

**BRIGHTON AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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**Early Roads in Genoa Township — Grand River**

Grand River travels diagonally through Genoa from just north of Brighton at Hacker Road, to the Tuscola and Saginaw Bay Railroad overpass just east of Howell. This is pretty much the route of the early Indian Grand River Trail to the headwaters of the Grand River. Considering the very real possibility that England may try to take back the land ceded at the Treaty in 1783, the Federal government scheduled a route to Michigan’s interior, promoting the settlement of Michigan Territory.

Leaving Detroit and heading west, the land looker crossed streams, rivers and swamps on foot or horseback watching for surveyors’ marks to identify the acreage selected. Then back to Detroit to record the selection. Now how does one transfer one’s family, needed tools, articles and shelter? With a great deal of hard work. A wagon following a horse trail needed trees cut (and stumps pulled). Oxen struggled through marshes to move the heavily loaded wagon; then cross many a river.

When Michigan became a state in 1837, the Federal government bowed out of the obligation to build roads for the state. How to fund a plank road for easier transportation?

At that time Michigan’s Capital was located in Detroit. In 1848 it was determined a more central location was necessary. After some searching, a site in the center of Ingham County, a wilderness, was selected. Entrepreneurs, many owning property along the trail, compiled funds, received a charter and set about building a plank road for which tolls for various categories (sheep, horses, cattle, buggies, wagons) were charged at varying amounts, at a toll gate about every six miles. Toll gatekeepers were hired. The plank road bed was 18 feet wide and the planks, three inches thick, placed on stringers. Many of the planks were cut from the trees in the way.

By the time the railroad came through the county, 1870, that plank road was well worn. Gravel was spread by local expense.

Stagecoaches were able to make the trip from Detroit to Lansing, 90 miles, in 12 hours at the time. Being charged for a toll was not well received — “It’s just a pile of stones.”

With the turn of the 20th Century, a new mode of transportation arrived. By 1903, an occasional car was seen chugging its way on the Trail, now mostly gravel, maintained by local farmers. Hills, sand, clay, mud holes and ruts made a trip between towns a real adventure.

As more local people began buying cars, income from license plate sales and gasoline tax funds helped move road care responsibility from the farmer to the user.

Not long after Grand River was graveled, c. 1920, the State of Michigan, with Federal help took over paving Grand River and by 1926 it became Federal Highway U.S. 16. Circa 1945, maintenance reverted back to Michigan and it was designated M-16. Nearby Interstate 96 now moves a large percentage of travelers, and the old Indian Trail is known again as Grand River. Counties have the major responsibility of maintenance.

(Condensed and edited by Marieanna Bair from: writings of Bill Pless; “From Settlement to City” by Carol McMacken; “Yesteryears of Green Oak”, Green Oak Township Historical Society; plat maps. Additions/corrections requested 810-229-6402.)

The Brighton Area Historical Society extends sympathy to the family of  
**Yvonne Taylor**  
a long-time member of the Society.