grade of the Great Northern Railway which connected with the Red Lake Falls line north. This grade was made a highway after the land was turned back to the county. This road was a short-cut vehicular highway to the Pembina Trail. The Pembina Trail, at its junction with county road No. 13 one half mile north of Dorothy, pretty well retains its identity today as a highway well up into Kittson County. It was an all season road and made easy access from Crookston to St. Hilare and points north.

The county roads, from the time the first petition was made to the commissioners for a road from Crookston to Grand Forks in April 1874, to December, 1958, have been arteries for the farm-to-market traffic. Present incumbent County Engineer Mr. Carl Erickson stated to the writer that the first real boost to county road construction outside of county levies came in 1945 when some 33 per cent of the state gasoline tax was returned to the counties. Polk County at that time received some $250,000. In 1957 State Constitutional Amendment No. 2 increased the allotment to Polk County to some $300,000 and in 1958 the assistance was $617,906. Engineer Erickson further reports that: thirty-one county roads totalled 127 miles; seventy state aid roads totalled 800 miles; municipal state aid roads 17 miles. As to the nature of the roads, Mr. Erickson reports: 98.6 miles bituminous, 832 miles of gravel surface, and .4 miles of pavement.

A brief historical review of the trunk highways in Polk County as reported by Lee R. Boyd, District Highway Engineer located at Crookston, includes the following information: 1921—the trunk highway system consisted of 99 miles of dirt road, 55.5 miles of gravel surface, 9.4 miles natural sandy, and 1.2 miles of concrete surface; 1923-24—a sum of $53,839.54 was spent in construction of state roads in the county; 1931-32—seventy eight miles of concrete paving (T. H. No. 2) was completed across the county together with connecting pavement on T. H. 59 from Erskine south to and beyond the south county line; 1950-56—concrete paving of T. H. 222 from 8 miles north of East Grand Forks to south to Climax, joining U. S. No. 75 at that point. The 1950's also saw the completion of the concrete paving of U. S.-T. H. No. 75 across the county, bituminous surfacing of T. H. 102 from Crookston to Fertile, and T. H. No. 32 from Marcoux to the county line south of Fertile. Other trunk highways entering the county include No. 9 from Crookston south through Beltrami, and No. 92 crossing Chester and Gully townships. In contrast to the 165.1 miles of dirt and gravel roads in the trunk highway system in 1921, Engineer Boyd points out the fact that in 1959 the T. H. system includes 148.4 miles of concrete, 102.6 miles of high type bituminous, and 8.02 miles of light bituminous, for a total of 259.02 miles of trunk highways.