

"Axle Grease" Roads Puzzle Engineers In Lost Provinces

Heavy Deposits of Valuable Mica, In Pulverized Form, Worst Hindrance To Building Roads In Some Mountain Sections; Chairman Page May Turn It Bottom Upwards; the Future Grand Tour of North Carolina.

By BEN DIXON MacNEILL.
"It looks like we'll have to turn this road bottom upwards," concluded Chairman Frank Page after he had seen the untoward prospects of ever making anything of the road that leads out of Spruce Pine toward Plimtree, Minne-apolis, Newlands and points east across the Lost Provinces. The road has defied all the canons of engineering, and no way that has been tried has proved its worth.

The answer is mica. Within those great hills that rise tier on tier in that region of the Lost Provinces there are vast deposits of mica, of a quality and a quantity to make many people rich. But unfortunately it is not all in lumps inside the mountains. Though un-enumeraled ages it has been crumbling up, and in places the soil would away 50 per cent mica.

As most people used to know, when a farm wagon was a very much more esteemed vehicle and axle grease could be bought almost anywhere, mica was used much for the making of grease, and mighty good grease it made. Mr. Rockefeller made some of his millions out of it, and that ought to be proof that mica is not entirely without the qualities of a lubricant.

Overdrawn a little, perhaps, but picture a road built of axle grease. Manifestly it is not a proper thing to make a road out of, but there is as much mica in a quart of dirt off that road as there was ever in a quart of 8.0 axle grease. It is a terrible slick road in wet weather and in dry weather, it takes on the characteristics of a feather bed minus the ticking.

Wherein lies the problem that will make Charles H. Upham and Frank Page knit their eyebrows and cudgel their brains. A feather bed is not a recognized sub-grade for a road, nor is axle grease a thing to surface them with. More than a year now the Commission has been struggling with that road, and still it takes nearly four hours to negotiate 25 miles of it. It is graded out to a splendid grade, but—

Originally it was thought to put a waterbound macadam road there, but that mica soil swallows eleven inches of stone like a sub-grade of quicksand. It won't do. The light, feathery stuff works its way through to the top and presently the stone is too deep to be of any use. Concrete is no better, and now Mr. Page is thinking that maybe it would do as well to put down a layer of asphalt, a layer of rock and maybe more asphalt. Just turn it bottom upward.

Grading down a mountain is comparatively simple from the standpoint of an engineer, though somewhat costly, and demanding of time. Mica is the thing that will hinder road building in that particular section of the Lost Provinces that lies within eastern Yancey, most of Mitchell and part of Avery counties. Probably nowhere else in the United States is that handicap to be met. Mica contaminates every particle of soil that it touches, and mica is very much at home in that section.

Eventually the road will be built. Mr. Page is too much kin to the member of the family upon whom they tell the cat story to be dismayed by it. It is said of this other Page that when he was a lad of five years old he was observed endeavoring to induce a cat to ride in a wheelbarrow. The cat was disinclined to vehicular divortment. For a full hour this Page would patiently put the cat in the wheelbarrow, and the cat would jump out before he could get the craft going.

Finally the child, with the utmost deliberation, picked the cat up by the hind legs and banged its head against the fence, and with fatal results. Every one of the nine lives expired on the spot, and this Page dumped the corpse into the wheelbarrow with, "Now, I reckon you'll ride." Eventually people will ride over that road that so far refuses to be built.

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ion. A part of the entourage of the Commission, journeying to Spruce Pine took passage with Francis Clarkson, who in wartime was an instructor of the Marine Corps air force. An airplane would have been better, and no doubt less taxing upon the nerves of the passenger. Airplanes at least have wings, but the Clarkson flier had not a wing to its name, though many were the times when they seemed imperatively desirable.

This bottom-upwards road is a link in the great highway that a year from now will enable a tourist to swing westward from Winston-Salem through the Lost Provinces, down through the county of Yancey and of Madison to Asheville, and turn east again, following somewhat the border line of South Carolina toward Charlotte, and thence over the new Raleigh-Charlotte highway. In time it may come to be the Grand Tour of Tarheelia.

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building the road is comparatively simple. The mountains abound in stone, and in the creek bottoms there are millions of tons of small, smooth rocks that can be crushed and made into road surfaces. In other places there are vast deposits of decayed granite that makes a surface very much finer than the best sand-clay types known to the east.

With the present state of transportation in that land of the Lost Provinces, a concrete road is next to impossible. There is an little sand up there as there is clay on the sand dunes along the bars of Hatteras; both sand and concrete would have to be hauled for many miles, and there is nothing to haul them over. It could be done, of course, but the cost would be prohibitive.

The rock is there for the taking, stone crushers can be put in, and material produced right on the spot. Over

this, when it is rolled and packed, is spread a coat of asphalt, and the result is a road which there is no better in the world. It is the type of road that will be built in the mountains, except where conditions will permit the use of decayed granite.

Building such roads takes time, even down in the lowlands where conditions are more advantageous. It will take longer in the mountains, but eventually the Lost Provinces will be paved. The Commission has adopted the wise policy of allowing a grade to settle for a year before any sort of permanent or semi-permanent surface is laid on. Most of the Winston-Salem-Asheville road beyond the mountains through the Lost Provinces has been under construction for a year or more, but the permanent surfaces will not be laid until next year.

All along the 30-odd miles between Newlands, the capital of Avery county, to Spruce Pine and Burnsville, bridges

have been built over every stream, and many of them sit away from the present roads as if they might never be intended for use. Grading goes on apace, and slowly, the road takes form. Another year and the Provinces will be redeemed.

The road turns at Boone's cross-roads, in Wilkes county, and one wing of it swings up across Surry to Alleghany and Ashe and southward to join the Boone-Newlands link near the line of Mitchell and Avery. The Ashe-Alle-

ghany link was ordered built, and has been under construction for more than a year. Despite this fact, some restive citizens who wanted the road built elsewhere claim that the first thing Governor Doughson did after becoming a member of the Commission was to order his own road built. That is the only criticism that has been raised against his administration, and that is with-

out ground. Mr. Page directed the road built 15 months ago.
(This is the fourth of the Lost Provinces series. The fifth will appear tomorrow.)

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