

DAYS OF THE TOLL ROADS

The grimy, blackened flatbed press of the old New Albany Ledger churned into motion and as the printed sheets emerged the pressmen carefully looked them over. The year was 1850 and a new book was being put to press – a book titled “A Brief Practical Treatise on the Construction and Management of Plank Roads.” The book was widely read all over Indiana and in New Albany it produced immediate effects.

In this day of four-lane ribbons of concrete linking city to city it is difficult to visualize the muddy trails which passed for roads a century ago. Some old photographs of Civil War vintage show graphically the poor condition of even the more important roads.

There was scarcely any long-distance travel by roads in horse and buggy days, yet by the middle of the last century local traffic between nearby towns had increased to the point that road improvements were a vital necessity.

The question was how to finance the improvements. The State of Indiana had embarked in 1837 on a vast internal improvements scheme that provided for state construction of roads, canals and railroads. But so great was the cost that the young Hoosier state, long on ambition and short on cash, was forced almost into bankruptcy. One of the projects was a paved turnpike linking New Albany and Vincennes. This road, today's Highway 150, was finished as far as Paoli when the money ran out. That is why, even to this day, Road 150 is called the Paoli Pike and not the Vincennes Pike. To gain some return on its expenditure, the State leased the road to a private company which then charged tolls on traffic using the thoroughfare.

This was the first toll road in Floyd County and for a decade it remained the only one. On other roads the mud continued to get deeper and deeper.

Then the idea of the plank road was evolved. Paving road with stone or asphalt was expensive. But timber was plentiful and lumber was cheap. Why not, it was asked, build roads of wood? Just lay wooden stringers along the side and down the middle of the road, put heavy wooden planks across the road and nail the planks to the stringers.

And that was the message carried by the book published in New Albany in 1850. It was written by Robert Dale Owen, distinguished son of the founder of the short-lived communal colony at New Harmony, Indiana. Owen's book was one of the first published in the United States on the subject of plank roads, and his words found a receptive audience in this area.

New Albany businessmen recognized the need for better roads, particularly to Corydon and began making plans for a plank road. To stir up public interest a public meeting was held. Robert Dale Owen was the principal speaker. So came into being the New Albany, Lanesville and Corydon Plank Road Company, chartered in 1851. The company sold stock and started work. The going was difficult, particularly blasting a new grade up the Knobs to Edwardsville. Sometimes money ran low, but in 1856 the 20-mile road was opened. Toll houses were located at Corydon, Lanesville, Edwardsville and in New Albany on the outskirts of town where the road curved around the base of Silver Hills. The route was well-engineered for the 1850s and even today Road 62 follows almost exactly every curve and rise in the old plank road.

Another plank road was built about 1851, too, linking New Albany with Jeffersonville and from Jeffersonville another plank road extended to Charlestown.

It soon became apparent that plank roads were easy to build, but hard to keep in repair. The planks were constantly coming loose and exposure to weather made them deteriorate rapidly. So through the years the planks were replaced with stone and tar if sufficient money was available, or with loose crushed rock if the treasury was pinched.

The original route of the New Albany and Jeffersonville Plank Road was taken over by the Pennsylvania Railroad for its line to New Albany in 1865, and another toll road, built of tar and crushed rock, was built from the end of Market Street and through Harrison Avenue in Clarksville on to Jeffersonville.

But the Corydon Pike, the most ambitious of the roads built in this area by private enterprise, continued the tenor of its ways and even achieved a certain distinction by being the last toll road in Indiana – the last until the recent construction of the Indiana Turnpike across the northern end of the state.

It was the automobile which brought the end of the toll road, because motorists wanted free paved roads everywhere and were willing to pay a tax on gasoline to achieve that goal. Sometime before 1921 Harrison County bought the section of the road in that county and made it free, and then in 1921 Floyd County followed suit.

Later the route became part of the State Highway system, a cherished dream of a century ago still doing yeoman service today.