

The building of Highway



by Michael Shirley

Driving along Highway 35 past sparkling lakes, huge granite outcroppings and pine forests, it is the surrounding countryside that captures our attention. The road beneath we take for granted. It is just another highway among the hundreds of highways that criss-cross this country.

But the road has a story of its own to tell: of men from this county, and from distant towns and cities, who worked unceasingly for three years on the largest construction project in the history of the Haliburton Highlands.

As you glide swiftly along the blacktop, think back to a time more than fifty years ago when the highway was being constructed. Imagine scores of men dumping wheelbarrow loads of gravel down embankments, hear the sound of hammers striking steel, the creak of harnesses as teams of draft horses strain against their load, and, in the distance, the rumbling sound of an explosion as another rock cut is blasted.

There, along the side of the highway, at Hunter Creek Road, Sun Valley, Twelve Mile Lake, Halls Lake and Saskatchewan Lake are the government

work camps - rows of buildings laid out like military encampments.

The country is in the midst of the Depression and this project is one of many across the country organized and funded by the government to fight unemployment.

The reconstruction of Highway 35 was undertaken by the Department of Northern Development, the forerunner of the Ministry of Transportation and Communications. The department was also responsible for grants to fund municipal road work under the Colonization Roads Act. Organized townships received full funding for the purchase of equipment and wages. Organized townships were reimbursed for 50% of their expenditures by the department.

Under the projects, funded in whole or in part by the provincial government, thousands of men found work. In 1931 for instance, 26,155 labourers and 10,482 teamsters were hired in counties across central Ontario. As the Depression worsened, these numbers declined because of provincial budget cuts, but the road jobs, as temporary as they might be, still benefitted several thousand men.

Reading through the minutes of council
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The road gang from Relief Camp 9 poses along Highway 35. Harry Cowen is seated on 'Sam' the horse seen at the right. (Photo courtesy of Harry Cowen)

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meetings held during the 1930's in Lutterworth and Minden townships, it is apparent that, while the municipal governments had many of the same problems and concerns as today, the Depression was having a profound effect on residents and creating a financial burden for the local government.

In 1932 the township of Lutterworth petitioned the deputy minister of the Department of Northern Development for a \$20,000 grant on roads for the relief of unemployment in the township and also asked the secretary of the unemployment relief fund for "\$1,000 for direct relief of persons in the township for food and clothing for the coming winter."

In October 1934 council passed a resolution that read in part, "We, the people of the Township of Lutterworth, are desirous of having some employment for our local people for the coming winter and have asked the Department to open two camps on the road from Miners Bay to Kinmount." In response, MPP William Newman wrote, "I fear this proposition is crowding the government too much, especially when we are building the road from Minden to Bobcaygeon in which camps, I believe your men could very well be absorbed."

Plea from Lutterworth councillors

Three months later council repeated their request for assistance from the department. A list of the names of 27 unemployed men, including several members and past members of council, along with the number of dependents of each man, was submitted to the department. The plea seems to have been successful since a special aid grant was given to the township in January, 1935.

The township itself would be responsible for one third of the costs of the project, but as is frequently noted in the minutes of the council meetings, the township was having difficulty collecting taxes. In an effort to square the accounts, the township passed a bylaw in 1935 giving local ratepayers the right to work on the road projects for wages that were redeemable on property taxes.

Only local residents were hired and those that owed the most were given the first opportunity to pay off their debt.

In 1935 roadworkers were paid \$2.00 a day while a man and a team of horses could earn double that amount. Five years earlier men were able to earn \$2.50 a day, but as the Depression continued, the wages gradually dropped to \$1.50 a day in 1933 before returning to pre-depression levels.

To put these figures in perspective, it should be pointed out that in 1934 butter cost 22¢/lb., coffee

was 45¢/lb., a loaf of bread cost 6¢, a hundred pound bag of bread flour went for \$2.29 and men's suits were on sale for \$20.00.

At the same time that the small improvement projects were being carried out on local municipal roads, the main enterprise in the county, the reconstruction of Highway 35 was underway.

Dick Kirkwood of Minden, was involved with the project from the beginning. "It started in the fall of 1931 and didn't end until the fall of 1934," he recalls and, unlike modern construction practices, the work went on year round. Mr. Kirkwood began as a driver for Ernie Windover, who had been appointed by the department to purchase lumber to construct the road camps. He later became a timekeeper beginning at Camp 10 near Saskatchewan Lake.

He remembers arriving at a lumber yard near Huntsville and seeing the surrounding hillside covered in stacks of lumber. "All the yards were full because they couldn't sell the lumber. Nobody could afford it." Thirteen camps were built the first year between Coboconk and Dorset, with the head office for the county located in Minden. The camps were comprised of bunkhouses, an office, stable, blacksmith shop, living quarters for the "Keymen" (the superintendent and foremen), a cookhouse and mess hall and the cook's quarters.

The bunkhouses, which measured 16 feet by 16 feet were erected on stone or block foundations and were constructed of rough cut lumber covered with tarpaper. The roofs were made of canvas stretched over a wood frame. The bunkhouses, each of which housed eight men, were not insulated so, during the long winter months one man in each camp was responsible for tending the fires. The stoves were fuelled with wood cut by hand from the nearby timber stands.

Supplies such as picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, drills, coal for the blacksmith's forge, clothing, blankets and food were transported to the railway station at Gelert then delivered to the camps by Hewitt Transport of Minden.

After work on the road got underway, about one hundred men lived in each camp, but as Dick Kirkwood points out, "The payroll for each month might have been as much as one hundred and forty men because a lot of the fellows were transients. They might stay for a few days or a week then leave."

When the project began, the men were paid the princely sum of \$10.00 a month plus room and board, but this amount was soon reduced to \$5.00 per month. They also had to pay 50¢ a month for doctor's fees. Dr. Wilfrid Crowe of Minden, who also served as the relief officer in Anson Township, travelled the highway from Miners Bay to Dorset in addition to making his regular rounds. As Dick

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Shovels and wheelbarrows were the main tools used during the construction of Highway 35. This photo, showing a stretch of the highway work near Halls Lake, was taken in 1934. (Photo courtesy of Ethel Greene)

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remembers, "We had no telephones in the camp, so we had to flag him down as he passed through whenever we needed him."

Fortunately there were few serious injuries on the job, although one man was killed near Halls Lake when crushed by a large boulder.

A commissary was set up at each camp where the men could buy clothing and other supplies. The amount of the purchase was deducted from the men's wages. Dick remembers, "They had to be careful not to overdraw. I remember one fellow who had only 2¢ left at the end of the month." Dick doesn't recall if the man was a smoker, but he remembers that with tobacco costing 10¢ a package, those who did smoke rolled very thin cigarettes and savoured every puff. In spite of the low wages many of the men were able to send a dollar or two home to their families each month.

As timekeeper Dick also had to register every man when they arrived at the camp. "If I didn't, they could spend the night, have breakfast in the morning, then disappear."

The men ate well

The wages may have been minimal and the accommodation spartan, but the men ate well. Crawley McCracken had the contract to supply meals at most of the camps in the county. He supplied the food and paid his cooks. "McCracken was paid 50¢ a day per man, so the cooks had to make the meals as cheaply as possible." But there was no shortage of food. Before the men set out for work at 8 a.m., they sat down to a breakfast of porridge, pancakes, sausages, corn syrup and home baked bread. Lunch and supper were also substantial.

Dick remembers the cook's helper having to peel 100 pounds of potatoes every day. If the men were working close to the camp, they would walk to the mess hall for lunch. But if they were too far away, the second cook and the cook's helper would use a wagon to deliver hot meals to the men on the job site.

Dick describes how the cook would mix the bread dough in the evening then put it in a large washtub. The tub was placed on poles over the cookstove which was kept burning all night. The dough would rise forming a giant loaf. Then in the morning, the cooks would cut it into small pieces,

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place them in pans and bake them in the oven.

As was the custom of the day in lumber camps, the men were not allowed to talk at the meal table. If they did, they had to face the wrath of the bullcook who would come bursting out of the kitchen usually armed with a large butcher knife. Needless to say, the men concentrated on eating and saved the conversation for later.

Men and horses

Modern roads and highways are built almost entirely by machines. Highway 35 was built by men and horses. The labourers would haul gravel and rocks by wheelbarrow and level the fill with shovels. Teams of horses removed stumps, dragged large boulders in stoneboats, and hauled gravel in wagons or sleighs.

The gravel was loaded shovelful by shovelful from pits along the roadway. One of the more arduous jobs involved breaking large rocks into smaller chunks to fill the spaces between the larger boulders. According to Dick, "If a foreman didn't like a man, he would put him to breaking stones. It was a great way to get rid of someone."

The old road that wound its way from Minden to Dorset usually skirted rock outcroppings and swamps. To straighten the highway, a lot of rock had to be blasted. The men would drill holes by hand to hold the dynamite.

The engineer would tell them where to drill and the depth of each hole. One man would hold the drill bit while two others took turns striking the shaft with sledge hammers. After each strike the bit was rotated a half turn. The man holding the bit would remove the dust from the hole using a long handled spoon.

Dick remembers, "If a fellow was older he would turn the bit and the younger fellows would strike. If they were all young they would trade off jobs."

One of the most important men in the camps was the blacksmith. Besides shoeing horses, he was also kept busy sharpening the bits. "The blacksmith would heat the drill on the forge then hammer the end to sharpen it. He would then heat it again and then plunge it in water to set the temper. It was important to get the temper just right. If it was too hard the drill would break. If it was too soft it wouldn't last."

Harry Cowen of Minden was among the many local residents who worked on the project. He did road work, drove a team for Angus Coulter and later delivered supplies for Hewitt Transport. He hasn't forgotten the drilling. "We used to drill eight feet in an eight hour day which is what they wanted from us. There were three of us doing it. You would hold for so long then get up and strike while the other

fellow held. You had to try and not miss the drill with the sledge hammer or you would hit somebody's hand. Every once in a while somebody would miss and the fellow would be mad and think it was done on purpose. I worked for \$4.50 a month and that was hand drilling too," he recalls laughing.

As the project progressed, air compressors driven by gasoline engines were used to power the drills. "I was at Camp 9, (near Halls Lake), when they brought in the first compressor. We used it on the rock cut this side of Sherwood Forest (at the first bend in the highway north of Carnarvon). We always called it Compressor House Hill."

Harry's wages improved when he was working for Angus Coulter as a teamster and were more in keeping with the wages he had earned while working in the lumber camps in the decade before the Depression. Angus paid him \$40 a month to drive the team of Sam and Rose, "The best, smartest team I ever knew."

Angus had another team on the project and recalls being paid \$2.75 a day, "And you had to supply your own feed." There were a lot of farmers in the area who had teams, and to ensure the work was distributed evenly, to share the wealth so to speak, each teamster would work at a camp for two to three weeks then return home." But, as Angus notes, "You could stay on longer if you were on the right side of politics." (The Conservatives were in power during most of the project.

As the depression dragged on, the construction of the highway continued to provide desperately needed employment for many local men as well as the unemployed workers from other parts of the province. Groups of men would be sent to Haliburton County from urban centres with high rates of unemployment. They arrived by train at Gelert or by bus.

As Harry recalls, "They would come in from a town that had a lot of unemployed. The town would buy them clothes then send them up here. They came from all over Ontario. Most of the men were pretty good. They would stay on the job and work hard even though there wasn't much incentive.

But others would sell their boots and work-clothes and leave." As Angus Coulter describes it, "Times were tough. There were too many good able men who couldn't find work." And yet in spite of the hardship, chronic unemployment and shortage of money, Harry believes, "We were happier then than now." Angus agrees, noting, "Everybody knew everybody's business. We got along and we trusted each other. It's different now."

Rural families were probably much better off than many people. Growing up on a farm outside of Carnarvon, Harry remembers, "We had horses,

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cattle, chickens and so on and most of what I ate as a kid was grown on our farm. We used to harvest about 150 bags of potatoes a year. Dad would sell some and use the money for flour, sugar, tea and such. So we did alright."

2300 employed on highways

It was inevitable that the highway would be reconstructed, but coming as it did in the dark days of the Depression, the job provided food, clothing and shelter for thousands of men over a three year period.

An article in the May 17, 1934 edition of The Lindsay Daily Post reported that 2300 men were working in the government road camps in the counties of Victoria and Haliburton and that most of these men would be eligible to vote in the upcoming provincial election.

The paper also reported the Liberal - Progressive candidate, William Newman, had received an enthusiastic welcome at a rally in the Village of Haliburton. In a rousing speech to the overflow crowd at the town hall, Newman criticized the Conservatives for their mismanagement, excessive spending and the \$610 million debt they had

incurred during their years in power.

According to the reporter, "The speaker attacked the government road projects in which he declared the present rush of road repair work, a mere election dodge, designed to buy the votes of the people. There had been a rumour circulating, he said, to the effect that if the Liberal Government were in power, all road work would cease. Such was not the case he assured the audience, the roadwork would be continued, roads would be built, and the money for their building would come out of the automobile and gasoline tax, as it should be, instead of sinking the province in debt and borrowing for this work."

The June 19, 1934 election saw the Liberals under Mitchell Hepburn come to power, ending 25 years of Conservative rule. William Newman won the Victoria - Haliburton riding, defeating Leslie Frost, MLA who like Newman had entered the political arena for the first time. Frost later won the seat after several unsuccessful attempts and went on to become the premier of the province.

Following the defeat of the Conservatives, the reconstruction of Highway 35 continued, but quite a number of men lost their jobs because of their support for the former government. The Liberals were in, and the Conservatives were out. The impact of the political change was muted somewhat as the

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project began to wind down after the election and the road camps were closed by November 1934.

Other roadwork would continue in the area, with the main projects in the 1930's being the reconstruction of Highway 121 between Minden and Haliburton, and the reconstruction of the road from Haliburton to Redstone Lake.

However, it was the reconstruction of Highway 35 that had the most immediate and long lasting effect on the county.

The impact of the reconstruction is perhaps best summed up in a report written in 1936 by the Colonization Road Engineer, A. L. McDougall. **"The most important and outstanding work in this division was the completion of the scenic highway from Coboconk to Dorset. The reconstruction of main roads in this area is a matter of extreme necessity. Built, as they were many years ago, as colonization roads, they were quite unsuited to present day traffic conditions. The benefits derived from their reconstruction have been reflected in a marked increase in tourist business, and in industrial development, particularly lumbering. He notes later in his report, "Traffic has increased to**

such an extent, that on one day early in August, over one thousand motors passed through the village of Minden."

Before the massive project was undertaken, the roadways were little more than glorified dirt roads twisting and turning as they followed the contours of the land. It was possible to drive to Lindsay in less than two hours by automobile, barring mechanical breakdowns and inevitable blowouts, but this was only under ideal conditions.

To the north, the Bobcaygeon Road linked the settlements of Hindon Hill, Pine Springs and Dorset. The roadway that later became Highway 35 traced a path through Carnarvon, Halls Lake and Pine Springs meeting the Bobcaygeon Road just south of the Leslie Frost Centre.

While it was possible to travel these roads by automobile, they were more suited to horse drawn wagons or sleighs. This was especially true in the spring when the road beds turned into a series of mudholes waiting to trap any unsuspecting motorist. Dick Kirkwood remembers one trip from Minden to Saskatchewan Lake that took all night because the car became stuck so often.

The reconstruction of Highway 35 changed all that, and by the time the project was completed, the Highlands had left behind the horse and buggy era and entered the automobile age.



Workers pose for a picture at the Hall's Lake Relief Camp. Note the Orillia direction sign over the door. (Photo courtesy of Ethel Greene)