

The Indiana Transportation History Project

By Jim Turley

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The world in 1900 was very different. A nation, a state, local communities and people were striving to meet their potential only to be confronted by muddy obstacles to mobility and progress. In Indiana, a state of industrial change and growth, the voice the better roads movement and the wheelmen were increasingly heard urging change and forward looking transportation policy and application of science to the planning and construction of roads. The story of our state and local road miracle is primarily a twentieth century story within the broader context of economic history. This story continues today and should be a part of our bicentennial story.

The federal highway legislation of 1916 provided the impetus and financial incentive for the individual states to organize the planning, establishment and maintenance of state highway systems. Indiana established its highway commission and planning process in a 1917 statute. The highway commission proceeded to plan for five market roads but met a successful court challenge. The highway commission and legislature were forced back to the drawing board to produce a 1919 revision which established the Indiana Highway Commission, the forerunner of today's Indiana Department of Transportation, and a revised highway system meeting the mandate to connect the county seats of government and cities and towns of over 5,000 inhabitants with a state highway. Over eighty years of work to build and improve this system resulted in a highway network almost without equal. The system is also a component of Indiana's overall intermodal transportation infrastructure which provides the mobility for the state's economic engine. From almost primitive beginnings to the wide sweep of modern highways and transportation infrastructure (ports, harbors, air terminals, mass transit, rail)-an achievement of remarkable impact.

The exciting Twentieth Century of transportation achievement has drawn to a close. Think of it! One hundred of the most eventful years have passed. Add fifty more years to include the industrialization of the state in the last half of the nineteenth century. Most significant for Indiana's citizens is the exponential change in how we get around. Mobility! The challenge of achieving mobility and maintaining and improving it and its impact and contribution to the quality of life and improved economic well being needs to be told. The telling of this story and its technical, social and economic ramifications should be major section of the overall 200-year history of Indiana. The Twentieth Century indeed looms large and is in many ways divorced from the early heroic pioneer beginnings.

By 1880 the state was crossed by up to forty railroads, established, from the time of the canal debacle to consolidation and maturity in the early 1920's. A new market system dictated a different kind of rail structure in the overall land transportation mix. The modern railroads are key elements in the intermodal picture. Important in a number of locations are the municipal transit systems. We should also note the coming and going of

the Interurban system in Indiana during the first third of the Century. And finally, not usually thought of as a mode of transportation, the hidden pipelines which move volumes of natural gas and other liquid or gas commodities through the state.

The Twentieth Century has been the epoch of land transportation. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916 was the culmination of an intense public policy debate and a resulting national consensus about what we as a nation should do about the problem of poor roads. In the ensuing 84 years, progress the improvement in highway transportation is nothing short of spectacular when viewed from the perspective of 1916. The highway and local roads story is indeed significant and must be told

Another feature of the Twentieth Century is the development of air transport and the sophistication of our Indiana shallow and deep draft port facilities the rivers, ports and harbors of Indiana are increasingly important to economic development and well being and are indeed extensions of a key transportation mode of an earlier time. These features complete our sea link to the rest of the world.

What of the people? The political and economic giants of Indiana played a role in all of this. In fact, we should determine the “Richard Lieber” of the Indiana transportation system. It is interesting to note that both the state park system and the highway transportation system were established during the administration of Governor James Goodrich. Who is the Richard Lieber of Indiana transportation or the Indiana highway system? Also, the unsung heroes of it all. Those who worked diligently on construction projects, both in the office and in the field, and those whose lives were drastically changed by the coming of highways, and the accompanying improvements. Their story, often forgotten, needs to be told. Indiana’s workers and families and their role in economic life and development should be told.

History allows us to celebrate the past and instruct the future. A Indiana Transportation history will do much more. It allows us to recognize the people and the process, which got us to where we are today and fit it into the context of broader economic history of the period. It can teach us by allowing the success, failures, and lessons of the past to assist us in doing a better job in the future as we tackle the challenges of the 21st Century and the third century of Indiana statehood.

Notes:

The Indiana History Project Concept. The Indiana History Project will focus on the Twentieth Century. At the present time no comprehensive work exists, but a number of significant books have been written about rivers, canals, railroads and more recently, the Indiana’s river ports. The current vision is a significant work or works to accompany others as Indiana marks the 2016 Bicentennial of statehood. Initial funding of an oral history project will form the basis for this bicentennial transportation history. Some of the proponents at the present time are R.H. “Bob” Harrell, Retired Executive Director, Indiana Highway Commission; Peter Harstad, Historian, Retired Director, Indiana Historical Society; Jim Turley, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army, Retired (Transportation

Corps) and now Project Manager, Indiana LTAP; and others transporters, engineers and historians.

Sources. The Indiana Historical Society publication entitled *The State of Indiana History 2000*. is new and will be an important resource for several years to come. Some of the papers are well worth studying. For those interested in economic and transportation history, "*Striving after the Wind: The Changing Sources of Hoosier Prosperity*" by Professor John Larson is of particular interest. Professor Larson also appended a comprehensive list of notes and references to the paper. A few resources are listed below.

Selected Transportation History References

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