

Romance of Detroit's Development Reads Like Fairy Story From Book

By JUDSON BRADWAY

I can remember riding into Detroit from my old home near Birmingham where I was born, over old Woodward avenue when it was nothing more than a narrow corduroy road. It was crowded with plants and hewn tree trunks, laid through marshes, with tamaracs and thick brush on either side of most of the distance from Birmingham to Forest avenue.

At that time the only buildings along this narrow channel through the brush and trees were an occasional road house and a sprinkling of farm houses. There were two principal landmarks, the old Halfway House on the corner of Woodward and Royal Oak, now Lafayette avenue in Royal Oak, and the Five-Mile House (or Ben Jacobs', as it was for many years known), which stood on what is now the corner of Calvert avenue and Woodward.

It was the invariable custom of people who traveled the road on those days to stop for a few moments at each of these places to give water to their horses, and possibly to purchase a glass of beer and a sandwich.

This condition existed within my memory, and in fact, so short has been the period of Oakland County's occupation by white settlers, I have within my lifetime known an old woman who was among the first white persons to settle in Oakland County, and who lived near my boyhood home. We all called her

"Grandma," she was then nearly 80 years old. One of the greatest treasuries of my childhood was the occasion when we gathered around her knees to hear her tell of her early experiences. When she and her husband, Oakland County they built their cabin on the ridge which crosses the Thirteen-mile road about one mile west of Woodward avenue. There was not even a corduroy road where Woodward avenue now is, but only a trail which was not passable a large part of the year. To reach her cabin from Detroit necessitated long detours, following the Hedges.

Full Of Indians

The country was then full of Indians. One of the principal camping grounds was near her home; and we never tired of her stories about the Indians. It was necessary to do to keep on friendly terms with the Chiefs. The country at that time was full of Indians. One of the principal camping grounds was near her home; and we never tired of her stories about the Indians. It was necessary to do to keep on friendly terms with the Chiefs. The country at that time was full of Indians. One of the principal camping grounds was near her home; and we never tired of her stories about the Indians. It was necessary to do to keep on friendly terms with the Chiefs.

lay the additional pavement, or for that matter, the townships. But lack of all the difficulty was the lack of an absolute solution—or else courage on the part of those in a position to correct the situation.

When first laid out as the old military road Woodward was planned with a width of 100 feet. This width was not maintained. Encroachments were allowed to be made by public service corporations; by the plating of property at various points; by farmers moving in their fence posts. The double-tracks of the D. U. R. 100-foot width; so did the Grand Trunk with its tracks alongside the roadway from Royal Oak northward beyond Birmingham. So there was not room to widen the highway without encroaching upon private property.

There were no parallel roads, for Woodward ran diagonally while the established section line roads ran east and west, or north and south. Agitation to bring about the much-needed traffic improvement on the avenue grew stronger and stronger. Finally, John R street was paved to the Eleven-Mile road. This was supposed to relieve Woodward, but the result was a very heavy traffic, there was still an ever-increasing stream of vehicles on Woodward. The road was improved to Southfield, and the South field road to Birmingham. While this was carried a great many people, conditions on Woodward avenue became worse and worse.

A Problem

One of the principal reasons for the delay in action in widening Woodward was the problem presented by that section of the Grand Trunk Railroad paralleled it. Should the avenue be widened all west of the Railroad? Or should it be widened partly on the east side and partly on the west side? There were serious objections to either proposal. The widening all on the west side, then there would be a demand by east side property owners for highway widening of the tracks, in order to avoid a continuous line of railroad crossings. On each side of the railroad, then there would be a question of grade separation between the tracks and the railroad left the avenue. Incidentally, many of us had for several years endeavored to have the railroad to install suburban service.

Finally the conditions became so very bad that several of us decided that the avenue must be widened; that it was ridiculous to wait for a decision on the removal of the railroad the installation of suburban service or anything else. Consequently, at a meeting of the Birmingham City Board, held in the high school in October, 1921, I strongly urged that there should be immediate action taken, entirely regardless of the difficulties involved. The Board passed a resolution and appointed a committee to stir up sentiment of immediate action. Within 30 days at a meeting of the real estate boards of Royal Oak and Pontiac, points of view were presented. Some publicity required; the matter was taken up with the Oakland County Board of Commissioners in a vigorous way. This commission felt that the widening of the avenue was very necessary, and expressed a willingness to do whatever it could, yet its hands were tied in such a way that it was almost impossible to begin how to begin.

Mr. Groesbeck's attention having been called to the situation, he came deeply interested. After traveling over the road on two or three occasions he was thoroughly convinced that something must be done at once. About this time the Detroit City Plan Commission, of which I was a member, was cooperating with the Rapid Transit Commission in making a very intricate study of the traffic problems of metropolitan Detroit. This body came committed to the necessity of wide main highways. It was not difficult to convince Groesbeck that the widening of Woodward avenue should be well done; and with his very splendid foresight and vision, he was able to see the present advisability and the future absolute necessity of a highway at least 200 feet wide. Several of us had had this same vision for years, but until this time, although some of us believed that we would have had the courage to go ahead, no one man of sufficient vision and courage to undertake the job had been in a position to do so.

I remember distinctly meeting with the Oakland County Board of Commissioners and their attorney early in 1922 at which time there seemed to be at least one dozen reasons why Woodward avenue could not be widened for many years to come. I distinctly remember to announce to the board that I would have had the courage to go ahead, no one man of sufficient vision and courage to undertake the job had been in a position to do so.

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Every one of the apparent insurmountable obstacles disappeared like mist as they were approached—with two exceptions; and these were, first, the removal of the Grand Trunk Railroad from the highway; and second, the problem of improving the road through the village of Birmingham.

Recently we have witnessed the solution of the first of these two problems. This month an act of the legislature has confirmed a contract between the State and the Grand Trunk Railroad which involves the moving of the railroad far to the eastward of the highway.

Birmingham Problem

The second problem—the Birmingham situation—will be quickly cleared up when men forget their selfish interests and realize that there must be no narrowing of this great, throbbing artery. To construct Woodward avenue at any point would seriously impair the value and importance of the highway. The 200-foot highway must go through, not only for the good of the present and future of the village of Birmingham, but for Oakland County and for the state at large.

Regardless of who had been Governor of Michigan, Woodward would have been widened—first, probably, to 100 feet, and sometime later, at many times the expense, to 200 feet or more. The State is fortunate to have had at this crucial time a Governor of vision, able to judge future needs by conditions about him, and to have the trend of the nation coupled with this vision, he had the courage to proceed. It is largely due to Governor Groesbeck that the widening of Woodward avenue passes, and the State of Michigan, have seen the beginning of this great phenomenon in highway construction.

Perhaps we in Detroit have had this colossal construction program "too close to our eyes" to realize the magnitude of the undertaking—the almost miraculous chain of accomplishments.

On the surface we see the old 20-mile highway 50 feet wide, transformed in a few short months to the greatest highway in the world. Let us look back for a moment upon conditions as they were.

There was a narrow ribbon of pavement not much wider than a footwalk. Over this passed two continuous streams of traffic. There were accidents every few minutes—actually, and there were narrow capes every second. For most of the distance, electric cars ran at a mile a minute within three feet of the motor traffic. Such was the main roadway of the Motor City—the preferred route to its most favored suburban areas.

Why It Was Difficult

Why was it difficult to widen this artery to sensible proportions? Because cemeteries bordered on it and was necessary to remove the earth legislatures and have an act passed authorizing the condemnation of cemetery property. Because it was necessary to move large business blocks and hundreds of shade trees. Retaining walls had to be built, road and street crossings, and houses reconstructed to meet the grade of the new highway. To reduce the cost of widening through certain business districts, property on side streets in the rear of Woodward avenue had to be razed and replaced by the new highway; this was exchanged for Woodward frontage with the owners. The City of Detroit and the State of Michigan was amended to enable the county to proceed under the plan of widening Woodward avenue. A double track electric car line had to be moved into the center of the new highway. A sewer and drainage system was installed on both sides for the entire length. Dozens of culverts were constructed. At least 65 miles of concrete curb and gutter were constructed; hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of earth moved, thousands of telephone, telegraph and trolley poles reset. There is a story of great length with many complications, involving months and months of effort, a Supreme Court decision, further negotiations, and finally a very satisfactory agreement for the State.

Has it been worth the substantial cost to leave this legacy to our heirs and successors? I think so. There is no investment that a community can make which will yield a return equally as large as that of street widening and street planning. When a public building is built, when a public sewer or water main is constructed, the destructive forces of depreciation and obsolescence begin to work immediately. It is only a question of time when the improvements must be repeated.

The Cost

But the expense of a widened highway is no more than its first cost. Instead of depreciation that moment for moment almost universally attaches not alone the property fronting upon it, but the entire vicinity through which it passes. Everything in the world has a tendency to go along with the main street. Second, it leads from the fourth city of the United States to the metropolis of Michigan, directly to the greatest metropolitan section of which any city of the country can boast—a single county made up of hills and valleys, acres of large forest trees and shrubs, with 600 beautiful fresh water inland lakes. It traverses this great metropolitan area with a series of cities and villages: Highland Park, Ferndale, Pleasant Bldg., Royal Oak, East Troy, Birmingham and Pontiac, the last named being one of Michigan's finest industrial centers and only 25

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When one travels the highway from end to end, the thousands of residences which view on either side afford convincing proof that the highway was built not simply to serve a future purpose, but to fill a present actual need. Woodward avenue is really an urban highway, passing as it does for almost its entire distance through cities and villages. There is needed only vision, and only a little vision, to see the entire area between Detroit and Pontiac solidly built up with business and residential improvements. And this, thanks to the widening of Woodward avenue—will come within the brief span of the next 10 years.

Motoring was held up for two days in Canterbury, Eng., because myriads of flying ants settled on the roads and made the surface too slippery for the wheels to turn.

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