

Isolation Ends for a People:

From Lost Provinces to Auto Age: Pioneer Roadbuilding in Hertford

"The Lost Provinces." That is the way many people characterized the Roanoke-Chowan and Hertford County in the early years of the 20th century.

It was the truth. For, with new means of transportation beginning to knit the nation together, the counties of eastern North Carolina—cut by many unbridged rivers and streams—came more and more to realize that they were cut off from the new age by a great lack of transportation facilities.

Ancient ferries crossed the Chowan and Roanoke rivers at scattered points. They had served for centuries to carry the buggies, the carts, the wagons, that constituted land transportation.

But, with the coming of the automobile, they were inadequate, woefully.

The first autos showed up in the area in the first and second decades of the 20th century. The high-bodied Tin Lizzies navigated along roads that had served in the horsedrawn past, but were completely inadequate in the new age. Dusty in summer, seas of muddy ruts in winter, they provided much reason for the many jokes about road difficulties in these booming days.

Then, after the First World War, local people—and the

state government—took the transportation bull by the horns.

The 1920's were the great roadbuilding pioneer days. In these years, local people banded together to provide themselves with a transportation network. Set back by the Depression of the early 1930's, the roadbuilding programs spurred ahead again in the middle part of the decade when the state took over the job and continued the task of laying hardtop roads, and of building bridges to span the rivers.

As the Second World War approached, most of the major highways had been paved, bridges had ended the river-caused isolation.

But the farmer was still in the mud. Miles of rural roads were still in essentially the same condition they had been when the century began.

The war put off the next roadbuilding era. Then, in 1949, a new Governor—W. Kerr Scott—took over Tar Heel government. A new spirit gripped local people.

In a great spurt of roadbuilding, the miles of rutted rural roads became surfaced. "Scott Roads" opened a new era for rural Hertford and other farm counties.

This is the story of the Age of Roads in Hertford County:

How did Hertford County commissioners react to the new "good roads" policy of Gov. Cameron Morrison's 1921 administration? Not so good.

The first problem which faced them was the decision on whether to switch from having road work supervised by the separate townships, or put under county direction.

The Hertford County Herald of January 28, 1921 reported: "County commissioners met but took no action on changing road work from townships to county."

In successive issues, The Herald's editorial stand urged the commissioners to join the rest of the state in this move. When it finally came to vote on February 11, 1921, The Herald recorded the fact that two of the six commissioners voted against the change.

F. G. Taylor of Ahoskie Township and J. O. Askew of Harrellsville, were voted down, by a margin of 4 to 2.

County Group
As a result, a county highway commission was set up, to hold monthly meetings in Winton. This commission was responsible for

hiring a county superintendent of roads, which they did.

Next move came on the state level, when the General Assembly was asked to approve a bill authorizing a bond issue for road work, if approved by a referendum of voters.

Sen. W. H. S. Burgwyn of Northampton County, with Sen. Stanley Winborne and Rep. D. C. Barnes of Hertford County, were adamant in their opposition to this "good roads bill." But it passed, nonetheless.

Winton Bridge
On May 6, 1921, The Herald announced that construction of a bridge over the Chowan River at Winton would be financed from the \$1,500,000 appropriated to Hertford County out of the state bond issue, if approved.

On June 10, 1921, the following road improvements were announced as planned from the state bond issue: A direct route from Ahoskie to Aulander; from Ahoskie to Murfreesboro; and a road for the section beyond St. John's, where the Aulander-Rich Square road intersected a Hertford County road.

To push for public approval of

the proposed state bond issue, State Highway Commissioner Hart of Tarboro and Miss Hattie Berry of Chapel Hill appeared at a "good roads" rally in Winton June 15, 1921.

At this meeting, Hart said his chief ambition was to have his name on a bridge at Winton, which he said "would redeem the 'Lost Colony' of North Carolina," referring to all the far northeastern counties beyond the Chowan.

Miss Berry appeared at another rally in Ahoskie with State Highway Commissioner Chairman J. Page. Later that summer, back she said that the road materials available in Hertford County were unusually good for this part of the state, and that drainage should be adequate and easy to maintain.

So the state went to the polls in August, to vote on the proposed bond issue. It carried overwhelmingly in most counties.

In Hertford County, only Ahoskie Township voted it down by a margin of 23 more against than for.

It was estimated that sand-and-asphalt roads in this county would cost \$15,000 per mile to build.

Bridge Opened
In October, 1922, with appropriate fanfare and a barbecue meant for 58 persons (150 were present) the first all-steel bridge in Hertford County was opened.

This spanned the Wicacoan River west of Harrellsville, and replaced a ferry known as "Boone Harrell's ferry" which had operated there at least as early as the Revolutionary War.

The automobile was here to stay, and the roads had to keep up with it.

In February, 1923, the contract was let for a road from Aulander to Winton, through Ahoskie. Nello Teer bid \$73,373.50 for doing drainage, grading and graveling. T. E. Galloway bid \$35,983 to build the bridges on the road.

This news was greeted with glad tidings from The Herald, where the late J. Roy Parker wrote: "A few of the faithful Fords are still plodding the mud, fording the streams and tearing their entrails out trying to get their chauffeurs from place to place."

But the gaiety was short-lived,

for when highway funds were allocated four years later, in 1927, Hertford County got none. In fact, the road from Aulander to Winton was the sum total of improvements made until 1934.

In that year, Dr. T. E. Browne of Murfreesboro, who was then director of vocational education for the state, mentioned the "very run-down condition" of secondary roads in the state, in a speech made in the county.

The county commissioners seconded his views, with a resolution passed August 9, 1934.

In it, they called for paving of highway 12 from the Virginia line through Murfreesboro, and of highway 35 from Winton to Harrellsville. For some reason, this got results, and the contract was let to pave highway 12 on October 18, 1934.

But Ahoskie, the fastest growing town in the county, was still "in the mud."

In December, 1934, a delegation went to Raleigh, where they appeared before the state highway commission chairman, Capus Wayne. They asked for paving of the highway from Ahoskie to Powellsville. The folks at Powellsville hoped either to have access to a main highway through Colerain to Edenton, or through Ahoskie to Norfolk.

A Hot Fight

This soon produced the hottest fight seen in a long time. One group, represented by Mayor Lloyd J. Lawrence of Murfreesboro, wanted a road from Colerain to Harrellsville to Winton.

Another protested this would cut Ahoskie off, and wanted the route from Colerain to Powellsville to Ahoskie.

Lawrence thundered that this was a move which would lead to moving the courthouse to Ahoskie, dire thought!

The Herald in June, 1935, reported "several communities up in arms and threatening Ahoskie with trade boycotts in the mad scramble for roads."

But the highway commission was at last swayed by the size of Ahoskie and the determination of the women's leaders in Powellsville, and by fall of 1935, had announced they would pave the road by that route "within a year."

Meanwhile, the last promise from the 1921 bond issue had bogged down in 1933.

A section of road from St. John's to Menola had been paved in 1931, but no funds were appropriated in 1933 for that kind of paving. By 1935, the St. John's residents were still waiting for the rest of the connecting link from Menola to Woodland.

During the next decade, even the Menola-Woodland link was completed, to finish the projects started in 1921.

By the spring of 1949, however, roads were in a bad way again—secondary roads, this time. Farmers were stuck on the back roads, unable to get to the main hard-surfaced routes. This was the theme of Kerr Scott's campaign to be Governor, and it was the farmers who voted him in, in hopes of getting better secondary roads.

One of the most anticipated roads was that proposed to link



SYMBOL OF A NEW ERA—The modern lines of a steel bridge spanned Meherrin River at Murfreesboro in the late 1920's, replacing an old timber bridge which had served in the days of the horse and buggy. The bridge joined a wooden causeway (background) across low ground on the Maney's Neck shore. Timber from the old wooden bridge was used in houses built in

Murfreesboro during the period. The Meherrin steel bridge was one of several major transportation facilities built in Hertford County in this period when roadbuilding was opening a new era of transportation and ending the isolation that had caused the area to be called "The Lost Provinces" of North Carolina.

Winton Good Roads Meeting Signal For Start in State Roads Program

WINTON—"Three hundred and sixteen years before the coming of Christ the Roman people had good roads," said Chairman Walter Hart of the newly-appointed State Highway Commission in his speech in 1921, "but our people today have no means to transport their produce to market."

The occasion was a meeting of citizens at Winton interested in the North Carolina Good Roads Association, urging the county to vote for issuance of \$500,000 in bonds for road work. And roads, together with schools, were the major concern of Hertford County and the state in the post-World War I era.

The plea for good roads in the twentieth century was only an echo of the sentiments that had prevailed long before the founding of Hertford County, almost 300 years before. Anglican priests, forced to travel by Indian trails and paths through the wilderness of North Carolina, had complained to the Lords Proprietor as early as 1679 that it was practically impossible to move about overland.

The Lords Proprietor, in turn, complained to the English government that colonial governors were not opening roads fast enough to encourage settlement south of Albemarle Sound.

The rich planters of the tide-water areas, not only needed means of transporting their turpentine, cotton and corn to shipping points, but needed roads as a means of fleeing possible Indian attacks.

North Carolina laws of the first quarter of the 18th century reflected the concern of the people over the bad roads and wide expanses of unbridged waters.

Cheshire Permit

A permit to keep a ferry over the Meherrin River near its junction with the Chowan River was obtained by John Cheshire in 1718, the express purpose of the utility being the convenience of intercolonial travel.

Because the colonies were jealous of their exports, each had high tariffs against produce coming from neighboring colonies. Ferry keepers were assigned the duty of requiring passports for all persons carrying the colony's borders.

The first interstate road probably ran from the head of navigation on the Pamlico River to Suffolk. A second ran through Currituck towards Norfolk and a third connected the Roanoke River with points in Virginia. A main road to the Governor's office in

Murphy's suggestions were feasible: a few main state roads; a network of roads for county control; and a feeder road system kept up by private land owners.

The large eastern planters would not support a plan so democratic, widespread and costly, however, and what followed at public expense was done by subsidizing navigation companies and other private ventures.

In 1815, Archibald D. Murphy, state senator from Orange County, offered the resolution in the General Assembly that "it is expedient to provide more efficiently for the improvement of the inland navigation of the state."

This was shrewdly worded, both to catch the support of eastern legislators concerned with water travel, and of western legislators concerned more with roads.

In his 1819 "Memoir on internal improvements," Murphy outlined a comprehensive plan for a statewide transportation system. He insisted the state would not advance without development of marketing centers to which farmers could move produce without great difficulty.

Murphy was named to what may be considered North Carolina's first "highway commission." His group was to proceed with an engineering survey.

The chairman, Peter Browne, was sent to England in 1818 to find a competent engineer, and accordingly hired Hamilton Fulton at a salary of 1200 pounds yearly. Within a short time, however, the legislature was manipulating members of the commission to force Fulton out.

Fulton thought three phases of

valuable crops rotting in North Carolina fields for lack of means to move them to market.

In 1848, Gov. William A. Graham suggested that use of "plank" roads be studied. As a result, some middle and western counties built "turnpikes" of planks laid as a foundation for topsoil. Interest waned again, and not until 1879 did the modern movement for better public roads evidence itself in the passage of the Mecklenburg road law.

This law provided for working of public roads (at first in Mecklenburg County only) partly by taxing and partly by the old labor system. The tax revenue was to be not less than seven cents or more than 20 cents on the \$100 worth of property, and a labor assessment of four days for all able-bodied citizens between the ages of 18 and 45 was to be made, with management in the hands of township authorities.

It was February, 1893, however, before the North Carolina Road Improvement Association was organized and the old Roman principles of drainage and construction were revived as suggestions. State Geologist Cain told the group of the "importance of grading and draining the public roads properly, by raising the roadbeds above the water flow and putting stone drains under them and alongside them."

The type of road construction initiated by the Scotch engineer, MacAdam, met with great success in the United States during the latter half of the 19th century. Because "macadam" roads used

See WINTON, Page 6



"NEW" BRIDGE—When it was constructed in the late 1930's, Ahoskie's Memorial Drive road and overpass was one of the Roanoke-Chowan's most advanced transportation arteries. For nearly a decade after it was built, the road and the railroad overpass were known as the "new bridge." The road and bridge were named "Memorial Drive and Bridge" after the Second World War. This photograph shows the "new" bridge a few days after it was finished.



BEFORE BRIDGES—This was Winton's Chowan River crossing in the early 1920's. For more than 200 years, ferry flats operated across the river at this point. Note the Tin Lizzie automobile. When it came, the use of the ferry was doomed and the Roanoke-Chowan was lifted from its transportation isolation by the construction of bridges. The picture was taken from the Winton shore as the cable ferry rolled into dock.



STREET PAVING—With the era of the automobile causing unprecedented demand for roadbuilding, Hertford County towns were also ready for the new era. Street paving projects in most communities began in the 1920's. This view is of Ahoskie's West Main Street (looking inward midtown) as it was just before hardtop went down in 1925.