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A Practical Road System for Watauga.

[By GEO. R. SHEPHERD, A. T. S.]

Almost every feature of rural life is being agitated, thoughtfully considered and thoroughly discussed. For the most part it is gratifying to note that every change has indicated progress. However there is yet unlimited opportunity for future development along many lines that are essential to the prosperity and happiness of our citizenship. Taking a careful observation over our entire county we are forcefully impressed that Watauga's preeminent need is a better system of public roads. The present condition of our roads do not reflect honor upon our people. By allowing them to remain in their unimproved condition, we are permanently handicapped and offer an irresistible barrier to every progressive movement, that the very strongest are unable to successfully overcome.

There are three hundred miles of unimproved road in Watauga—the Boone and Blowing Rock Turnpike being the only exception, and just one trip over it in the winter or early spring will reveal the fact that it is improved only as to grade. Therefore we believe at least a conservative criticism in a general way is justifiable. We shall mention only a few of the main lines that are most used. The road from Boone to Stony Fork, in many places has at least a twelve per cent grade, besides being narrow, rocky, sidling and muddy, making it utterly impossible to haul a reasonable load or travel with any degree of satisfaction. The road from Boone to Elk finally narrows into an almost imperceptible trail across Jakes Mountain which is an impassible barrier cutting off all western communication. This trail will doubtless be marked by the next generation in Els township as a memorial to the bravery of their progenitors who were so daring as to take a wagon and team on such extreme heights without a road. Going west from Boone to Beaver Dams, you may find any sort of thing to impede travel. The road abruptly and unnecessarily runs toward the summit of Rich Mountain and descends to Brushy Fork with the same slope making western travel very difficult. For about six months in the year the entire surface of the road bed is completely overlaid with clay mud, varying in depth from six to twenty four inches. But passing Brushy Fork a still more intolerable condition exists, however we are very much delighted to know that you can either go in the creek, as was formerly the custom, or that you have the privilege of driving down a very rocky bridle path about eight feet wide—not necessarily in water the whole way.

George's Gap compares favorably with Jakes Mountain, entirely isolating Beaver Dams from all other parts of the county. We may safely assume that it has even more than a twelve per cent grade, with a combination of all other bad features such as being extremely narrow, muddy, rocky, sidling, cut up with routes, and turn-outs, then wood and logs piled on the upper side of an eight foot road with every other conceivable thing calculated to imperil life and endanger your safety. It further commands us to insist that every "Doubting Thomas" make an earnest effort to take his Hanner over these lines—and they had better both walk, too.

The following reasons may be assigned for the existence of these deplorable conditions. 1. The roads were not properly graded. 2. They were not scientifically constructed, and any amount of work is not a thing of permanence. 3. Deficiency in road judgment. When Bill is overseer he makes a persistent fight for something. When Fitzhugh comes in, he tears it up. 4. The roads are not worked when they need it. 5. There is a lack of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the hands, and 6th, public sentiment does not demand better roads.

If we are to have better roads—and we are going to have them or wage an incessant war on all opposition—the very first thing we are compelled to do is to cultivate a good roads spirit. Public sentiment in every township in the county must be thoroughly aroused. Good roads meetings must be held; enthusiastic members must communicate the spirit to the indifferent ones who have never been interested. Good roads must be talked in every home, around every fireside, and to every neighbor. Let the Good Road spirit pervade every home in Watauga until the mighty force of public sentiment shall blend a united voice for improved roads. We trust that advocates of ability and influence will offer their bodies a living sacrifice in campaigning the county, over which will be their reasonable service in behalf of good roads. When the people assume this attitude there will be a road revolution worthy of notice, the effects of which will be permanent and far-reaching.

Taking into consideration the fact that Watauga has only 2½ millions of taxable property, we can see no consistency in our expending the large amounts that Buncomb, Wake and Iredell have spent, neither do we advocate either the macadam or sand-clay roads, owing to their immense cost, but we do advocate a good system of dirt roads in every section of the county. The ideal road for Watauga should not exceed a four per cent grade; should be twenty feet wide; should have a smooth, rolling surface and a good drainage system on either side, with underground culverts wherever needed to dispose of all water without washing or injuring the road. We might be rather compromising as to width in deep cuts and high banks, but we must have the grade and drainage regardless of cost, because these are essential, and we can never have a road without them.

Necessity demands that we shall have a better system of roads, but we find it difficult, if not impossible, to designate just which roads we should have first, and we offer this merely as a suggestion, speaking in behalf of the masses of the people. Our impression is that an east and west line should first be constructed through the entire county, beginning at Todd, and running by way of Boone, Vilas, Sugar Grove and Beaver Dams to Tennessee thus connecting the two railroad points. The main east and west line would be easily accessible to most townships by the construction of short intersecting roads.

We feel that there is not a citizen in the county who would dare insinuate that this road is not needed. But now comes the patriotic test. Merely admitting the necessity of such a road is of no material importance, considering the amount required to construct it. The proposition directly confronting us is, how shall we raise the necessary funds on

terms of justice and entire equality. We join with many of our best citizens in declaring that taxation has long since reached a limit. We affirm there is only one thing about which we are more sensitive than taxation—our wives. But the fullness of time has abundantly proven that we can never have good roads unless some special means are provided. Therefore, without hesitation, we propose that a tax of 40 cents on the hundred dollars valuation be levied, half of which shall go to the county for the construction of main lines, the other half to the townships, to be applied on needed roads. Mr. H. B. Varner, of the North Carolina Good Roads Association, declares the State is paying a tribute every year to mud and bad roads the immense sum of four million dollars. Of all conceivable extravagance this is by far the worst, as it is absolutely thrown away without benefit to any one. Dividing the four millions of dollars by the one hundred counties in the State, our proportional part is forty thousand dollars. Although our county is comparatively small we feel that it will average with the others, owing to the fact that we have no improved roads. Our proposed tax will amount to ten thousand dollars annually, just one fourth the amount that is voluntarily paid in mud tax. So the only logical conclusion from a financial and economic standpoint, is to retain the thirty thousand by levying the ten thousand dollar tax and building roads as long as there is necessity for them.

The cost of the Boone and Blowing Rock turnpike which is in a low state of improvement is \$600 per mile, but with an additional \$400, a good rolling surface and complete drainage system may be added. We may safely assume on an average that a mile of good road can be constructed for 1,000 dollars. So with our ten thousand dollar tax the first year we can build half way to Todd. The second year to Vilas the third year to Todd, the fourth year to George's Gap, besides having twenty thousands in the townships for local construction.

The proposed tax may not at first appeal to the property owner who is over forty five years of age and has been released from road duty. He may have a feeling that he has worked the 27 years required by law, and is under no further obligation. But

whether he has worked or not, the fact prominently remains that we have no roads. There may also be a seemingly injustice for the man subject to road duty who owns only a few acres of land has no team; never uses the road except occasionally walks to the store or carries a turn to mill, to have to pay a tax for building roads to be used by the team owner. But we declare it is to the interest of every man to see that this tax is levied. The roads should be built by the tax and not call into service the regular hands because their duty will be keeping the road in repair. So relieving them of any special duty, we believe that our entire plan is founded on the divine law of justice, for whether you own much or little you will be compelled to pay your proportional part, another principal we may well associate with the economic policy is the great increase in the value of land. An authentic and conservative report declares a good road system increases the value of land 9 dollars per acre. Take for instance the man who owns 100 acres of land valued at 2,000 dollars. His tax will be 8 dollars while his land will be increased \$900. There are 200,874 acres of land in Watauga which increased \$9 per acre will amount to \$1,807,866 combining this with the 40,000 mud tax and deducting 10,000 for building and construction. We have a saving of \$1,837,866 to the county. We leave the matter optional with the people having stated only a few unvarnished facts that withstand the test. The sincere desire of my heart is that the next Legislature shall make ample provisions for our relief.

Next we favor taking our entire road system out of the hands of the county commissioners as they hold office for only two years and in so short a time they cannot acquaint themselves with our greatest needs. Besides this office is purely political and the temptation is very great to do some things for policy sake and the hope of re-election. Therefore we suggest that a road commission be appointed by the Governor, who shall have supervision over all the roads in the county. We believe it should be strictly non partisan or at least not more than two members should belong to the same political party. The term of office should be six years, having appointments made every two so that an old member shall always be on the board. The appoint-

ment should be based altogether on merit giving it only to such men as are intensely interested in road improvement and have the good of cause at heart. Doubtless keeping in time and cooperation with the Interstate Highway Commission would make their work more effective and satisfactory. We believe the commissioners should go into every section of the county and carefully consider every need, then hire a skilled engineer to lay out such roads as they may think proper to the greatest possible advantage. A monthly report sworn and subscribed to of all receipts and expenditures should be published in the county paper so that every one may know their exact proceedings. The commissioners should receive ample remuneration for their work, but not enough to create an undue desire for the office.

With the above designated plans we are confident that we can better our condition. When we have once established improved roads with eight days well applied work at the proper time we can maintain them. We realize the magnitude of this undertaking and feel that it can only be accomplished through the combined effort of our entire citizenship. Therefore we enter into the cause heart and mind, soliciting the hearty cooperation of every progressive man who longs to see within the next ten years a complete road system throughout the entire county.

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