

## Forward and Introduction

"When the bicycle made its advent in the late seventies, it soon became so popular that it was looked upon as a nuisance by the great majority of people in cities, towns, and villages. The farmer, because it frightened his horses on the public highway, hated this new means of transportation. In consequence, the rights of the bicyclists were curtailed wherever possible. This attitude of the general public forced the users of bicycles to organize into national, state, county, and club formations in order that their strength might be combined and used for their protection as well as to gain, by various forms of legislation - state and civic - their constitutional rights. During this early period, bicyclists were as much hated as automobilists were in the nineties. And so the League of American Wheelmen was formed in 1879, with each state organized as a division. The League was the first organization that promoted the building of better roads. The League fought for the privilege of building bicycle paths along the side of public highways. The League fought for the privilege of carrying bicycles in baggage cars on railroads. The League fought for equal privileges with horse-drawn vehicles. All these battles were won and the bicyclist was accorded equal rights with other users of highways and streets."<sup>1</sup>

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"Another force contributing to the education of public sentiment in favor of good roads was the bicycle. Even in the time of the "high wheel" bicycle, there were enough devotees of the sport to constitute what would now be called a pressure group. Then about 1890 appeared a different type, the "safety," with two wheels of equal diameter, operated by sprocket wheels and chain, the riding of which was an accomplishment quickly learned by young and old of both sexes. Bicycling became a craze, its followers were legion. These together with the bicycle manufacturers wanted above all else "bicycle roads." The great majority of the owners of the bicycle lived in towns or cities. They used the bicycles primarily for pleasure. Their invasion of the country highways did not provoke an immediately favorable response to their insistent demand for better roads. But the bicyclists became organized. The League of American Wheelmen, both as an organization and as individuals, was among the most important missionaries for the cause of good roads. Farmers living along the routes, or the proposed routes, of the rapidly spreading rural free delivery system added their influence. From this source and elsewhere there began to appear some tangible support for the good roads movement from the rural areas."<sup>2</sup>

This is not about bicycles, or automobiles, or the history of transportation.

This is about roads in Superior Township.

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<sup>1</sup> Earle, page 61. Horatio S. Earle has been termed the Father of Michigan Roads.

<sup>2</sup> Fuller, page 113.

Let us start with the fact that there is nothing special about the roads of Superior Township. They are very much like all the roads of southeastern Michigan, so before we go any further perhaps we should very briefly discuss the history of roads in southeast Michigan. They can be placed into five categories: Indian trails, military roads, survey roads, territorial roads, and modern highways.

**Indian trails.** They are exactly what the name means; pathways that conveyed the Indians from one location to another. Indian trails are described as being about 18 inches wide and depending on their use may have been considerably depressed. The Indians traveled "Indian fashion", meaning in a line one behind the other so their trails needed to accommodate only one person at a time. Although there is some reference to their having ponies they had no wheeled vehicles, carts, or the like. There was no need for them to have anything other than a narrow pathway.

Some of the trails were well known and were of a semi-permanent nature; the Sauk trail, the Pottowatami Trail, etc., they being used constantly, but there were many lesser trails throughout Michigan used on an occasional basis. It is safe to say that none of these trails always followed exactly the same path like our modern roads do. Allowances would have to be made for local disruptions such as fallen trees or flooding conditions. If a trail was little used it might even be obliterated over time and a new pathway created which may or may not have been in the same location as the first. The destination was the thing; be it the location of a settlement, some religious center, the easy ford of a river or stream, or the pathway of a portage between two watercourses.

The Indians would maintain their intended direction, but being reasonable people, avoided precipitous terrain, marshes, and lakes, and they would find the best place to ford a river or cross a stream. When Europeans began to penetrate into the interior of Michigan it was logical for them to follow the trails established by the Indians. These trails were convenient, avoided the more difficult locations and generally led to the destinations desired, or at least to the vicinity of destinations desired. As these trails were traveled more and more by Europeans they became more well defined, more permanent, and evolved into roadways suitable for the passage of wagons.

**Military Roads.** Up until the War of 1812 there was no way to easily access the Michigan peninsula by land. Available were Indian trails or a water route across Lake Erie from New York State. The water route was closed for a good part of the year and the land route was difficult as it had either to go through or around the Black Swamp, a large marshy area at the west end of Lake Erie. During the War of 1812 a military road was constructed from Ohio to Detroit and after the war Congress was persuaded to fund the construction of other military roads.

**The Survey Paths.** The terms of the Northwest Ordinance required that before government land in the Northwest Territories could be sold it was to be surveyed. This survey was to utilize the Base Line/Meridian Line system which allowed for the locating of any parcel of land in reference to these two lines. Townships were to be established nominally six miles square and each townships divided into sections one mile square,

more or less. The surveyors were instructed to mark the corners of township sections with a post and to blaze trees along their survey lines.

One of the early township duties was for an individual to be the 'pathmaster' to insure that no one did anything to restrict the access to land parcels. This duty later devolved on the "fence viewer" and the "highway commissioners of each township.

These initial survey lines and the resulting paths that evolved into roads became the bases for most of the roads in southeastern Michigan. This was particularly true where the terrain had few lakes, marshes, or other features that compromised the location of roads. The result, as evident when you look at a road map, is the grid configuration of the roads throughout southeast Michigan, frequently located at one mile intervals.

**The Territorial Roads.** The fourth source of roads came as a result of the recognition that it was necessary to provide for access between the settlements being established in Michigan. The Territorial Council issued authority to individuals to survey and layout a road between various settlements.

By and large these roads appear to have follow Indian trails or roads already established by the early pioneers. The act spelled out in detail the procedure to be followed when privately owned land was taken for these roads. On occasion the Legislative Council would direct that a road be created as was a case of the Territorial Road running through the second tier of counties from Detroit to Benton Harbor.

By 1840 the layout of roads in southeastern Michigan was fairly complete. Roads subsequently constructed as the need arose generally followed the survey right-of-ways established earlier although on occasion a new rights-of-way were obtained to alter the location of a road or provide for its improvement. Government settled down to the maintenance and improvement of these roads.

**Modern Roads.** An entirely new phase of road construction began in the 1950's with the construction of the Interstate Highway system. Call it what you wish; expressways, freeways, or limited access highways, the planning for such high speed highways occurred in the 1930's. A few such roads, usually called parkways, were build in the U.S. before World War II. In 1954 President Eisenhower proposed a system of "national defense highways", a system of highways that could rapidly carry military units from one part of the country to another. This evolved into the Interstate Highway System that we have today.

## **Introduction**

Prior to 1870 the only vehicles on roads were horse drawn and the teamsters and farmers had learned to cope and live with the conditions that existed. The country roads were dirt and if there was any improvement at all it involved the removal of stumps and large stones, the creation of drainage ditches, and the bridging of streams and rivers. Where necessary a corduroy road was created, making a road base through wetlands with tree trunks, and then covering the trunks with dirt, but the idea of hauling unlimited amounts of gravel to make roads solid and enduring was out of the question. There was just no equipment to accomplish the task. Plank roads were created in the hope that they would be more satisfactory, but they proved not to be feasible since the money raised by charging tolls was not sufficient to maintain the roads. Pavement was occasionally found in cities but there wasn't much of that either.

The desire for better roads actually started with the advent of the modern bicycle and the resulting cycling craze of the late 1800's, a subject I won't go into here, but very soon after appeared the automobile. A horse drawn wagon traveling at five miles an hour can handle a narrow, pot-holed, and rutted road a good deal better than an automobile or bicycle going 20 miles an hour. The need for better roads became apparent and finally there was something that could be done about it. Mechanization and communication: power graders, steam and gas shovels, dump trucks, tractors, telephones, typewriters, concrete mixers, and above all, a willingness by the populace to pay for it. It didn't happen all at once, but the time had come for the improvement of roads.

This all led to the consolidation of the road building and maintenance responsibility, a marked change in the way we look at transportation, and the modern road system we have today.

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Assuredly there are many sources of information that I have missed. There were a great many legislative acts that affected the roads of Michigan that I will not be touching on, particularly those dealing with the taxation and financing of road work, but I hope to give a history sufficient for one to understand why things are the way they are, at least with regard to Superior Township roads.