

Talk given at meeting of The Town Hall, 123 West 43rd St., N.Y.C. Feb. 21, 1931.

Roads to Prosperity

By H. S. Fairbank, Chief, Division of Information,
U. S. Bureau of Public Roads

Twenty years ago this year I was a member of a small party, commissioned to spread the word about road improvement, over the section traversed by the lines of the Southern Railway System.

We travelled on a "Good Roads Train", which the railroad company operated at its own expense in the expectation that the economic stimulus that would follow an improvement of the public roads in its territory would redound to its benefit in increase of freights and passengers.

Every few miles we would stop at a town and hold a "Good Roads" meeting, after we had gathered together as much of the populace as we could crowd into our "lecture car"; and moving, in this way, from town to town and State to State we came to North Carolina.

Now, at that time, in the Dominion of Tarheelia there were large parts that were virtually roadless tracts. For years and years, under the ministrations of the local road supervisors and their gangs of poll-tax laborers, the wagon tracks that passed for roads had become all but impassable, and there were whole counties in the western, mountainous section that were, in consequence, so inaccessible from the rest of the State that they were generally termed the Lost Provinces.

Here, then, was what we conceived to be practically virgin territory - a territory in which whatever reasonable effort we could inspire was certain to yield substantial benefit; so we set about our task of education with missionary zeal. But, to our surprise, we were met in many places, not with incredulity only, but with active hostility and a good bit of heckling; and after a number of such occurrences we experienced a sense of defeat such as must have been felt by the bright young theologian who, by way of acquiring experience in his art, was sent to preach to a small rural congregation to which he was a stranger.

In his first sermon he dilated upon the manifold blessings vouchsafed to those who walk in the way of the Lord, and to substantiate his promises he turned, when the sermon was over, to the Amen corner, for a testimony of experience that would add the last convincing appeal that might be needed to win over the hesitant sinners.

Selecting a little man of mild appearance seated in one of the front rows he singled him out and said, "And, now, my good man, won't you rise and tell us what the Lord has done for you?" The choice was a bit unfortunate. It had fallen upon Mr. Simpson who was the afflicted possessor of a club foot, a hunchback, and a hare lip. And when, after some uncertainty, he was at length persuaded that it was really he that was called, he rose and said, "Well, if its me your askin', I should think you could see He's pretty durn near ruined me!"

Nearly everywhere we stopped in North Carolina, on that Good Roads Train of twenty years ago our appeal was met with just about that same response. After expounding the benefits that would follow the rather limited measure of road betterment we proposed, some Tarheel was certain to stand up and put the fatal question, "Jist haow much is all this yere agoin' ter cost?" To which we would lightly and somewhat conservatively reply, "Oh, about a thousand dollars a mile;" and then brace ourselves for the invariable and final answer. "Waal, we caint do hit; hit 'ould ruin us. Reckon these yere roads we got is good enough fer us; and what you want ter git us ter do is fix 'em up fer these yere autymobiles. Waal, we haint agoin' ter do hit."

In vain we would expostulate, and explain that they were already, as Mr. Simpson remarked, "pretty durn near ruined," and that what we proposed would help them; that they could easily afford the small betterment we advocated, and actually could not afford longer to do without it. We were beaten and we knew it, and if the smoke from our engine wasn't trailing the tracks as we emerged from the State it was considerably lighter than our spirits.

That was twenty years ago. At that time the description of North Carolina, in relation to her neighbors, Virginia and South Carolina, as "a valley of humility between two mountains of conceit," was still apposite in the economic sense at least. But

North Carolina has found herself since then. Her people, too, have become proud, and with reason. Her industries have burgeoned and produced abundantly. Her institutions have taken on new life. Until, like her forty-seven sister States, she was numbed a bit by the depression, she was highly prosperous. And we have it - not from enthusiasts, not from propagandists, but from sober students of economics and sociology - that of all the factors that have contributed to the great change in her condition the most influential of all are the splendid roads she has built; built at a cost many times greater than the modicum her citizens feared to invest twenty years ago; and at a cost which has been paid in its entirety from the special revenues contributed by her motor vehicle owners.

Roads to prosperity? A people at work is ordinarily a prosperous people. By this simple and direct test we know that the building of roads and the vehicles that use them, the production of the fuel they consume, and the transportation of all the commodities involved make in the aggregate an enormous contribution to the prosperity of the United States.

In the year 1929, the latest for which the figures are available, and the year just preceding the onset of the depression, it is estimated that the construction and maintenance of rural roads alone gave employment directly or indirectly to 1,500,000 men. In the same year the manufacture of motor vehicles, parts, and tires

employed directly and indirectly 4,500,000 men; and the production and distribution of the 14,000,000,000 gallons of gasoline consumed by highway vehicles in the same year gave direct or indirect employment to certainly a million more workers. Fully 7,000,000 of the nation's workers employed directly or indirectly, in the last year before the depression, in the creation of rural roads and motor vehicles and the production and distribution of motor fuel - 7,000,000 of a total working population of 48,000,000, one in seven! I believe that fact will astonish you. Yet it is a conservative measure of the enormous contribution which highway transportation and the elements that enter into it are making to the prosperity of the United States.

Railroad freight car loadings are indicative of industry and prosperity. Measured by this standard what is the contribution of the highway transportation industry? Again referring to the year 1929 this business - itself a business of transportation - called upon the railroads for the transportation of more than three and a half million carloads of commodities - including the materials of road construction, all the elements entering into the manufacture of vehicles, the vehicles themselves, and the gasoline consumed by vehicles in use. The revenue accruing to the railroads from this movement was in excess of \$550,000,000, which was more than one-ninth of the total freight revenue of Class 1 railroads.

All these figures I have given you are for the year 1929. They reflect the condition of the highway industry in the year just preceding the depression. What happened to it during the last disastrous year? As everyone knows, the motor vehicle industry slumped about as much as other manufacturing industries. Road construction continued, not only unabated, but at an augmented rate. Although the final figures are not yet available, we know that the year 1930 was the largest road building year in our history. Gasoline consumption by motor vehicles continued without abatement, indicating a use of the roads at least equal to the usage of the peak year of 1929. In fact, the consumption of gasoline in the first six months of 1930 - over 6,800,000,000 gallons - was greater by more than 300,000,000 gallons than the consumption in the corresponding period of 1929; and although the last reports for the year are not available, it is certain that the year's total consumption will not fall below that of 1929 and will probably show a slight increase.

But 1930, with all its troubles, has passed. We now look ahead to 1931. What are the prospects for the coming year?

I can speak for road building only. We confidently expect a bigger year than the last; a total expenditure on rural roads alone - not including the expenditure for city streets - of nearly two billion dollars; employment direct and indirect for close to two million men.

Thanks to the emergency appropriation of \$80,000,000 made by Congress in December, to be advanced to the States and used by them to match the regular Federal-aid road appropriations, we are getting an early start. States, which otherwise would have had to wait the appropriation of funds by their legislatures have been able with the funds advanced by the Federal Government to start their road construction work earlier than ever before.

The new Federal-aid road projects approved at the end of January, on which construction is now beginning, involved more than 3,700 miles - 1,900 miles greater than at the same time a year ago, or an increase of more than 100 per cent.

This week our reports show that \$30,000,000 of the \$80,000,000 emergency appropriation has been allotted to specific projects on which work is beginning at once, and this implies an additional expenditure of a little more than \$30,000,000 of regular Federal Aid to match the \$30,000,000 of emergency funds - a total of more than \$60,000,000.

During the current year we expect to spend, under the Federal-aid plan, and under the joint supervision of the Bureau of Public Roads and the 48 State highway departments, \$300,000,000, of which \$210,000,000 will be contributed by the Federal Government and the balance by the States. We anticipate that this portion of the year's total highway program will give employment, directly and indirectly to about 300,000 men; and although this work represents only about

a sixth of the probable total rural road expenditure for the year, it will be especially beneficial in contributing to the relief of unemployment because it is getting under way early.

In the State of Arkansas, for example - worst hit of all our commonwealths by the combined effects of drought and depression - there will be actually under contract by March first, as a result of the Federal advance, \$5,000,000 worth of new work - work that will employ all told at least 5,000 men and support at least 20,000 people, nearly all of them in Arkansas itself, because practically all the materials for these roads will be produced within the State.

So, in the field of road construction, we not only look forward to the most active year in our history, but we also know that the work will get under way this year at an earlier date than in any previous year and will soon afford a very substantial opportunity for the employment of labor.

All of which - to the extent that a very ambitious road program can provide it - means prosperity of the sort that is typified by the full dinner pail. In the midst of depression that is perhaps a heartening thought. But this depression is a passing phase of our life as a nation; and there is much more to this great road building effort upon which as a nation, we are so busily engaged than the filling of today's dinner pails. This

road building looks to the future. It is preparing the new means of transportation without which our future economic development would be hindered. It is building a closer network of streets in a country that has reached the point where it must have such a network or accept a lowering of its pace of progress.

We are witnessing today an augmentation of our transportation system comparable to that which began a hundred years ago in the building of the railroads, with this difference: That, whereas a hundred years ago it was the long distances that we set about to span, today it is the myriad short distances to which we are turning an improving hand. A hundred years ago we had before us the settlement of dominions; today we are concerned with the intensive development of acres.

We built the railroads and they prospered us greatly because we needed railroads. Today we still need the railroads as much as we ever did; but we need also a supplementary service which they can not afford and which the motor vehicle, operating on improved highways, is showing itself to be ideally fitted for.

Imagine that in this City of New York with all its present population and industry you had for your transportation system the subways and a mile-wide mesh of paved streets with all the intermediate streets under-improved, and you will have a somewhat exaggerated picture of what the condition of the United States of the future would be without a developed rural road system.

It is significant that in recent years the curve of our national production has continued steadily upward, but the curve of railroad freight tonnage has turned toward the horizontal. Have the railroads been deprived of tonnage that should have been theirs? I do not believe it. Far more likely, I think it, that these latest increments of production would have been added with great difficulty if at all had there not been the new facilities of transportation provided by the motor truck and the improved roads.

This week we have been informed by the Bureau of Railway Economics that the rail passenger income in 1930 dropped to the 1906 level. In part the result of the depression, that falling off in passenger income is perhaps mainly the result of the people's preference for travel in its own private automobiles. Unquestionably, the new facilities bring with them problems of adjustment to the older agencies; problems that must be met with intelligence, with fairness, with sound decision free of bias, and with the determination to utilize each within its proper field to the utmost.

We must find the way to keep our efficient railroads, the while we continue to build up the supplementary service of our highways, for in the years ahead we shall need them both as our Roads to Prosperity.

* * * * *