The Plank Road Craze:
A Chapter in the History of Michigan's Highways

By Philip P. Mason

Lansing was still a "city in the forest" in 1852, but its settlers had cause for optimism as they gathered one hot July afternoon at the Seymour House in North Lansing to await the arrival of a stagecoach. It was not the first stage to arrive in the new capital, nor was it the arrival of a celebrity which attracted the crowd. The occasion was the formal opening of the Lansing-Howell Plank Road.

The stage was heard a mile away speeding over the new oak planks, but it was not until it came into sight over the hill near Pennsylvania Avenue that the crowd started cheering. In speeches which followed, James Seymour and other prominent Lansing citizens predicted a "new era" in travel and transportation. The new road, which joined the plank road from Howell to Detroit, would end the control of "king mud," they said, stimulate the economy of Ingham County, and provide Lansing's "first outlet to civilization."

Other towns and cities all over Michigan, and indeed, the rest of the country, were witnessing similar ceremonies, for the construction of plank roads had become a "mania" with the American people. Michigan was one of the leaders in the development of these roads; in fact, the first plank road in the United States was built in this state. Although the movement lasted only a few decades, it represented a unique place in the development of Michigan's highway system.

Construction of Plank Roads

Plank roads should not be confused with "corduroy" roads which were also popular in Michigan during the early nineteenth century. The latter were made by placing logs, often of different sizes, over a low or swampy area. Although depressions were filled with gravel or with smaller logs, the corduroyed road was usually rough and some-times even dangerous. Logs "floated and rolled" in the slippery mud and often horses, "frightened by the unstable footing, plunged and floundered and at times sank one or more legs between the loose logs." Plank roads, on the other hand, were made of boards and as long as they were properly maintained, provided a smooth surface. They were constructed by laying planks of pine or oak, eight to sixteen feet long and three to four inches thick, across "sleepers" or "stringers" which were placed parallel to the direction of the road. Ditches were dug on either side of the road to provide proper drainage.
FIRST PLANK ROADS

Most highway authorities claim that the plank road was introduced in this country in New York in 1844. They overlook the conclusive evidence, however, that seven years earlier, in 1837, the Michigan State Legislature granted a charter to the Detroit, Plymouth and Ann Arbor Turnpike Company for a "timber road made of good, well-hewn timber." The Legislature granted similar charters to other private companies. In 1844, for example, it authorized the construction of plank roads from Detroit to Port Huron and from near Sylvania, Ohio, to Blissfield, Michigan. Two years later, charters were given to the Corunna and Northampton and the Marshall and Union City Plank Road companies.

So great had interest become in the construction of these privately-operated turnpikes that in 1848 the State Legislature passed a general Plank Road Law. It was no longer necessary to get a special charter from the Legislature in order to build and operate a plank road. The new law provided that any company could operate a plank road as long as it was constructed according to certain specifications, namely, that the road be two to four rods wide, sixteen feet of which was to be "a good, smooth, permanent road, well drained by ditches on either side." At least eight feet of the road was to be covered with plank three inches thick. The law provided further that no grades were to be greater than one in ten and that the charters were to run for sixty years. Minor amendments were added to this Plank Road Law in 1851, 1859 and 1867.

PLANK ROAD COMPANIES

Private control of plank roads, or turnpikes, as they were commonly called, reflected the failure of state and local governmental units to provide an adequate highway system. Despite the tremendous influx of settlers to Michigan in the decades after 1830 (the population rose from 31,640 in 1830, to 212,267 in 1840, and to 341,591 in 1850), the state of Michigan did practically nothing to provide roads. The Panic of 1839 killed an elaborate program for internal improvements in Michigan and thereafter the State Legislature turned its back on any further state aid program.

Local units of government made feeble attempts to build roads, but the total results were hopelessly inadequate. Even the program of the federal government failed to meet the needs of Michigan settlers. Prior to 1837 Congress had authorized the construction of a number of "territorial" roads, ostensibly for military reasons, but the construction of these roads proceeded so slowly that they failed to assist settlement. Thus the task of road construction fell by default to the private corporations.
Financial support for the plank road companies came mainly from local sources. Well-to-do farmers, manufacturers, merchants and professional men invested in these ventures. Prominent backers of the Detroit-Howell Plank Road Company were Lewis Cass, Zachariah Chandler, Henry Ledyard, C. H. and Frederick Bush, C. C. Trowbridge and other influential Detroiters. These men were also stockholders in the Detroit-Mt. Clemens Plank Road Company. The Lansing-Howell Road was financed by James Turner, H. H. Smith and James Seymour of Lansing and businessmen from Howell, Fowlerville, Williamston and Okemos. Farmers along the way contributed materials and labor for the road. Additional capital to construct the road was obtained from eastern capitalists.

The paid capital stock of the plank road companies varied greatly. Ninety thousand dollars was invested in the Detroit and Howell Plank Road Company and only one thousand dollars in a venture in Sault Ste. Marie. Typical of the other company investments were: Adrian and Bean Creek, $24,000; Ann Arbor and Whitmore Lake, $12,000; Detroit and Birmingham, $24,000; Flint and Fentonville, $18,000; Grand Rapids and Plainfield, $20,000; Lansing and Howell, $44,457; and Ontonagon and Rockland, $20,000. In all, a total of $2,040,180 was invested in Michigan plank road companies.

Construction Costs

The cost of building plank roads ranged from one to three thousand dollars per mile depending upon the condition of the road bed, accessibility of timber and gravel, and the cost of labor. Bridges over rivers and streams were costly and put a heavy financial burden on the plank road companies. Toll houses were also added to the initial capital outlay. Some companies, like the one which operated a road between Detroit and Mt. Clemens, purchased several stands of timber and a lumber mill on the Clinton River to guarantee an adequate supply of planks. Gravel pits were also purchased by many companies.

Tolls

The Legislature not only set up specifications for the construction of the plank roads, but it regulated the tolls as well. A charge of two cents a mile was made for a wagon or carriage drawn by two horses, and one cent a mile for every sled or sleigh so drawn. If more than two horses were used, an additional charge of three-quarters of a cent per mile for each additional animal was levied. A toll of one cent per mile was made for a vehicle drawn by one horse, as well as for a horse and rider. Tolls of one-half cent a mile were levied for every score of sheep or swine; for every score of "neat cattle," two cents a mile. In 1869, turnpike companies in Bay, Clinton, Gratiot and Saginaw counties were given permission by the Legislature to double their tolls.
POPULARITY OF PLANK ROADS

Despite the tolls, plank roads were extremely popular during their heyday. As long as they were properly maintained they were a great improvement over the dirt roads, which were impassable during many weeks of the year. Trips which took from four to six days on dirt roads were cut to from ten to fourteen hours over plank roads.

Plank roads were as popular in rural areas as in towns and cities. Farmers could carry greater loads to market, and furthermore, many preferred to use the plank road rather than the railroad, which was being introduced in the state during the 1830s and 1840s. In fact, plank roads were often called "farmers' railroads" by contemporaries who maintained that competition from plank roads would keep down railroad rates.

A total of 202 plank road companies received charters in Michigan during the nineteenth century. Sixty-four of these were granted by the State Legislature before 1848, seventy-two between 1848 and 1851, and sixty-six companies were set up after 1851. The longest plank road given a charter was to have run from Zilwaukee to Mackinaw City via Traverse City, a distance of 220 miles. The shortest was a one-mile plank road in Sault Ste. Marie.

Detroit was the terminus of eight plank roads which spread out like spokes in a wheel from the metropolis. Mt. Elliott, Michigan, Grand River, Woodward, Gratiot, and East and West Jefferson avenues were once plank roads. Plank roads were extremely popular in Grand Rapids, with no less than seven companies operating toll roads. Alpine, Grandville, Plainfield, and Reed Lake avenues were once plank roads, as were Bridge, Canal, Division, and Walker streets.

Monroe was also an important center, with plank roads running to Dearborn, Flat Rock, Newport and Saline. Lansing plank roads connected Eaton Rapids, Mason, Howell, Ann Arbor, and Jackson with the capital city. Other cities which had these roads were Adrian, Ann Arbor, Dexter, Flint, Hastings, Hillsdale, Kalamazoo, Lapeer, Marshall, Niles, Ontonagon, Paw Paw, Plymouth, Pontiac, Saginaw, Tawas City, Utica, and Wyandotte.

In addition, there were scores of other plank roads which were projected only on paper. Of the 202 companies which obtained charters, only eighty-nine actually built and operated plank roads. Indeed, of the 5,082 miles of plank road authorized by the Legislature, only 1,179 miles were ever built.
DECLINE OF THE PLANK ROADS

Despite the initial popularity of these roads and the hopes of their promoters, the "plank road craze" did not last long. The roads remained in good condition for the first three or four years, but after that they needed constant attention. Planks loosened, warped and decayed and had to be replaced often. It was estimated that annual repairs cost from twenty to thirty percent of the original cost of the road.

There were other fixed costs which had to be met. Toll houses had to be built and maintained and a full-time superintendent employed throughout the year. As previously noted, some road companies had to buy and operate lumber mills. Moreover, toll income was reduced by the use of "shunpikes" – short stretches of road built to avoid the toll gates.

Because of the high costs of lumber, some companies substituted gravel as the planks decayed. Thus the road became a combination of plank and gravel. This made travel difficult and in some cases, hazardous. It was the famous humorist Mark Twain who left us the classic description of this type of road. Asked how he liked his trip over the Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids Plank Road, he replied, "It would have been good if some unconscionable scoundrel had not now and then dropped a plank across it." Another writer referred to a road in a similar condition as "an enlarged washboard."

By 1900 only twenty-three of the original 202 plank roads were in operation, and of these only a short stretch of the Detroit-Howell road was actually made of planks. All of the others had been replaced with gravel, although they were still popularly called "plank roads." In the first decade of the twentieth century the remaining private roads, coming increasingly under public scorn, were turned over to the state or purchased by street railway companies. Thus ended one of the most unique phases of Michigan's highway history.

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