

THE CENTENNIAL ROAD LAW OF 1921

LIFT MISSOURI OUT OF THE MUD

by Terry Primas

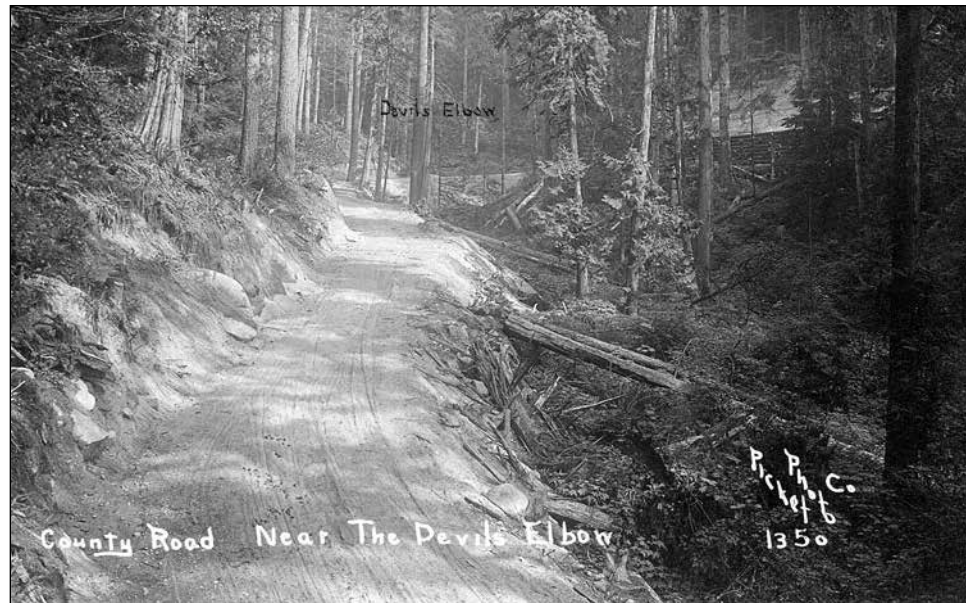
With the centennial observances of the bridges over the Big Piney, Roubidoux Creek, and Gasconade River in our area, we thought it a good idea to look into a bit of road history and the landmark legislation that led directly to the construction of the three bridges.

Early Roads

At the beginning of the 20th century, the roads in Old Pulaski were, like much of the rest of the state, dirt roads often poorly maintained by county governments and local township road overseers. The state government had not built any roads or bridges since the Civil War. The main thoroughfare through Pulaski was the St. Louis to Springfield Road, more commonly known as the Wire Road. Wagon roads reached northward along the Wire Road to the railroad towns of Dixon, Crocker, Swedeborg, and Richland. Rutted wagon roads in the more sparsely populated southern half of the county radiated from the county seat of Waynesville to Spring Creek, Big Piney, Houston, Bellefonte, and St. Annie.

Emma Page Hicks, in her long-running column "Early History of Pulaski Pioneer Families" in the *Pulaski County Democrat*, describes the three-notch road from Waynesville to Big Piney as "it was through the county and every so often there were three notches cut on trees cut with an ax." She also describes the first automobile she saw along that road.

I can remember the first one I ever saw. It was at Big Piney about 1912 when we had a store at Big Piney. A man and woman left St. Louis to go somewhere up South. Of course, they had to travel the Three-Notch County Road and they came through Big Piney or "New Town" as it was called then.



Until 1917, construction and maintenance of early roads was the responsibility of each county. Some roads were built by subscription or donations. This was a typical Pulaski County road in the early 1900s after being dragged. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

Many people had never seen a car at that time for they could not hardly drive them over the rough country roads. This car was a bigger and better kind of a car than a Ford.

We did have telephones. When someone would see the car pass their house they phoned ahead

to tell their neighbors it was coming.

When they came by father's home, they thought the horses were going to go over the fence. Dad had the work horses out in a pasture near the road and when they saw and heard this car they came running to the house near-



When the dirt roads were subjected to heavy rains, they became a quagmire. Roads or sections that were continually wet, as from springs, were sometimes covered with half-logs or wide planks, creating a plank or corduroy road. Courtesy of the Missouri State Historical Society.

ly scared to death.

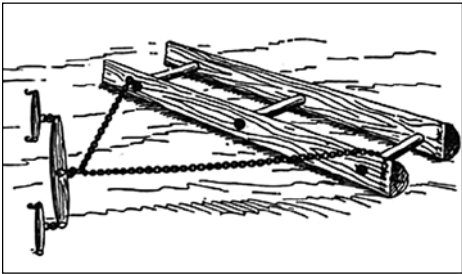
When the news came to town that there was a big car coming, the people were out in the street looking for it to pass. When it arrived they were all gazing at them and the car.

These folks stopped in front of our store. The woman was a Geers woman [Rose Geers, daughter of lumberman Addison Bates of Texas County] that was raised up south and married and lived in St. Louis.

This automobile traveling the Three-Notch Road on its way to Texas County was not the first auto to enter Pulaski County. We relate elsewhere (2009 *Old Settlers Gazette*) the memories of a young Dru Pippin seeing St. Louis Police Chief Edmund Creecy drive the first automobile into Waynesville in 1909. Creecy had navigated the Wire Road from Rolla and entered Pulaski County by crossing the Big Piney at Wagon Ford, aka Hooker Ford, and broke an axle on his chain-driven Metz by hitting a stump in the middle of the road.

While there were only a handful of automobiles in our area in the first decade of the 20th century, ownership increased sharply in the second decade, mostly due to Henry Ford's innovations. The Ford Runabout debuted in 1909 with a price tag of \$825.

Governor Elliott Major (1913-1917), a Progressive Democrat, had a broad reform agenda, including road financing and improvement. In 1913, Major called for citizens to "Lift Missouri Out of the Mud" and donate two days to working on Missouri's roads on August 20 and 21. Major saw good roads as more than a path to comfort or speed. He saw good roads as necessary to economic growth. He averred that "I myself will shoulder a pick and do my part and I hope every able-bodied man in the State will follow suit, for nothing



The main implement used in maintaining the dirt and/or gravel road surface was the King road drag, invented by D. Ward King, a farmer near Maitland, Missouri. Originally, it was two parallel split logs set three feet apart and pulled by a team. This simple road grader revolutionized road maintenance in the early 1900s. Photo at right courtesy of the Library of Congress.



means so much to the prosperity of this State and welfare of its people as good roads."

At first, there was a nationwide grin for what many considered a stunt. The grins turned to jaw drops when 250,000 Missourians turned out with picks and shovels to turn the road dirt in their neighborhoods. The *Pulaski County Democrat* reported that "The citizens in this vicinity responded generously to the call to work the roads. Yesterday we learn that every road leading to Waynesville had a large force of hands doing effective work."

Good roads got good publicity but, unfortunately, the work of thousands did not improve the roads much and, worse yet, did not result in any increase in immediate state road funding.

By 1916, Ford had reduced the price of the Runabout to \$345, making it affordable to many middle income families. Emma Page Hicks's brother Bob Page bought a Ford in 1914. It aided him greatly in his real estate business. Car dealerships appeared in the railroad towns of Dixon, Crocker, and Richland. Almost 300,000 vehicles were operating on Missouri roads in 1917.

Good Roads

In 1912 there was a road tax of 25 cents per \$100 valuation in Pulaski County. In 1914, the County Court fixed the poll tax for roads at \$6.00 or five days of labor. The need was great yet the tax revenue was meager. Road work beyond basic maintenance was beyond the means of a rural county. Pulaski County disbursed

\$2,065 to the 17 road districts and overseers in the county for maintenance in the fiscal year 1916-1917. It would take big money from big government to improve roads. Legislative efforts were beginning at both the state and federal levels. The Good Roads movement was gaining momentum.

At the federal level, good roads legislation in Congress was led by a Missourian. Representative Dorsey W. Shackelford of Boonville was Chairman of the House Committee

Bob Page must have been pleased with his first car, a new Ford. He and W. E. Burchard organized the Crocker Motor Company, the first dealership in Crocker. Their ad in the August 27, 1914, *Pulaski County Democrat* is at right.



Buyers to Share in Profits Lower Prices on Ford Cars

Effective from August 1st, 1914, to August 1st, 1915, and guaranteed against any reduction during that time:

Touring Car	\$490
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Ford Motor Company

To those who are considering buying a car before August 1st, 1915, it appears to us that it would be wise on your part to do so as early as possible, in order that you may get on the profit-sharing plan of the Ford Motor Company. The Ford Motor Company agrees with you that there will be no reduction in the prices they are making to you now before August 1, 1915.

We have on hand and can supply at once an ample supply of Ford cars.

For further particulars regarding these low prices and profit-sharing plan, see
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on Roads and introduced legislation that became the Federal Road Act of 1916. Commonly referred to as the Federal "Good Roads" Act, the landmark law established federal funding for highways, although it focused assistance to rural post (mail) roads. Funding to the states was 50-50 matching grants, not to exceed six percent of statewide roads over a five year period. This program started slowly with only \$5 million allotted the first year and the entry of America into World War I in April of 1917 but, most importantly, federal aid to states for road improvement and construction was established.

State legislators had been particularly active. The Missouri General Assembly created the State Highway Department in 1913. It passed the Hawes Law in 1917 that shifted responsibility of road building from the counties to the state. The Morgan-McCullough amendments in 1919 increased the scope and level of participation of the state.

Pulaski County showed its commitment to good roads. The County Court proposed to issue bonds for the first time for road purposes in the amount of \$250,000. The bond issue carried the vote on December 23, 1919, and the bonds sold in January 1920.

The Hawes Law of 1917 and the Morgan-McCullough gave Missouri a framework for road building. What it needed was the funds to do so. Missourians wanted to quit talking

and get to building. In 1920, voters passed a \$60,000,000 bond issue. It needed to be allocated for projects.

The 1921 summer special session was a hot one. The source of the heat: urban versus rural needs and expectations. Urban bond issue advocates assumed they were working for a statewide road system that would start with a cross-state highway from St. Louis to Kansas City, dubbed "peacock lanes" by rural legislators. The city press called the rural legislators, primarily in the House, "dirt roaders" and "mud daubers." The Senate passed a bill which proposed continuous, connected, hard surface state roads and it was rejected by

the House. The House passed a bill with farm to market roads connecting villages and small towns. They preferred that the money be distributed to county governments and that locals determine road improvement, just as it had always been. The Senate likewise rejected it and thus a stalemate. The opposing sides held fast through June.

In July, a House-Senate conference committee was formed to reconcile the differences. The wrangling began again. On the third day, an unidentified mediator (either the House Speaker or U.S. Representative Harry Hawes) brought about an agreement. The compromise allowed \$29 million

to the "peacock lanes" and \$31 million would fund the lesser traveled county highways. Each county would receive one complete cross-county road before any work began on the concrete roads. The rural representatives were satisfied that the city and "tourist" roads would not consume all the bond money before the needs of the counties were met. It was a good compromise: neither side was satisfied and each could claim victory. The resulting legislation was overwhelmingly passed by both houses. It was dubbed the Centennial Road Law, commemorating the 100 years of statehood.

The law lays out a state road system of 1,500 miles of "higher-type" primary roads connecting the major population centers of the state and two cross-county secondary roads for each county that connect with adjacent cross-county roads for a total distance of 6,000 miles. This would result in a state road system of 7,500 miles, taking ten years to complete.

Another important provision was the appointment of a nonpartisan State Highway Commission of four members. The Commission, through the State Highway Department, was given the power to designate routes, construction schedules, and to let all contracts, among other things. The funds, enabling legislation, and bureaucratic mechanisms were all in place to "Lift Missouri out of the mud."



Regional groups held conventions to lobby for good roads. The meeting in Lebanon pictured above with lines of cars on the town's dirt main street was to promote good roads in general and the Ozark Trail in particular. The convention was well attended by Pulaski boosters. It was chaired by John T. Woodruff, Springfield attorney and hotelier. Woodruff was an early supporter of the good roads movement. A decade later, he promoted U. S. Highway 66 as a founder and first president of the U. S. Highway 66 Association. For more Pulaski roads activity, see the 2015 *Old Settlers Gazette*, pages 11-17. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

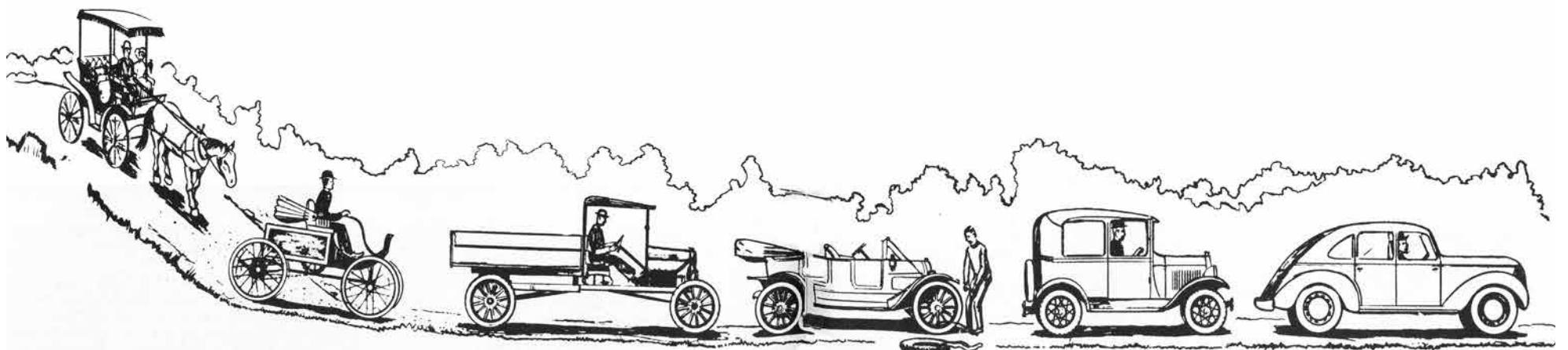


Illustration from *Roads & Their Builders*, Missouri State Highway Commission, n.d.