

## THE GRAND RIVER TRAIL (Cont.)

The Federal government bowed out of road building in Michigan when it became a state in 1837. While the Grand River Road reached as far as Brighton by 1840 with bridges over the Rouge, Huron and various small streams, nothing more than a trail for a horse existed west of Brighton. (Funds for road building came from the sale of land, subscription and taxes.)

When the Government surveys were made in the 1820s there was no provision for a right-of-way for roads; it was left up to the local land owners to provide the land. Perusal of a township map will show the roads were usually laid out along property lines. A road 3 rods wide took a strip  $1\frac{1}{2}$  rods wide off the property on each side of the line. Where swamps or lakes made it necessary to cross a farmer's land, he gave all of the land for the road. The new settler, having just claimed the land from the government for a small amount and needing roads, didn't object to this practice.

With the elimination of the toll houses along the Grand River Road c. 1880, (altho' the original contract signed in 1850 called for tolls for 60 years for the investors) it became a free road and subject to the same method of maintenance as other roads in the county. This was accomplished by the division of the townships into 'road districts' with an elected "pathmaster". In early spring the pathmaster would "call out" all of the men in his district to work out their road tax. (Each 60 acres of land owned meant  $2\frac{1}{2}$  days per year of road work.)

Bringing their teams, wagons, plows, drags, shovels and picks, etc., the farmers would haul gravel or dirt into low places, smooth ruts by dragging with a harrow, drain holes by digging trenches to run water off into the ditches other farmers had plowed. Since it was a diversion from their usual solitary life in the fields we can hope the farmers enjoyed this road repair work. Those who didn't or could not work out their \$1.00 tax had to pay in cash. As a boy of 10, Bill Pless, as other boys his age, was credited as a man against his father's road tax, driving a team hauling gravel from the pit to the hole in the road.

The "pathmaster" system served well for the time. Farmers were able to transport their produce to market without much difficulty over the roads they had built. He also built the fence along the road and kept the road side free of obnoxious weeds and brush often planting rows of maples or evergreen trees along the road. These, along with the growth of native trees, all combined to shade the traveler and his horses besides making a pleasant landscape. (To be continued. Condensed and edited from "A Scrapbook of Michigan Memorabilia" by Wm. A. Pless and "1880 History of Livingston County".)

BRIGHTON AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
P.O. Box 481  
BRIGHTON, MI. 48116

Printed courtesy  
OLD KENT BANK  
300 W. North  
Brighton, Mi. 48116