

"The History of Roads and the Kent County Road Commission"

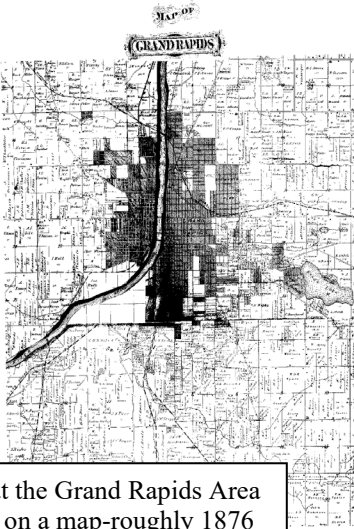
By Michael Steenwyk &
Edited by Tom Byle

Pre-Road Commission Days

The area today known as Kent County was first surveyed by government surveyors in the early 1830's and shortly thereafter. At that time Kent County was a land of continuous forest, broken only by the rivers and streams running through it. Most travel took the easiest route-by canoe or boat up a river or stream. The Hopewell Indians were the first to inhabit what later became Kent County. These people were the mound-builders of long ago and their works can still be seen today along the Grand River.

One of the early settlers who arrived in 1836 was named James Scribner. He purchased a large chunk of property on the west side of the Grand River. At this time in history most people lived on the east side of the river, so he was purchasing property in the "sticks". Mr. Scribner took his property (south of the present day Road Commission Building), platted it and nearly gave the lots away to entice people to settle there. Today the street in front of the Road Commission still bears his name.

In 1854 some of the City streets were planked (with wood). By 1856, Monroe Ave. was paved with cobblestones. This was the same year a three hundred pound bear was shot at Fulton and Monroe. By 1874 wood pavements replaced stone. Blocks six inches long, cut from four inch-pine planks, were set on end upon a gravel-bed of sand with gravel being tamped into crevices. Pearl Street and the lower portion of Monroe Avenue were included in this paving project. Wood pavements were also laid out on Lyon Street, West Bridge Street and some other streets in 1875 and also in the following year 1876. The initial pine blocks only lasted about five years. When they wore out, cedar blocks were substituted in their place.



This is what the Grand Rapids Area looked like on a map-roughly 1876

All this made for a very bumpy ride for bicyclists who rode long distances on those streets in the late 1800's. Horatio "Good Roads" Earle was the head of the League of American Wheelman in Michigan. He organized the first

International Road Congress in Port Huron and the first "Good Roads Trail". He became a State Senator from Detroit and encouraged the establishment of a State Highway Department

Beginnings of KCRC

In 1911 when the Kent County Road Commission began, most roads outside the City or Villages were little more than “wagon roads”, an improved trail, which had previously seen buggies and buckboards travel its length. Every community and township owned a road grader. These were made of steel, with a six and a half-foot blade, which could be tilted and turned much like a modern-day motor-grader. These graders were pulled by a team of horses and later in time could also be seen being pulled by a Model T truck. Someone would have to stand on the grader itself, using the controls to change the way the blade met the road. Each farmer along the main highway would spend a couple of



days each year maintaining a section of road near his farm. The farmers used their own horses to pull the “Township” scraper along their road. In exchange for this roadwork each year, the farmer who worked on his section of road received a reduction in the amount of the property taxes which he paid on his farm.

The State Highway Department was created in 1905 to meet the growing needs of Michigan. A few years later in 1909, The County Road Act was passed by the State of Michigan. This piece of legislation *permitted* the Board of Supervisors of a County in Michigan to create a *county road system* and a *county road commission*.

The Board of Supervisors (known today as the Board of Commissioners) met on October 21st of 1910 to look into the possibility of forming a Road Commission. A committee of five was appointed by the Chairman to investigate ... with a view of adopting a general system for Kent County... and to report at the January meeting the following year.

This was in fact done, and at the January 13th meeting in 1911 a report from the special committee was supplied and read. The special committee appointed at the October session reported that so far some 40 to 45 of the Counties in Michigan had already implemented Road Commissions. To date the Counties implementing them had been satisfied with the results.

The men who were the first “Road Commissioners” for Kent County were Alvah W. Brown of Grand Rapids, Dexter G. Look of Lowell and C. A. Bloomer of Sparta. Mr. Brown was to be the chairman.

The First Board of Road Commissioners Meeting Took Place on July 15th of 1911

The first piece of equipment used by the County was not a truck, but a rented car. With this rented car, the Commissioners drove many miles of roads all over Kent County.

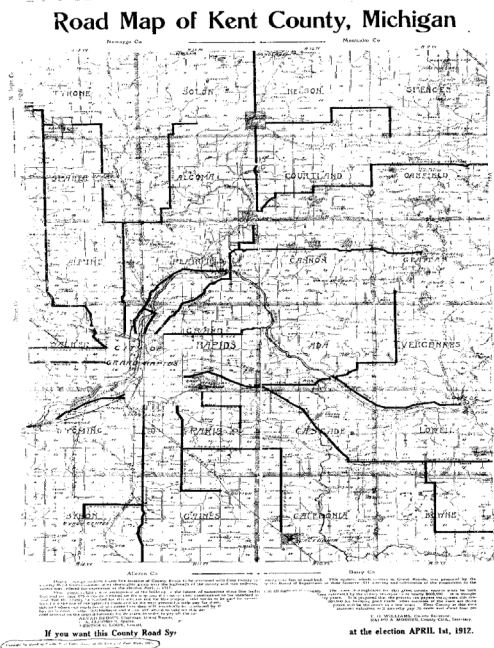


The fledgling “Road Commission” proceeded to layout their findings to the Board of Supervisors that fall at the October 20, 1911 meeting. In the report to the Board of Supervisors, they noted they had traveled some 848 miles inspecting the roads traveled. Of these, they had selected 187 miles of Kent County roads for construction. An additional 33 miles had already been built by the townships. The total of approximately 220

miles of roadway was to be improved.



The Road Commissioners then employed the Kent County Surveyor by the name of Theodore O. Williams, who also worked out of the Kent County Courthouse. He was hired as “Engineer” to determine a price tag for the proposed work. The Kent County Surveyor, “T. O.” Williams estimated it would cost \$573,385 to improve the first 187 miles of road and proposed that a Bond issue of \$600,000 be proposed. The remainder would be used to purchase road building equipment.



*This is a copy of the first County Road Map of 1912.
Heavy dark lines show the first roads to be improved under a Bond Issue.
Total Miles = 220
Bond Issue was for \$600,000*

The County used his estimate and map as the basis for a \$600,000 bond proposal placed before the voters early the following year April 1st, 1912. This was the first bond proposal under the new “Road Commission.” On the first of April of the following year (1912) the voters of Kent County **approved** this new Road System with the attached \$600,000 bond issue. This bond issue, when it passed in 1912, signaled years of roadwork for the new Kent County Road Commission. The first four projects were

South Division Avenue, Alpine Avenue, Ada Road and Plainfield Avenue.

That same year (1912) the Road Commissioners also purchased a car-possibly the same one they had rented. The first car purchased was a Mitchell Motor car Model 5-6 purchased for \$1,523.95. Shortly afterward they also purchased a gasoline road roller on July 30th. Later wagons were also added to the equipment purchases. However, it must be remembered that much of the transportation and road building was still done with horses for years to come. Working with horses ended about 1923.

Our first *brand new* County “plow” truck - a 1924 United.



This is our first new truck, purchased to replace old worn-out war equipment.

In the early days of the Road Commission, the Commissioners originally had their meetings at the Kent County Courthouse. As they acquired road equipment, this Road Commission equipment was then stored just north and east of the Courthouse at the old Fox Brewery building. This brewery building was located in the southwest quadrant of Ionia Ave. and E. Bridge Street where the State of Michigan Building stands today.

Much of this original equipment for roadwork from the years 1912 till the 1920's was done with teams of horses and scrapers. John Paas was the first maintenance foreman, while Fred Carlisle was first construction foreman. Together these two men were responsible for over 500 horse and trailer teams, as well as the men necessary to operate them. The teams hauled the road-building materials plus entire portable camps to the job-sites during the early days of road building. These camps enabled the men to set up construction sites anywhere in the County. A camp contained: shelters for the teams, bunkhouses for the men, and a blacksmith shop, as well as dining and cooking facilities.

State Reward Roads

This reward money was typically \$200, \$500, \$750 or \$1000 dollars per mile of road built in the early years. It was later doubled for “State Trunkline” roads. The “State Reward” roads consisted of the four following types:

- Clay base with gravel surface
- Stone base with gravel surface
- Gravel base with stone surface
- Macadam

In 1905 there were 2700 automobiles statewide and _____ 50 cents per year in taxes.

The road system consisted of 68,000 miles.

- 30,000 miles of clay
- 26,000 miles of sand
- 3,000 miles of swamp
- 7,700 miles of gravel
- 245 miles of stone or macadam

Our Long Serving Manager - Otto S. Hess

In October of 1920, State Engineer **Otto S. Hess** became the new Engineer-Manager of the Road Commission. Otto Hess previously worked with our forces for many years especially on State Reward Funds and proposed County projects.

A New Location for the Road Commission

The next major change for the Road Commission occurred in the fall of 1923 and the spring of 1924. The Road Commission ended up building its own building on Scribner Avenue.



In October of 1923, by Board action of the Commissioners, it was decided to accept bids for a new garage, office, stock room and machine shop to be built at the Scribner Avenue and Webster location. This is the Road Commission's present location with the address of 1500 Scribner Avenue N. W. Construction for the “new” Road Commission

Offices at 1500 Scribner were started in the fall of 1923. Road Commission engineers set lines and grades for the buildings on land purchased from the Widdecomb Company. There was originally a spur track, which ran from north to south alongside the river. By means of this railroad spur track, materials such as tar, asphalt, as well as salt and chloride were delivered into the new complex. The original office building built in 1923 was only about half the size of today's building.



The new Road Commission Building built in the fall of 1923 and spring of 1924. The top picture is of the new building-looking at southwest side. Note the freeway has not been built yet. The bottom picture is of the interior garage for storage of vehicles.



In the 1930's, additional facilities were built in Sparta, Cedar Springs, Rockford, Ada, Caledonia, and Wyoming.

More space was added to the original Road Commission building in both 1937 and again in the 1950's. First two bedrooms were added to the supervisor's apartment and then office space was added northward from the Engineering hallway. There were now offices on both the north and south sides (old part) of the east west hallway in the Engineering Offices. In 1937 and 1950, additions were added to the existing building.



In 1987, the original garage and warehouse were demolished and the current building was completed.

During the depression, property tax revenue to the Townships plummeted and delinquencies mounted. When that happened, the Townships had a hard time keeping up with the local road maintenance. Because of this shortfall in revenue, a new Act was introduced in the State Capitol. It was named the Mc Nitt Act of 1931. Township roads were to be transferred to the County jurisdiction, 20% per year over a five-year period. This happened all across the State of Michigan and ended up being the major source of road funding for years until in 1951. The funding was also switched from a property tax base funding to a fuel tax and registration fees base.

Up to this time, improved roads were gravel or concrete pavement. In the early 1930's a new process called "blacktopping" was introduced. This process was found to be able to withstand the wear and tear of traffic for many years. The use of blacktop (meaning at that time cold mixed in place asphalt and also prime seal, very little hot mix asphalt)



coupled with new and better types of equipment gave Kent County residents better and safer roads, which were also easier to maintain. Blacktopping and general upgrading continued on County roads throughout the 1930's.

During the 1940's, most road work was funded by the Defense Highway Act of 1941. In 1947 and 1948, the Good Roads Federation conducted a needs study. The result of the study

was the enactment of Act 51 of 1951 the Public Acts. This legislation is still today the funding act for public highways in Michigan. Nineteen fifty-six saw the enactment of the Federal Highway Act of 1956, which resulted in the construction of the interstate system as we know it today.

A New Manager and More Changes into the 1960's

In 1958 there was a change in the leadership of the Road Commission. After 38 years of faithful service, **Otto Hess stepped down.** **Leonard E. Kaufman** who had worked under Hess for many years as the Secretary of the Road Commission, now assumed the lead role. He was completely responsible for managing the Road Commission. He was not an engineer like Hess, so he instead carried the title of **Secretary-Manager** (from the years 1958-1965). Mr. Kaufman was well thought of and respected just like Otto Hess had been.

Leonard Kaufman was a man who worked here for many years and eventually became our Secretary Manager. He was well liked and did many good things for the Road Commission. Today he has a golf course named after him on Clyde Park Ave. just south of 44th Street. This tradition of being well liked and having a place named after one also

happened to some of the early Commissioners such as the farmer from Alto, Mr. Henry Johnson (Johnson Park) and also Mr. Warren Townsend (Townsend Park).

When L.E. Kaufman retired after serving from 1958 till 1965, he was replaced by Donald R. Schofield. The program ran for 10 years and was instrumental at upgrading many of the bridges in Kent County. It worked so well it was followed by a second 10-year program. Schofield later in 1965 became the Engineer-Manager of KCRC. He held that title of Engineer-Manager from 1965-1979.

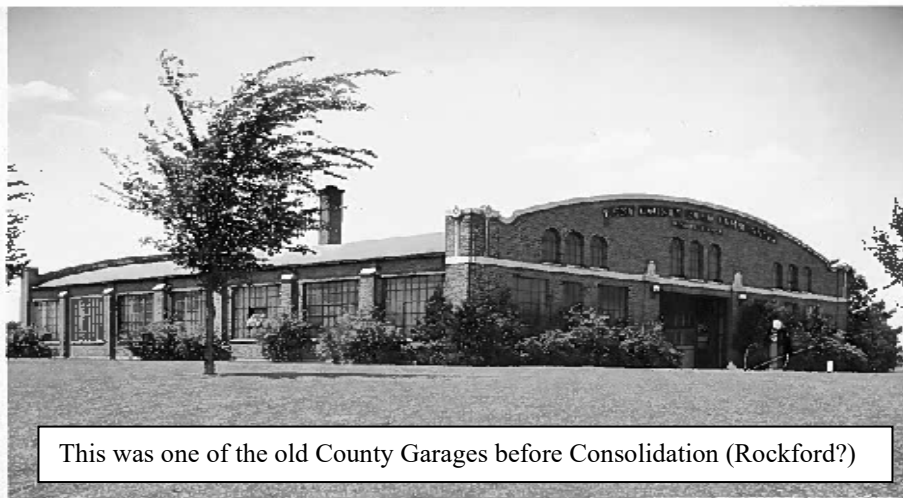
The employees were represented by an employee association since 1941. The employees voted to affiliate with the Teamsters Union 214.

There were also changes in leadership at the top of the organization through the years. Donald Schofield had stepped down and been replaced by James C. Porritt, Jr. who had assumed leadership in 1979. Mr. Porritt was Managing Director from the years 1979-1995.

Continuing History about the 1970's and 1980's

In the late 1970's, the Road Commission began a program to consolidate the seven district garages and the main garage into three facilities.

While at one time the Road Commission had a total of seven District garages, now the north end of the County was to be serviced by one new garage.



A new North Complex was to be built and opened in 1981.

North Complex - 1981



The main office facility was renovated in 1987.



The South Complex was opened in the spring of 1990.

South Complex - Dedicated in 1990



Continuing History about the 1990's Through Today

Southwest Complex - Dedicated in 2004



Even more recently we also added the Southwest Complex at the northeast quadrant of US 131 and 84th Street. The land was originally owned by the State and the garage was laid out with a special emphasis on the State Highway of M-6. The construction of M-6 necessitated a facility to

service M-6 and the southwest corner of the county. The Southwest Complex was opened for business officially in October of 2004.

In 1994 there was an organizational change. Jon F. Rice took over as our new Managing Director beginning in 1995 when Jim Porritt retired.

Belmont Jupiter Bridge - Completed in 1998



Over the years there have been many other projects well done and of great use to the public, so to all of you hard workers at KCRC who have not been mentioned by name, but have faithfully come into work day after day...

Thank you for your work and the service provided to the people of Kent County.

An Overview of the Last 100 years at KCRC

Our History Timeline

1909 – The **County Road Act** was passed by the State of Michigan. The official name was Public Act 283, which became effective September 1 of that same year. This piece of legislation *permitted* the Board of Supervisors of a County in Michigan to create a *county road system* and a *county road commission*.

1910 – The Board of Supervisors (today known as the Board of Commissioners) met on October 21st of 1910 and began to look into the possibility of forming a Road Commission in Kent County. A committee of five was appointed by the Chairman to investigate, with a view of adopting a general system for Kent County, and to report at the January meeting the following year.

1911 - At a meeting on May 1st, a Mr. Renihan moved that a special committee of seven be appointed by the Chair to consider the matter of electing and organizing a Road

Commission. Mr. Renihan found himself on that committee along with a Mr. Geib, Doan, Goudzwaard, Lamoreaux, Alberts and Sinclair.

On **Friday, June 30th of 1911** three men were appointed to be the first Road Commissioners of Kent County. The men who were the first “Commissioners” for Kent County were Alvah W. Brown of Grand Rapids, Dexter G. Look of Lowell and C. A. Bloomer of Sparta. Mr. Brown would hold the position of Chairman. **The original Commissioner’s first meeting took place on July 15th of 1911.** At that first meeting they met downtown in the Kent County Courthouse at the office of the County Clerk.

1912 - On the first of April of the following year the voters of Kent County approved a \$600,000 bond issue, which enabled the fledgling Road Commission to launch its proposal to upgrade a system of trunkline roads throughout the County of Kent. Sale of County Road Bonds were made available to the public. On June 10, 1912, a W. Johnson began his duties as “Superintendent” or “General Manager” of the Road Commission for a salary of \$233.33 per month for a term of one year. Sometime after this a W. C. Whiting took over as “Engineer” and “Manager”.

1914 - 1918 WWI

1920 - Otto Hess became our Engineer-Manager continuing in that role until 1958.

1924 - A building is built and the Road Commission moves from rented space downtown at the County Courthouse to the corner of Scribner Ave. and Webster Street. Today this building is known as the Central Complex.

In the 1930’s a new process called “blacktopping” was introduced.

1931 - With the advent of the Great Depression road funding changed. Now a new Act called McNitt is used to take Township roads into the County System. This happened through the years of 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935 and 1936. It was accomplished by simply placing an ad in the local newspaper, originally the Grand Rapids Herald and later the Grand Rapids Press.

1941 - With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. entered into WWII and many road projects were placed on hold. Others were stacked up in anticipation of KCRC workers returning home after the war. Jobs were held, as men served their country with the anticipation of that same job being available after the war was over. An Employees Association was also started in this year.

1945 - WWII was over and the Nation settled down into a routine. Many roads were built in the ensuing years. Technology continued to advance with better hydraulics and electrical systems, as well as more quality to the tires and steel used in construction of the big orange trucks. (Our trucks acquired the lime-green look about 1970.)

Late 1950’s and into the 1960s - Building of Limited Access Freeways began, which continued into the 1970’s and even more recently with the construction of M-6.

1951 - A new Act called Act 51 changes the way roads are financed in Michigan.

1958 - Engineer-Manager Otto Hess retired after 38 years of service. He was replaced by Secretary-Manager Leonard E. Kaufman.

1965 – Secretary-Manager Leonard E. Kaufman retired and was replaced by Donald R. Schofield who then held that title of Engineer-Manager from 1965-1979.

1970 – Teamsters Union replaces the Association, which had previously existed since 1941 at KCRC.

1979-1995 - James C. Porritt, Jr. was Managing Director of KCRC.

1980 - The North Complex was built consolidating of the Districts of Sparta, Cedar Springs, and Rockford into one operation.

1987 - The Central Complex was renovated. Today the building also houses the Department of Public Works and the Kent County Drain Commission.

1990 - In the southern end of Kent County the District Garages of Ada, Wyoming, and Caledonia were closed to make way for the combined South Complex.

1995 to Present - Jon Rice is Managing Director of KCRC.



<p>Coll. No. 125 Neg. # 125- E0772.3 Date: 1945- 10-23 View: Fox Deluxe Brewing Company</p>	<p>Description: Fox Deluxe Brewing Co., at 26 Michigan St. NW in the Belknap/Lookout neighborhood. It was located on the south side of Michigan Hill, just down from Immanuel Lutheran Church, at the corner of Ionia Ave. The building was originally built in 1892 for the Grand Rapids Brewing Co., but went vacant during Prohibition. GR Brewing reopened for a few years when Prohibition was repealed. The Michigan Brewing Co. operated the plant from 1935 until 1940, when Fox Brewing Co. took over until 1951. In 1964 the old brewery was torn down to make way for the State office building, which still occupies the site.</p>
--	--

1

This building, the old Fox Deluxe Brewing building, was later used by the Road Commission as a storage facility until 1924 when the Road Commission built its own garage at 1500 Scribner Ave. This photo is from the collection of the Grand Rapids Public Library.

<http://www.grpl.org/photocoll?cat=onlick&keynum=663>

03/31/2011