

THE GRANGE VISITOR

"THE FARMER IS OF MORE CONSEQUENCE THAN THE FARM, AND SHOULD BE FIRST IMPROVED."

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WHOLE NO. 407.

HIGHWAY LEGISLATION.

A Discussion of the Legislation Necessary to ensure the Needed Reform in Highway Improvement.

S. S. BAILEY.

The assessed valuation of real and personal property in the state, exclusive of cities, for the year 1891, was nearly six hundred million dollars; as equalized, over \$600,000,000. The number of days' work assessed for highway labor tax, estimating one day for every \$500 assessed, this being about the average amount, some towns assessing more and some less, shows an assessment of \$1,200,000 days' work, or that number of dollars. If to this be added the poll tax, estimating the same at one day for every ten of population, calling the population 2 1/2 millions, we find an additional tax of 225,000 days' work, or \$225,000. Adding this to the highway tax assessed makes a total of \$1,425,000 assessed for highway purposes in 1891 outside of the cities. This amount does not include amounts raised by the townships at their annual township meetings for building and repairing bridges, grading hills and repairing such roads as could not be repaired by the highway labor assessed. This amount in many towns often exceeds the amount of labor assessed, being sometimes as high as two mills on assessed valuation. Making a low estimate and calling it one mill on the dollar one year with another, this additional tax amounts to \$600,000, which added to the \$1,425,000 makes a total sum assessed for highway purposes in 1891, \$2,025,000.

The sentiment is universal and the remark is common among all classes that not less than one-half of this amount, except where bridges are built, is thrown away, partly for the want of a dollar's worth of work for the dollar assessed and partly for the want of system and from misapplied labor,—each overseer of highways being governed by his own notion of how the work should be done, and not by any established standard, no competent engineer having been employed to lay out the work, and no one competent to advise having been consulted.

The state defines how a gravel road owned by a company must be built—the grade, width of the road bed, thickness of gravel or stone and their quality, and yet on its own roads (for all roads are really the property of the state for the benefit of all its citizens), no standard is set up to govern the highway commissioners in the expenditure of highway funds raised nor to govern the overseers of highways in supervising the working out of the highway labor.

If one-half the amount found assessed as above each year is wasted for the want of a full, honest day's work for a day assessed, and for the want of system and from labor misapplied, the state loses each year in the highway fund over one million dollars. This amount husbanded and expended under competent engineers and capable commissioner would put in first class condition, equal to our best toll roads, nearly one thousand miles of the now main traveled highways. This waste to the state and loss to road improvement has been going on for more than forty years. This lost labor and money, had it been centralized and properly expended for the last ten years, would give us today from seven to ten thousand miles of first class gravel roads.

THE LOSS SUSTAINED.

We will not now consider the loss

sustained by the public which has traveled and hauled loads over our bad roads, as all concede the losses in the aggregate have already reached millions. Shall we consent that this waste continue for another ten or more years, or shall we seek and demand such legislation as shall remedy existing evils and provide for a larger highway fund and for a wise expenditure of all moneys raised and so meet the universal demand for better roads? There is another and a very great loss to the highway fund which we will now consider. It is generally understood that all property except that exempted pays its proper share of taxes, whether state, city, town, school or highway taxes. An examination of our constitution and laws, shows that railroad corporations, mining, insurance and other companies paying specific taxes, never pay a dollar for highway purposes.

Section 1 of Article 14 of our state constitution provides that all specific taxes, except those received from mining companies of the upper peninsula, shall be applied in paying the interest upon school funds and interest and principal on state debt, etc.; a certain portion of the mining tax is also thus applied. None whatever can be applied for highway purposes without constitutional amendment, and not one of said corporations has ever paid a dollar of highway tax or any tax for road improvement. The farmers alone have been made to bear all the burdens for improving the highways of the state, receiving no aid from any source, while all property and persons are equally benefited by the improvements, and all alike have the right to use and do use them.

Is it any wonder that the farmer has done dilatory work and become almost heartsick when contemplating permanent road improvement, when he considers that his property and his labor alone must bear all the burden of improvement while other property, more productive and less uncertain in its dividends, shares equally with him in the benefits of his labor without contributing to the improvements?

The value of the railroad property of the state as stated in the report of Commissioner of Railroads for 1891, so much of the same as is operated in Michigan was \$265,720,770.83. Should this property be assessed, estimating the same at one-half its cost as is much farm property, it would give in round numbers \$133,000,000 as a basis for assessing its share of highway tax. Had the railroads been assessed for highway purposes the same as farm and other property, the highway tax for 1891 would have been not less than \$266,000. Had other corporations paying specific taxes also been assessed for like purposes \$5,000 more would be added, making in all \$271,000 which the corporations paying specific taxes should have paid if all property is to bear its equal share of the burdens of taxation for highway purposes.

DO RAILROADS PAY THEIR SHARE?

It will be claimed, perhaps, that the railroad and other corporations pay their full share of tax in the amounts paid in specific taxes. This is found not to be true, for an examination of reports shows that the railroads for the year ending December 31, 1889, paid only \$757,231.94 on a cost capital of in round numbers 266 millions. Reducing this amount one-half as before as a basis for assessment it is found that such property pays less than nine-sixteenths of one per cent on reduced valuation while farm property, including personal

property, pays on an average over one per cent on valuation—nearly double the tax—and in addition pays about one-fifth of one per cent for highway labor tax. Allowing that for the last twenty years only a little over one-half this amount each year, would have been justly due the highway fund we should now have to be expended for highway purposes from this source alone over three million dollars. Adding this amount to the sum found wasted and misapplied during the last ten years we find an actual loss as relates to the highway fund of over thirteen million dollars. This amount wisely expended, under competent commissioners and engineers, would give us over ten thousand miles of reasonably good roads, better than most of our toll roads.

We would make no unjust demands of railroads or other corporations as we regard them, especially the railroads, as indispensable to the farmer's prosperity and the good of the country. Without them property values would be greatly reduced and the public would be the sufferer. If they pay their full share of all taxes in the specific taxes paid to the state, then the state should pay over to the highway fund the part belonging to it.

From the foregoing it plainly appears that some legislation is needed before we can enter on a new era of highway improvement. Suggestions are in order, and out of the many some plan may be adopted by the next legislature to meet the great want.

Heretofore, no matter how much the farmers who were public spirited might wish to make a permanent first class road for a certain number of miles, there has been no law by which those unwilling to aid in the improvement could be made to bear their fair share of the betterment. This defect in the law alone is one great cause why road improvement has been so long neglected. The only provision by which any extended highway improvement could be made is found in section nine (9) of article ten (10) of our state constitution, which provides under certain conditions for raising money in counties for constructing and repairing public buildings, highways and bridges. So far as relates to highways this section has remained a dead letter except in a few instances, as only in a few counties has any permanent road improvement been made under its provisions, and it is questionable whether extensive road making was ever contemplated under this section.

A SUGGESTED REMEDY.

The state should provide by law for a highway fund sufficient to pay at least one-half the cost of all main traveled roads that shall be permanently improved; each county to have its share in proportion to population or assessed valuation. This fund to be collected each year as State taxes. This money to be expended under the direction and supervision of county commissioners, together with such other funds as may be raised by counties or townships for the main traveled roads. Make provision by law so that the board of supervisors by a vote of two-thirds of all the members elect may raise money each year for highway purposes, limiting the amount that can be raised in any one year. Provide also for the issuing of highway improvement bonds by the counties, limiting the amount to be issued, the amount to be governed by the assessed valuation and limiting the amount to become due in any one year.

Some persons in this state and

in other states propose that a portion of the roads shall be called state roads and improved under state authority and expense. The time has not come for the state to enter on any extended plan of road making. With the railroad facilities which we now have there is no need of state roads as such. Let the authority and responsibility for improving the main country roads be lodged in the proper officers of the counties and townships, such officers as may be provided by law for that purpose. Legislation for state roads would lead to corruption and legislative sessions would be prolonged indefinitely, as every member would be expected by his constituents to have the state road run by their farms.

Make provision for giving back to the highway fund a portion at least of funds wrongfully withheld from it, and thus settle in part if not wholly, the great debt which the state owes the farmers. Provide for taking private property for roads, including gravel beds and stone quarries, upon proper compensation to owners. There is gravel in abundance in the state suitable for road making and much of it within easy reach of the highways to be improved.

Amend the constitution so that railroad and other corporations, if the law be such that they cannot now be taxed for highway purposes, may be made to pay in specific taxes a certain amount for that purpose, or else let the legislature if it has the power, provide for assessing and collecting each year as state tax an amount equal to the share such corporations should pay for road improvement, and increase the specific taxes sufficient to equal the tax assessed. Define by law as far as possible, how all highways constructed in whole or in part with the use of public funds shall be built, what grade, width of road-bed, depth of material applied and quality; all roads to be built by contract and let to the lowest responsible bidder, and supervised by one or more county commissioners, assisted when necessary by a qualified engineer or county surveyor.

Repeal the law requiring poll tax, which is now almost a dead letter except to those who may choose to pay.

Repeal the law giving corporations the right to own and operate toll roads and provide for the purchase of those roads now built when desired.

FURTHER PROVISIONS.

Provide for collecting all road taxes in money and for electing three commissioners in each township, one each year, to serve three years, and do away with all path masters.

Provide by law for the construction and maintenance of good roads where a majority of the tax payers along the line of any public highway are willing as shown by petition to incur the expense of the same less the amount provided for by public funds. Provide for the issuing highway improvement bonds for the building of such roads and for assessing the property along the line of the road benefited, for the payment of the bonds and interest; bonds to bear a low rate of interest and to run ten or twenty years, more or less as thought best. The proceeds to be expended under the direction of the officers before named.

Property taxed for such roads not to be taxed for other main traveled roads.

Provision might be made for paying the interest in part on the bonds and for keeping the road in repair, where the road exceeds a

certain number of miles in length, by allowing a low rate of toll to be collected from teams passing over the same. The toll paid by those taxed to make the road would be no less to them as it would be only paying the money for their benefit. Others using the road and paying none of the tax would contribute something for their relief.

With such a law in force it is confidently believed many of the main traveled roads would be built as soon as the law and other laws suggested for creating a state highway fund were in full operation. The people would have the benefit of such highways many years before final payment, and the payments would be comparatively easy by reason of enhanced valuation of property and savings from cheapened transportation to market.

The farmer need not complain about the state tax for creating a highway fund, as a large share would be paid by the cities and villages and railroad and other corporations, and paid, we believe, without complaint; as they would be equally benefited both directly and indirectly, and would gladly extend the helping hand. All funds expended for the building of these roads would be spent along the line and in front of the farmers' property, and much of it go into the pockets of the farmers who pay the tax.

CONVICT LABOR.

Provide by law for the using of so much convict labor as can be profitably employed at the prison in the manufacture of tile for road drainage where found necessary, and for preparing material, brick or crushed stone, to be used in constructing roads, the same to be distributed equitably to the counties.

I regard the idea of employing all prison labor, or even a large part of it as visionary. No sound business principle in it. No prose but lots of cheap poetry to be set to music and sung by the politician for votes.

Mr. Potter, who has contributed as much or more than any other one person to road literature, in his essay on roads advises "the farmers to insist that the main roads in the country shall be reconstructed and kept in repair at the expense of the state at large instead of by a tax directed against the farmer alone. That the day has come when the state should begin to square an everlasting debt with the farmer. That the common highway is the property of all the people—that the road which passes the farmer's door is only a part of the great highway from Maine to California."

May not the time soon come when we may call on the national government, if it has the constitutional power, to provide a national highway fund to be distributed to the states, and by the states to the counties for road improvement? The government gives bounties to railroads in public lands, bounties to those producing sugar, subsidies to steamships, bounties indirectly so claimed by a majority of the people as lately expressed, to the manufacturing industries, expends large sums for improving water ways, all proper. Why not give something for the highways of the country, scarcely second in importance to any other interest benefited and as relates to "general welfare" second to no other interest mentioned? A portion of the tariff duties might be used, or the government might issue a limited number of highway three per cent improvement bonds running twenty or more years, the proceeds from

Notices of Meetings.

KENT COUNTY.

The December meeting of the Kent County Grange will be held Dec. 14 in the new Court House, in the city of Grand Rapids.

H. G. HOLT, Com.

ALLEGAN COUNTY.

The next session of Allegan County Council P. of H. will be held at Allegan Grange hall Dec. 6. It is the annual meeting and the election of officers and other necessary business will be the order of the forenoon exercises, and in the afternoon at 2 o'clock Bro. Jason Woodman will give us a lecture. Articles left over from last program will be called for to help make up the entertainment. Music and recitations will be furnished, also by our musical and young people. A good attendance is expected and we expect a good time.

N. A. DIBBLE, Lecturer.

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AGRICULTURAL PAPERS.

Table listing agricultural papers such as American Agriculturist, Ohio Farmer, Farm News, etc., with prices.

MAGAZINES.

Table listing magazines such as Atlantic Monthly, Cosmopolitan, Harper's Monthly, etc., with prices.

MISCELLANEOUS.

Table listing miscellaneous papers like Detroit Free Press, Grand Rapids Democrat, etc., with prices.

NOTICE that all yearly subscribers sent before Jan. 1, '93, will be credited to Jan. 1, '94, thus getting the paper free for the rest of this year.

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For further information, address the Principal. W. N. FERRIS, Big Rapids, Mich.

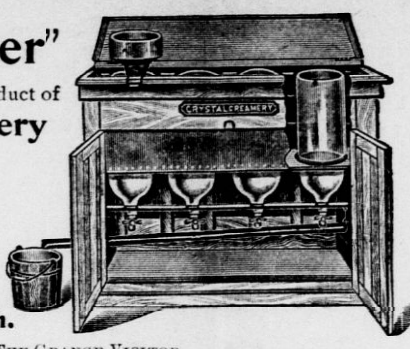
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GRAND RAPIDS and Indiana Railroad

Table showing railroad schedules for Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad, including times for various stations.

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Advertisement for 'FOR BEST HAY PRESSES' featuring an illustration of a hay press and text about its quality.

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