

Early Road Building in Oakland County

The necessity for roads early engaged the attention of the pioneers in Oakland County. Entrance into the county from the south was nearly barred by the almost impenetrable swamps in the neighborhood of Royal Oak, and the water course and Indian trails were the only avenues through the forested regions to the north and west of that morass. These trails, especially in the warm weather, could at best be used only by pack horses or men on foot, the dense timber and underbrush preventing the passage of wagons. The first settlers, the Graham party, packed all their belongings into the county on five ponies, and most of the other early settlers employed the same means of transportation unless some stream could be used to transport them to their objectives.

The most important Indian trail at the time of the organization of the county was the Saginaw Trail, which led through the county on a line between Detroit and Saginaw. Another trail of importance led from Mt. Clemens to Orchard Lake. It was much used by Indians going to the lake, and subsequently proved to be of advantage to the early white inhabitants of the county. The end of this trail is now marked by a tablet fixed on a boulder at the lake which reads: "This tablet marks the end of the Indian trail from Mt. Clemens to Orchard Lake. Pontiac and his braves returned to Me-na-sa-gor-ning after the Battle of Bloody Run."

The locating and making of roads was one of the first concerns of the settlers, and as each township was formed it located roads and commenced work upon them. The Saginaw road, which followed the old trail of that name, was rightly conceived to be the most valuable highway, and its construction did much to develop the county.

The early Saginaw trail has been described by Ralzemond A. Parker in his paper entitled "Reminiscences of Royal Oak, Michigan." Mr. Parker writes:

"It may well be said that Royal Oak was the gate-way to Oakland county. The early trails followed the ridges as far as possible. Thus the early Saginaw trail left Detroit about where Hamilton avenue does now, passed through the east part of Greenfield, struck the ridge upon



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which is situated the villages of Royal Oak and Pleasant Ridge, following what is now called 'Pleasant Ridge', passing through or near Washington avenue in Royal Oak village, just west of the D. U. R. waiting room; thence north across the present intersection of the railroad and First street, thence northward along the ridge for a short distance, then northwest across the Red Run, through the east part of sections 16, 8 and 6, and intersecting and following the line used by the present Saginaw turnpike from a spot about one mile south of Birmingham near or just beyond the Deep Run Stock Farm, as it is called; went on to Saginaw through Birmingham, Pontiac, Clarkston, Grand Blanc and Flint. This was the 'Early Eaginaw Trail.' Many subordinate and branch trails led from it and it was afterwards modified more or less. One of these branches, perhaps the principal one, led north along the ridge from Royal Oak following a line along what is now known as the Rochester Road. It was called the 'Paint Creek Trail.'

"A military road was begun about 1817 or 1818, starting from Detroit and following the Saginaw Trail, and Colonel Leavenworth, then in command of the Post, had previous to 1819, worked it about three miles, besides corduroying it several additional miles. This corduroy I have seen, and many of the old settlers will remember it, it being especially plain to be seen across the marshes of sections 16, 8 and 6.

"About 1820 a military road to Saginaw was authorized from the ten thousand acre tract by Act of Congress providing for military roads in Michigan. This road was cut along the present Saginaw turnpike, and the other road was abandoned; though for many years it was referred to by the early settlers as the 'Old Road.' The new military road paralleled it on the west through Royal Oak township at a distance of from one-quarter to three-quarters of a mile. By 1844 it had been worked out as a wagon road, by the United States government to what is called the Beecher School House, five miles north of Flint; and by an Act of Congress, was given the name "Saginaw Turnpike."

An act which was approved August 5, 1824, incorporated the "Pontiac and Paint Creek Turnpike Company," this turnpike to extend from the Detroit river, on the present road, by the most practicable route via Royal Oak to the court house in Pontiac, with a branch from Royal Oak to a point on Paint Creek. Another act, approved June 23, 1828, a road was ordered to be layed out from the northeast corner of the county and running south with the county line until it intersected the Detroit and Pontiac turnpike. An act of March 4, 1831, provided for a road running southwest from Pontiac to a point on the road between

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Monroe and Ypsilanti. On June 26, 1832, a road was ordered layed out from section 18 in Southfield Township to Detroit. A road was authorized from Livingston county to Pontiac on April 4, 1833, and on the 20th day of the same month a road from Bloomfield west to the Pontiac and Monroe road, and one from Bloomfield through Auburn to Flint were authorized.

These first roads were little better than cleared paths through the wilderness. Little grading was done, and almost no surfacing, so that in wet weather they were almost impassable. Corduroy roads were built over the marshiest stretches, and while these did give a solid foundation, they soon became so rough that it was torture to traverse them in a wagon. Graveled turnpikes, most of which were built by turnpike companies which exacted toll to pay for expense of building and upkeep, succeeded the corduroy roads, and as the highway engineer's science has been perfected, grading and draining as well as smooth surfacing, came into common use throughout the county. The automobile has been the greatest determining factor of the past generation in the construction of improved roads. Rapid transit has become a necessity of commerce, and transportation of goods from one town to another by means of the motor truck has made the building of hard surfaced, adequately foundationed roads imperative.

Within a comparatively short span of years road-making has been revolutionized. Broad highways extend in a net work over the entire county, and what in years gone by used to be a trip of days is now one of hours. The farmer, the merchant, the manufacturer, all alike depend upon these highways, and profit from them as well.

—EXTRACT FROM HISTORY OF OAKLAND COUNTY.

