

1.

"That is one political job I would take if it were offered me."

With these words I walked away from Dick Miles and Charlie Cooper one day in Rotary Club and started for Houston, Texas, little knowing what I had let myself in for.

When I returned, Harry Harrington called up and informed me that I was a County Road Commissioner, that I should immediately arm myself with a box of cigars and a box of candy bars (some Supervisors don't smoke) and get up to Grand Haven that morning to meet the Supervisors and be sure and bring the Candy and Cigars. They will be expecting them.

How I was elected I will never know. I was acquainted at that time with at most, 6 of the 29 there.

Well, I passed the Candy and Cigars, met everyone and told them what a surprise it was, and that it would be a pleasure to serve them and Ottawa County.

The following Thursday I appeared at the County Road Commission Office and met the personnel, the other two Commissioners last. They immediately informed me along with other rules and regulations that we were an independant body, that the Supervisors had no authority over us and that our money came from the State and not the Supervisors. This was I thought a rather odd statement, but I kept my mouth closed and absorbed all they had to tell me. I was entitled to 7 cents a mile on my car and meals away from home on Commission business (Conventions, etc.). This much I remembered from my first day.

The following Sunday evening the phone rang. Joel St. John on East End Avenue said a tree had fallen across the road, was I the Road Commissioner and would I do something right away. I would. I got in my car and drove down there. Someone had started a grass fire which had burned the tree (it was dead) and it had fallen across the road. At this early date I did not know where to call anyone to handle this situation so I got out of my car and with my Sunday Clothes on removed this tree from the traveled part of the road. The tree was possibly 4" in diameter.

Shortly after this we had a thaw. The roads got muddy. I got a call. The girl was pregnant. The road in front of her house was impassible, would I fix it. I would and did.

(Mrs. Van Oss story)

Mrs. VanOss, who lives at the end of East 26th Street, in Holland Twp., just east of Baker Furniture called and said:

"Mr. Lamb, you're the Road Commissioner, aren't you? Well, I'M tired of getting the run around. I've called both the City Manager, Mr. H. Holt, the County garage and I'm not getting the action that I'm entitled too as a taxpayer. I've been in Florida and my mother here all winter and the job they did is sure terrible. The other day I even got my car stuck in the sand and had to be pushed out. As a tax payer, that's a terrible way to be treated and I'm sure going to do something about it."

I finally got a chance to open my mouth. I asked her where she lived and what job she had reference too.

Off she went again, "It seems to me that it is your duty to check things like this and see that a good job is done."

At this time I had to butt in and again and ask what job she was talking about.

She then informed me that the City or the County or Somebody had been out and done some work and left a terrible job, that she had called Mr. Holt, that he had said that the work being in Holland Twp. was under the jurisdiction of the County and that she should call the Zeeland County Garage. She had called them and no one had done anything about it. Why just the other day she got stuck in the sand and had to be pushed out.

I wasn't getting any place this way, so I thought I had better get over and see what the trouble was. I asked her where she lived and finally got the address. It was at the end of 26th Street in Holland, Township. I drove over at noon. Not a soul was at home, but someone had been in with grading equipment and graded the turn around at the end of the road. I got out and checked the job, and so far as I was concerned it was quite satisfactory. I breathed a sigh of relief and thought to myself, well the County has been in and taken care of the job between the time Mrs. VanOss called and the time that I got there, so she'll think that I'm really on the ball, so I proceeded to forget about the whole thing.

Bang---the phone rang again the next morning. Mrs. VanOss was on the phone. She had been stuck again. I thought how in the World did that woman manage to get stuck on that turn around. I told her that I had been out, that it appeared that the County had already been there, and had done what I thought was a pretty good job. Wham--that was the wrong thing to say. Again I had to listen to a lecture on the morals as they should be of a public official. I learned that she owned property in Florida as well, and that she had never been treated there as she had been treated here. Boy, how I wished that it was winter again, and she would be in Florida. She informed me that she had called Mr. Holt again, that she was going to get a petition signed and see if something couldn't be done about the way we were treating the taxpayers.

I finally got in long enough to suggest that Mr. Holt was a city official, that her property was in Holland Twp., so it was unlikely that he was responsible.

Mrs. VanOss informed me, "Well that's what he told me too, but it seems to me somebody should do something. It's a disgrace. Why my mother is sick in bed, and it's a good thing she can't see what you have done to her flowers. The poor sole. I insist that you have it fixed before she is well enough to get out of bed and see how you've torn up that nice bank."

I couldn't remember any flowers nor any bank. So I again questioned Mrs. VanOss as to where she lived. She gave me the same address as I had had before. I then told her that I didn't remember that we had spoiled any flowers, nor did I recall any bank."

"Why! You certainly did spoil them. You ask any of the neighbors, across the street or those next door. You ask them if that bank wasn't beautiful, my mother spent most all her spare time working on that bank and she would be heart broken if she should see it now."

Now I was completely floored. So I asked if I could come over to talk to her.

No, she was going over to her mother's.

Going over to her MOTHER'S, alas came the dawn. I then asked just where was this work she had referred to.

"Why over at my mothers of course. That job you did to drain that low section near the Dutch Boy Bakery."

This is the first time that I had known that I had been looking on the wrong side of town. Her mothers place was on 17th Street across from Rezelman Paint Co. The job she had been referring to was the drain tile that had been put in by the City even though it was outside the City Limits. It was done for their convenience to prevent further flash flooding of the low section near the Federal Bakery.

I told Mrs. VanOss that I thought she had reference to her property on E. 26th Street.

A complete turn about accured on her part. She now realized that she had never given the correct location, and she was very apologetic.

I did go out to 17th Street to check the complaint, by this time the City was beginning to grade the entire tile line. I could see that Mrs. VanOss had had a just complaint, up to that time the tile line had been merely backfilled with sand, and it was very understandable that she had been stuck. The City did complete the grading and they also resodded the bank that had been somewhat chewed away. The job must have passed Mrs. VanOss's inspection. I never heard from her again, and so far I am unaware that she ever had the petition circulated.

It often seems that a road commissioner's relationship with the public consists entirely of listening to kicks, squawks, beefs and bellows. Complaints are always with us, and always will be. They are of various types, according to kinds of men--and women--that make them. As I have considered many complaints that we have had to deal with during my short experience as a road commissioner, it has seemed to me that I could distinguish three groups or classes of complainers.

The first of these is the kicker that I will call the Little Hitler. He is always, in his own opinion, the most important man in his community; and his community is of course the most important in the county. He doesn't come in to ask for something; he comes in to tell the road commission what to do--what it has to do. If he isn't immediately given just what he wants, he becomes noisy and threatening. He is going to appeal to the Board of Supervisors, or go to Court. He is going to see that the Commissioners are thrown out of office, and probably into jail. He refuses to be satisfied with anything less than full compliance with his requests, no matter how unreasonable they may be.

In contrast with the Little Hitler is the complainer that I shall call the Smooth Talker. His technique is to flatter the Commissioners, to tell them what a wonderful job they are doing, how he has been supporting their program in every possible way, and how much tax he pays. Presently, it develops that he has a piece of road that needs just a load or two of gravel. Actually, of course, what he is after is grading and surfacing half a mile.

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More common than either of these types is the third, which I call the Whiner. This man is abused and discriminated against. His neighbor got a culvert and he didn't. The road in the next township is being maintained better than his is. Everybody is against him, especially the road commission. In the extreme form the whiner becomes the Weeper. He is really bad off.

The sad thing about all these complaints is that most of them are justified. Our people need better roads than we can give them, deserve better maintenance than we are able to provide, with our present tax income. We have made studies, and I am sure most of you have done the same thing, which show that our increased revenue from the recent road legislation barely balances our increased cost of operation, increased cost of fuel, equipment, repair parts, materials, and labor. In terms of what our tax income will buy today, we are barely as well off, in some ways not as well off, as we were in 1950 and before. This is not to imply that the increase in income resulting from the new legislation isn't a tremendous help, of course. Without it we would be in a bad way indeed. But the fact is that if we are to carry out any kind of improved or expanded programs of construction and maintenance, we must look to other sources of income to provide the money. If we can't obtain other income, we can't do much more than try to keep even. And I have had enough experience to know that unless we can keep making our roads better, they are going to get worse.

7.

As I began to learn a little of what the Road Commission was doing, I realized that their Public Relations were not only zero but that they had antagonized numerous Supervisors. This I felt was wrong and I started an increasing pressure toward bettering our standing with the Supervisors and the Public.

Also about the time I became a Road Commissioner there was almost a feud going on between truckers and the Commission as to load limits on County Highways. Some one had mistakenly set their limits too low. There is still room for argument and many an hour has been spent arguing, but the load limits on your County Roads are the same as the State Roads in your County at all seasons of the year.

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The Supervisors have been very sympathetic in the last 3 years and they have given us in appropriations, \$75,000.00 -- \$125,000.00 -- \$50,000.00. This last \$50,000.00 was scraping the bottom of the pot after the people had turned down a 1 mil tax for 3 years. Nevertheless, we will continue to ask for \$200,000.00 a year extra to place Ottawa County at the top as far as quality of roads is concerned.

The townships too are cognizant of the fact that roads cost money. All Townships give us \$125.00 a mile for maintenance besides raising numerous funds from \$1,000.00 to I believe about \$40,000.00 in Holland Township through last year for special reconstruction of gravel secondary roads. This all sums up as follows. Last year we received from:

		200 000 ⁰⁰
state Hwy Main		
Gas & Weight Tax	-	800 000 ⁰⁰
Supervisors	-	50,000.00 125 000 ⁰⁰
Townships	-	21 000

and spent all of it improving, maintaining and reconstructing.

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(9.)

Now, what of the future. Costs are going up all the time. We still have considerable roads to be built for the first time (I mean dirt roads) which have never been built. We have 35-50 bridges which must be rebuilt in the near future, and believe it or not we have pavements which are altogether too small to carry the traffic. For Instance, South Shore Drive is over the limit in vehicles per day for a 24' road. We have tried to divert some of this by making 32nd Street a through highway, but without satisfactory results. To buy right of way and build a new 4 lane highway would cost today about \$600,000.00. By the time we get that sum saved up, it could cost 700 or 800,000.00. We are not yet in the foreseeable future, finished with road building.

What makes up a desirable road system? Please answer the following questions for yourself.

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1. On a one-way trip to your downtown area, do you drive less than one-half mile to reach a through street or main highway?
2. In the city where you drive most frequently, can you travel on a main route during the morning or evening rush hours at an average speed for the whole trip of 25 miles per hour or better?
3. Between your home and your most frequent destination points are all roads and streets smooth and dust-free, well maintained for year-round travel?
4. On some trip you make regularly, such as to work or from your home to the city, count the number of times you are stopped, on the average, by traffic signals or stop signs. If your route is on a rural highway, is the number of stops less than one per five miles: if urban is it one stop per mile, or less?
5. Do you always feel free to make pleasure motoring trips without undue fear of overcrowded and unsafe roads?
6. Visualize closely a half-mile of the rural highway in your area which carries the most traffic. Count on the right side the number of places, such as restaurants, service stations, etc., which have driveways where vehicles may leave or enter the roadway. Include all intersections. Is the total less than 3?
7. On any regular week-day trip in your car, such as to work, can you make the round trip without once being held up at an intersection longer than one change of a traffic light?
8. On the last long trip you made (25 miles or more), were you able to maintain safely and comfortably an average speed between origin and destination of 45 miles per hour?
9. Each pavement lane on main streets and trunkline highways should be approximately twice as wide as your automobile. Do all the principal highways in your area meet this standard?
10. If on a frequent trip in connection with business, you travel six miles or more within a metropolitan area, on a main thoroughfare, is four miles or more of your route over an expressway design (i.e., divided lanes for opposing traffic, major intersections separated by under or over-passes)?
11. On the route you use regularly to work or to reach a city from home, have all main line railroad grade crossings been eliminated by over-passes or under-passes?
12. When you drive to the area where you do most of your shopping, can you nearly always find a parking space, lot, or garage within a block (about 300 feet) of your destination?
13. A bridge or under-pass is dangerously narrow if it isn't at least several feet wider than the pavement approaching it. Visualize the route you drive to work, if in a metropolitan area, or to shop, if a rural resident. Is this route free of dangerous bridges and under-passes?

14. Blind curves and hills prevent safe passing of other vehicles.
Do you encounter these conditions less often, on the average,
than five in 25 miles of rural highway driving in your area?
(Don't include mountain roads.)

If you have honestly answered all these question in the affirmative,
your roads are far above the average throughout the Country, if you
have not, there is a definite need for improvement of your roads.