

THE ADVANCE

PEELE & PEELE, Publishers HERBERT PEELE, Editor Member of the Associated Press...

A Comedy of Errors

The Advance observed with some interest and with a measure of exasperation, but with more amusement than either, under the headline, "Stinking Gut Road Finished at Last," the following item in last Friday's News and Observer:

The final chapter in the construction of the floating road over Stinking Gut Swamp, regarded by highway engineers as one of the most remarkable pieces of work yet accomplished, was written yesterday when George E. McNutt, construction engineer on the job, turned in his report of costs and was officially checked off the job.

Contrary to widespread reports that have circulated throughout the eastern end of the State, the total cost of construction under State supervision falls under rather than runs over the figures submitted by contractors who bid on the job when it was first offered in 1922.

The unit price bid submitted by the lowest bidder when the project was offered for construction amounted to \$145,019.28. The road was completed at a cost of \$118,814.89, according to the final report submitted by Mr. McNutt yesterday.

The road is 2.74 miles long, connecting Elizabeth City and Camden courthouse, and is built across a swamp that has no bottom, insofar as engineers have been able to determine. The concrete surface, eight inches thick and reinforced with 90 pounds of steel to the square yard is laid over timber corduroy covered with dirt hauled in boats 20 miles.

Twice a day the tide which comes up the Pasquotank river covers the road, but after a year of service it has given no indication of sinking. The engineering department believes that the experiment is now safe, and that the road will serve traffic indefinitely. It has withstood the traffic of heavy trucks during the construction period, which, it is believed, was heavier than any immediate burden the road will be called upon to bear.

The only news to this section, of course, in the foregoing clipping was the presumably authoritative statement of the road's cost—the first such statement that The Advance has observed in print.

What "widespread reports" were referred to in the second paragraph of the clipping, The Advance has no idea. There was, to be sure, a general understanding that, owing to the delay in completion of the project and to the necessity of maintaining a ferry boat detour for more than six months, the cost of the project would exceed first estimates when it had been hoped to complete by January a road on which construction did not actually cease until the last of the following June. But The Advance never heard anybody suggest that it was going to cost the State more to build the road than the job could have been done for had it been let to contract. It is true that there was a lone report published in this newspaper, as paving operations were completed, that "the estimated cost of the project runs up to nearly \$140,000.00"—a report based on figures of \$133,866.48 given in a then recent issue of the State Highway Bulletin as "estimated cost."

These figures were accepted at their face value by The Advance, this newspaper at the time having lost sight of the exact figures of the low bid on the project rejected by District Highway Commissioner Hart, on the ground of being too high. However, this lone report was speedily corrected with the explanation that the highway bulletin's figures were based on contractors' bids and not on estimates of the cost of actual construction; and with a further statement that the actual cost of the project would not go any where near \$140,000.

TIMELY TOPICS

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planation that the highway bulletin's figures were based on contractors' bids and not on estimates of the cost of actual construction; and with a further statement that the actual cost of the project would not go any where near \$140,000. Where the News and Observer got its figures of \$145,019.28 as the lowest bid on the project The Advance does not know. We do know that figures published as the lowest bid at the time bids were rejected was \$135,990.85; and we know again that Commissioner Hart in a signed statement to this newspaper published in the issue of May 30, 1922, said that the lowest bid in round numbers was "something like \$138,000.00." However, The Advance presumes the new figures to be revised and correct, the only matter as to figures to which The Advance takes exception being the implication that there were "widespread reports" in this section that the cost of the road would exceed \$145,000.

The glaring and in some cases ludicrous inaccuracies made in the remaining paragraphs of the clipping are apt illustrations of the persistence of error once started on its course. Ben Dixon McNeill spent a day looking over the road as it was nearing completion last spring and in the next issue of the News and Observer appeared a very vivid and entertaining account of the obstacles overcome in building this road. But Mr. McNeill's story was more vivid and interesting than exact, and, where Mr. McNeill lacked in definiteness, whoever wrote the headlines for the article as it appeared in print made up for the lack by a ready imagination. Now, apparently, every time there is occasion to refer to this particular road, the writer who handles the story turns to the headlines of Mr. McNeill's article for inspiration.

For instance, the marsh over which this road passes is described as having "no bottom in so far as engineers have been able to determine." It is a matter of record, The Advance believes, that engineers who surveyed the route preliminary to the building of the road by the Camden Ferry Company found bottom at a depth of 15 or 18 feet below the surface on each side of Glovers Cut, while beyond 200 feet from the cut the depth of muck varied between limits of five and 10 feet. That may be bottomless so far as automobile traffic is concerned, but to say that it is bottomless "so far as engineers have been able to find" is going it a bit thick. The Advance knows of its own knowledge and observation that, when the 40-foot piling was driven down at Glovers Cut, admittedly the deepest section of the quagmire, prepara-

tory to the construction of the present bridge over that channel, beneath the muck was found a foundation so hard that the butt of every piling driven down was splintered before it could be driven to the required depth.

As to the "dirt hauled 20 miles in boats," of course it could not be expected that the upstater should know that dirt could be hauled 20 miles in barges probably more economically than it could be hauled the length of the road in trucks.

Again News and Observer desk men who write glibly of this road, after a hasty glance over the McNeill story headlines, imply that the State laid the corduroy for the entire 2.74 miles of road, when as a matter of fact less than 2,800 feet of corduroy was laid by McNutt. There was one stretch of 1,400 feet where he used corduroy to raise a sunken portion of the road above the tide, and there were other shorter stretches aggregating in all less than 1,400 feet that were so raised. But the only crosslogging under the major portion of the road was that put down when the road was originally built nearly 20 years ago by the Camden Ferry Company. McNutt did, however, raise the roadbed by about 14 inches throughout its length with dirt, unloaded for the most part at the center of operations at Glovers Cut wharf from barges, and it was this new dirt, subjected immediately after it was put down to the heavy traffic of State construction trucks under conditions of a wet winter, which gave Ben Dixon McNeill his exaggerated idea of the condition of the road before the State took it over.

"Twice a day the tide which comes up the river covers the road" would make a horse laugh. The only thing that the man who put headlines on McNeill's story knew about the ebb and flow of tides was what he had read about ocean tides in his high school geography and in his English poets. He therefore presumed that if there were tides on the Pasquotank they came up the river twice daily. McNeill sent along a picture of a truck caught on the road by the tide and stalled, and so the headliner jumped to the conclusion that when the tide came up the river it submerged the whole road. As a matter of fact, as The Advance has vainly and ineffectually sought again and again to tell the News and Observer, the only tides of this section are wind tides, which are high with continued high winds from the Southeast and low with continued high winds from the opposite direction, while, when there are no high winds, the tide is normal; tide being used to denote the level of the water, which fluctuates with the force and direction of the wind in-

stead of with sea tides or with rainfall.

High tides are not, therefore, a matter of daily occurrence, but are as infrequent as a high southeast wind. When they come they last as long as the wind stays up, and begin to recede as soon as it goes down. But never, in the highest tide ever known to prevail here, has the river road been submerged for its entire length, or even for one per cent of its length, since the day it was built. The only sections submerged while construction was going on were the sections the level of which McNutt sought to raise by crosslogging. McNutt undertook to raise those sunken sections above the tide and thought he had done so. But this road, under loaded truck traffic, sunk in certain spots after it was graded and continued to settle in these depressions after it was paved. Consequently, today these two or three spots are submerged practically all the time, the depth and area of the water varying with the tide. But the variation is not one that occurs twice daily and the length of road bed submerged is seldom more than 200 feet in any spot. The Advance does recall one occasion since the road was paved, however, when the water on the paving was deep enough to stall low-swung motor cars. Before the road was paved such accidents were of more frequent occurrence, and, while the road was under construction, the "tide" was high enough on certain days to stall even the State trucks crossing the sunken portion of the highway. The idea, however, that the road had to be built between tides that submerged it twice daily is erroneous to the point of absurdity.

Finally, the News and Observer has renamed to its own liking that portion of the Pasquotank river swamp which this road crosses.

"Stinking Gut Swamp" is a swamp The Advance never heard of anywhere except in the News and Observer. Glovers Cut, which bisects the peninsula in Camden opposite Elizabeth City formed by an oxbow bend of the Pasquotank river, it is true, was for a time, while an oyster canning factory flourished on Machelhe's Island, known as Stinking Gut. But to name a whole swamp—a swamp as old as the Pasquotank river itself, after an artificial channel cut, according to tradition, not more than two generations ago, strikes us as rather unusual. If the News and Observer prefers Stinking Gut to Glovers Cut, even though no basis of fact for the former name now exists and though Glovers Cut is the name used on all maps in this section, the News and Observer has the right to its preference in the matter. But to try to name a

three-mile section of the Pasquotank river swamp after the head-quotank river swamp after the abandoned name of an artificial foist the name on the road as channel cut through a part of well as the swamp is adding in the swamp strikes us as going a sult to injury.

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