

Highway Progress

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Busses now travel from New York to Los Angeles in ¹¹⁴100 hours elapsed time over three optional routes and by several other routes in a slightly longer time. In 1910 - little more than two decades ago - a pathfinder for the American Automobile Association, traveling with a commission as special agent of the Office of Public Roads, needed 49 days to make the same trip, and reported at its conclusion a tale of high adventure on almost impassable roads. The contrast of these two experiences, separated in time by a bare score of years, offers, it seems to me, a most enlightening commentary on the progress that has been made in the improvement of our highways.

For those more statistically minded there is equally convincing evidence in a comparison of the mileage and types of roads existing in 1914 with the similar record for 1932. In 1914 only about 10 percent of the 2,446,000 miles of rural roads in the United States had been improved, and of the 257,300 surfaced miles only 14,442 miles were improved with high-type surfaces. By 1932 the total mileage had grown to 3,040,000 which was 29 percent surfaced and of the 875,300 surfaced miles more than 157,000 miles were of high type. Besides more than trebling the surfaced road mileage of the country, the work of less than

two decades has multiplied the high-type mileage many times. Nor is the entire story told by figures of mileage, for in addition to the remarkable extension of the length of improved highway, the even more striking fact is the great improvements that have occurred in the width and design of the roads of all types.

Important social changes materially affected by highway improvement have taken place in the last quarter century, particularly in the mileage of mail service over rural roads, the consolidation of schools made possible by better roads for the transportation of school children rapidly and comfortably, and the tremendous increase in the number and speed of motor vehicles. As a result of these changes an improvement has come in rural living conditions made possible by better highway transportation facilities.

Highway safety has become a matter of major gravity and the part played by adequate road improvement in providing safe travel conditions is important. Adequacy of highways involves not only the width, thickness and character of the surface but it has to do with the elimination of dangerous highway grade intersections with both railroads and other highways, the provision of footpaths along crowded roads, particularly near cities, and the removal of traffic hazards such as blind curves, narrow bridges and pavements, and other similar features of highways that add to the dangers of travel. The development of the roadsides so as to add to their beauty and convenience is also an improvement that has been begun and which can aid in making safer highways.

In the field of highway administration the concentration of authority in the State highway departments so that the main State roads could be improved as a connected system of highways was the outstanding feature of the period. Funds available for main roads were augmented by Federal aid on important sections of the State systems beginning in 1916 and continuing in increasing measure. The National Industrial Recovery Act and other succeeding acts of Congress increased the total Federal contribution of rural roads and, in addition, provided for Federal participation in the improvement of main routes across cities and the secondary or feeder roads. The enlarged Federal contribution to road improvement was made to provide work for unemployed men because highway building has come to be considered as an essential public work of particularly outstanding value in providing employment during times of business stress.

Past highway progress is evident to the most casual observer. The future program holds even greater needs than the past, especially at what might be called the two ends of the highway system. At the city end there is urgent need of a further enhancement of the serviceability of the great intercity arteries, not only to keep their capacity abreast of the increased demand but actually to reduce the loss of life, which is the appalling result of the congestion and present inadequacy of many of these main routes. At the country end there is need of the improvement of a selected body of the more important secondary roads.

The recent Federal legislation makes provision for the extension of Federal aid to the improvement of these more important secondary roads

and serves to emphasize the need for a study of all highways to discover what road improvements are justified and when they should be made. The choice and improvement of the main State roads has been rather obvious; these have been the principal concern of the past two decades; now we have before us the selection of the most important secondary routes. These secondary routes must be selected from the 2,640,000 miles of rural roads in the United States not included in the State highway systems.

As a first step there is need in each State of a traffic survey directed to the discovery of the new roads to be built that are justified on reasonable grounds of economy or social usefulness. If any of the State highway departments now lack legislative authority, such authority should be granted at the coming sessions of State legislatures. To aid such highway planning the recently enacted Hayden-Cartwright Act makes available up to $1\frac{1}{2}$ percent of the funds apportioned to the States. There is no better use to which sums can be put in the present stage of highway development.

The action of our legislatures is consistent with what is understood to be in the public interest. In preparing future highway programs they will respond properly to facts presented for their guidance. It is for the purpose of supplying such facts that the making of traffic surveys of the type suggested is indispensable and far-reaching legislative action with respect to local road administration and finance should be deferred until the essential facts can thus be obtained.