

Story for American Civic Association

The Highway Departments Turn To Beauty

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Four major movements are needed to beautify and enhance the usefulness of the highways. They are: First, the complete elimination of commercial advertising signs not only those within the right of ways but those on private property along the right of ways; second, the removal of oil filling stations, "hot dog" and lunch stands and roadside markets that encroach upon the right of ways, and regulation of the distance from right of ways at which such establishments may be located on private property; third, the planting of trees and shrubs along the roadsides; and fourth, the location, design, and construction of the highways in such manner as to preserve the natural beauty of the countryside.

While the majority of States more or less rigidly regulate billboard erection within the highway limits, such regulation only tends to force the signs off the right of ways onto adjoining private property. There they are concentrated at curves and rail and highway intersections because such locations - the most dangerous possible - are the most favorable for display purposes. That they have remained as long as they have as a menace to motorists and as a blot upon the landscape is a national disgrace.

A growing resentment against this disgrace is manifest in the increasing strength of the opposition by women's clubs, civic and

patriotic organizations. These organizations have been especially active in appealing to the lawmakers of the States and in demanding proper regulation to force the billboards off the highways and keep them off. They are now joined by newspapers and popular magazines, which are taking up the battle in their editorial columns.

Producers of some of the better products so advertised have become convinced of the fairness of the protests registered and have ordered their signs off.

A surprisingly few States have specific legislation concerning the erection of oil filling stations, "hot dog" and lunch stands and roadside markets. A few prohibit them on the right of ways and require State licenses for their operation. A large number which have no specific laws do keep them off the right of ways by exercising their right of jurisdiction within the roadway limits.

In some States the large oil companies have cooperated with the State highway departments by keeping their stations far enough from the right of ways to prevent obstruction of traffic by the vehicles that stop for motor supplies. These companies have concluded that a reasonable regard for the public safety makes for better business for the stations.

For a number of years, women's clubs, and civic and patriotic organizations in some of the States have been working for State legislation governing roadside planting. State highway departments have

cooperated as much as they were able; but the laws of most of the States do not permit the expenditure of highway funds for the purpose. However, as the beautification idea gains momentum, State laws will doubtless be amended to take care of this present lack. On May 21, 1928, an amendment to the Federal Highway Act was passed granting permission to use Federal funds for wayside planting of trees on the Federal-aid highway system.

In a few States organized attention is given to roadside beautification. The Massachusetts Department of Public Works is empowered by law to make roadside improvements, the work including such planting, replacements, and care as may be necessary. When a road is laid out as a State highway, it is generally made sufficiently wide to provide an area on each side of the traveled portion for roadside improvement. No tree, shrub, or plant within such a highway can be cut, removed, or new ones added without a permit from the highway department.

Connecticut has a landscape division which is operating throughout the whole State. It maintains all trees on State highways. Within the next two years it expects to spend some \$500,000 landscaping cuts, bridge sites and abandoned sections of right of ways.

California has some 585 miles of highways on which trees have been planted. The State has also made a survey of areas adjacent to the roadways, which can be beautified by the planting of trees and vines. The survey also included the treatment of natural growth to

preserve and emphasize its beauty. In each of California's ten highway districts, sections approximately a half mile long are being selected as model sections.

Delaware for a number of years has been planting shade trees along the highways where the right of ways were wide enough, and has planted Rambler rose bushes along practically all the guard rails. An effort has been made to keep the roadsides free from litter and to have them mown rather frequently during the summer season.

The State highway department of Missouri recently inaugurated a plan for beautifying the highways. It employed an experienced landscape architect and offered his consulting services and advice free to any interested community, civic club or patriotic organization. Many of the towns became interested, and held meetings, at which civic and patriotic clubs assumed responsibility for beautifying some of the highways.

A campaign was also started to interest the owners of roadside camps, filling stations and parks in the improvement of their property adjacent to the highways. The county school superintendents of Missouri are attempting to interest residents of rural districts with a view to the landscaping of school yards. A number of land owners have inquired of the department about the beautification plan.

In Wisconsin, the State highway department is planning to plant trees along new projects where old trees have been destroyed, the expense to be met with construction funds. By starting in this small

way, the State hopes that the legislature will see the necessity for this kind of work and establish a separate department to handle it.

Iowa has a bill before the State legislature whereby the maintenance of primary roads will include maintenance of the entire right of way in a neat and attractive condition, including planting along the roadsides.

In Kentucky, the State highway department has conferred with the State forester and with horticultural societies with a view to obtaining trees and shrubs to be planted and cared for by the highway department.

In Nevada, the State highway officials are taking a horticulturist over the State to try to formulate some plan by which the highways may be beautified.

In the semi-arid regions of the Southwest, trees and shrubs can only be planted in the irrigated valleys and then only to a limited extent. Beautification of roadsides in these sections consists in keeping them free of litter.

In the Dakotas, and neighboring States, where snow fall is heavy, all that can be done toward beautification is to encourage the cutting of weeds and bushes and a general cleaning up of the property along the highways. To plant trees or vines within the right of ways would cause obstruction of the roads in winter by drifted snow.

In several States, women's clubs, civic and patriotic organizations have agreed to furnish trees and shrubs for planting if the State highway department will plant and take care of them. In some of these States, the departments have secured permission from land owners to plant trees on property adjacent to the roads.

Highway engineers are now giving much greater consideration than formerly to the development of road location so as to bring out and preserve the natural beauty of the locality, and to supplement it by landscaping devices where it is naturally deficient. This consideration of the aesthetic viewpoint is particularly noticeable in the new road locations developed in the national parks and forests by the Bureau of Public Roads, the National Park Service and the Forest Service. But the principle is rapidly being adopted so far as practicable in the improvement of county and State highways.

In the construction of highways much can be done to preserve and enhance the natural beauty by intelligent clearing of the right of ways so as to save specimen trees and develop vistas of outstanding magnificence. Bridges and culverts can be built to harmonize with the general character of the landscape.

After the road has been built, much can be done by intelligent planting under the supervision of the State highway commissions. Care must be exercised, however, to avoid obstructing the view of intersecting roads, unnecessary interference with the cultivation of adjacent farm land, and planting effects foreign to the natural character of the locality.