

Paved With Good Inte



Good Roads, the Automobile, and the
Rhetoric of Rural Improvement in the
Kansas Farmer, 1890–1914

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by Paul S. Sutter

In 1896 a group of perturbed farmers confronted William Allen White on the streets of Emporia and berated him for his criticism of their political goals. Angry and cowed, White retired to his office to compose a piece that helped make his reputation as a journalist. Entitled “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” the piece received a national audience and won White fame among Republican leaders. With tongue squarely in cheek, White painted his fellow Kansans into a premodern corner:

Oh, this is a state to be proud of! . . . What we need is not more money, but less capital, fewer white shirts and brains, fewer men with business judgement, and more of those fellows who can boast that they are “just ordinary clodhoppers. . . .”

We don’t need population, we don’t need wealth, we don’t need well-dressed men on the streets, we don’t need cities on the fertile prairies; you bet we don’t! What we are after is the money power. Because we have become poorer and ornerier and meaner than a spavined, distempered mule, we, the people of Kansas, propose to kick; we don’t care to build up, we wish to tear down.

With the fervor of a booster, White chastised the agrarian grab for political power by depicting farmers as reactionary opponents to economic modernization. Concerned for the increasingly soiled reputation of the state, White lashed out at the “hayseeds” who, in his mind, were undermining the state’s prosperity. His voice was an important one in creating what historian Gene Clanton called the “negative climate of opinion” that stunted the growth of the Populist movement.¹ White’s rhetoric rested on a logic that equated modernization—in White’s terms a process that included urbanization, increased population, business virtues, a higher standard of living, and even a fashion aesthetic—with rationality and national destiny. In White’s mind, farmers were guilty of opposing the inevitable and doubly guilty for being blind to

the fact. Ironically the national circulation of the editorial likely accomplished the undesired effect of reinforcing the negative image that White sought to dismantle.²

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1. O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), 242; White’s editorial quoted in *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946), 282.

2. Scott McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 174–75; Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 44–49; Robert S. La Forte, *Leaders of Reform: Progressive Republicans in Kansas, 1900–1916* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 2–3.

White's editorial was part of the charged rhetoric of an era in which discussions of modernization resonated with symbolic language and emotional appeals. Depictions of the agricultural population as "backward" were rife, although they were not always as vehement or animated as White's diatribe. This article examines how such depictions shaped the discussion about the improvement of rural roads and the acceptance of the automobile in Kansas. It is based on a thorough analysis of the discourse about good roads and the automobile found in the Topeka-based weekly farm journal, the *Kansas Farmer*, between 1890 and 1920.

Discussions about rural road improvement occurred in two phases. The early good roads movement of the 1880s and 1890s was a contemporary of the agrarian challenge and was profoundly shaped by Populist and anti-Populist rhetoric. A second phase of the good roads movement occurred in the first two decades of the twentieth century, an era in which Populists yielded the mantle of reform to progressive Republicans.³ The automobile was central to this second phase, shaping the arguments both for and against road improvement. Many of the themes of both the agrarian movement and of the rhetorical backlash against its participants remained a part of this second phase, although they were somewhat transmogrified by Progressive Era concerns. Indeed there is a noticeable shift in the pages of the *Kansas Farmer* from a more open and searching dialogue about modernization to a reliance on authoritative notions of progress, efficiency, and expertise.⁴ This article looks at how periodical literature encouraged Kansans to empower themselves by modernizing the farm and by challenging the market on its own terms.

Railroad dominance during the mid-nineteenth century stifled serious discussion of road improvement on a national scale. Although rural residents struggled with the poor conditions of the nation's

roads, sentiment for road improvement was not effectively mobilized until the 1880s. And when it was, it came from an unlikely source: bicyclists. The bicycle was an important precursor of the automobile. Many of the technological achievements we tend to associate with the automobile are more appropriately credited to the bicycle. These include mass production, accurately machined gears, and pneumatic tires, among other innovations.⁵ Above all else, however, cyclists desired passable roads, and as they ventured into the countryside they came into conflict with rural residents about the condition of the roads. To represent their interests, cyclists organized themselves into clubs, including the League of American Wheelmen (LAW) founded in 1880. By 1888 LAW had launched a national campaign for better roads, a campaign that is widely considered the genesis of the modern good roads movement. It was not, however, a movement that fit easily into the agrarian agenda. According to Philip Mason, farmers raised their voices "in bitter opposition" for numerous reasons: fear of increased taxes, threats to their control over highway administration, and the potential meddling of city folks with their notions of expertise.⁶ Many saw LAW as a challenge to rural autonomy.

LAW initially manifested some hostility toward the farmer. A LAW publication from 1891 entitled "The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer" berated farmers for their backward concerns. In this account its author, Isaac B. Potter, told of a visit to his fictitious farming friend "Hubmire." Potter depicted Hubmire as irrationally conservative and ignorant because he refused to acknowledge the effects of primitive road conditions in the nation's rural areas. To Potter, Hubmire was a "typical representative of the farming class" who, true to his name,

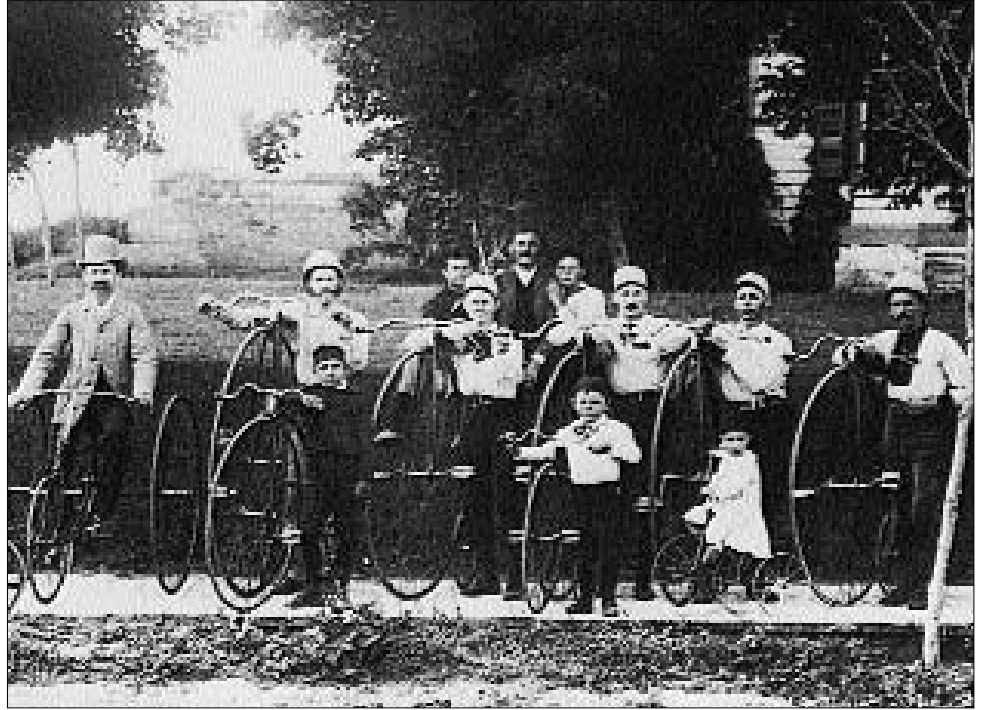
5. Peter J. Hugill, "Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States 1880-1920," *Geographical Review* 72 (July 1972): 327; see also James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 4-5.

6. Philip P. Mason, "The League of American Wheelmen and the Good Roads Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1957), 90-92; see also Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 11-13.

3. See La Forte, *Leaders of Reform*.

4. Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

Bicyclists in the 1880s mobilized sentiment for improved road conditions. To represent their interests in their conflict with rural residents, they formed the League of American Wheelmen in 1880, which in 1888 launched a campaign that is considered the genesis for the good roads movement. Pictured here is the Dodge City bicycle club in 1892.



refused to pull himself out of the literal and symbolic mud of inferior roads. Rather than addressing farmers' fiscal concerns about road improvement as legitimate, Potter opted for rhetorical intimidation. While LAW changed its tune by the end of the century, farmers were slow to forget the condescending tones heard during the movement's early years.⁷

There is no reason to think that Kansas was not affected equally by the proliferation of the bicycle. Joseph Pennell's photographs of Junction City, Kansas, in the 1890s document the bicycle's ubiquitous presence.⁸ From the 1890s onward, one finds in the pages of the *Kansas Farmer* articles and advertisements discussing the bicycle's merits and drawbacks. An ad for Columbia bicycles claimed that their product provided "just the kind of exercise that stimulates the monotony of country life." An editorial in 1895 suggested that "the bicycle is displacing many horses formerly used, especially in cities and towns."⁹ The bicycle provided a quick and simple form of transport, although some were still worried about certain impacts of the bicycle. It was, as the previous quote indicates, a tool

of the townspeople, an invader to the agricultural hinterland. In another 1895 editorial came a report of a woman who, while walking along a rural road, had been accosted and robbed by a man on a bicycle. Bicycles, the author implied, brought strangers into the rural landscape; improved roads promised only to facilitate such travel. Luckily in this case the woman was able to lure the bandit off his bicycle, at which point she grabbed the vehicle and went for help.¹⁰

Some Kansans were skeptical about cyclists' demands for better roads. In a speech to the Cowley County Farmer's Institute, I.O. Rambo implored those in attendance to submit to the expertise of competent engineers rather than continue to operate with the substandard roads that came with the use of statute labor. (Rural roads in the nineteenth century were built primarily by local officials who lacked training as engineers and were often maintained by local residents who chose to work in the place of tax payments).¹¹ But Rambo also issued a warning against catering to cyclists, clearly intimating that they were interlopers of a different economic class. Good roads, Rambo suggested, were meant to meet the needs and

7. "The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer" is cited in Mason, "The League of American Wheelmen," 101–2.

8. Joseph Pennell Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence.

9. *Kansas Farmer* (Topeka), June 10, 1897, 367; "The Bicycle," *ibid.*, June 5, 1895, 360.

10. "A Bandit on a Bicycle," *ibid.*, March 6, 1895, 150.

11. Seely, *Building the American Highway System*, 12.

standards of the farmers who built and paid for them not interest groups like LAW that offered farmers little but insult.¹² Rambo foreshadowed a debate about the nature of the road as a public space, a debate that focused on who should properly be using and paying for rural roads.

In 1895, largely due to the efforts of LAW and its affiliates, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) created the Office of Road Inquiry (ORI) to survey conditions of the nation's rural roads and to provide advice to local authorities. ORI was significant for a number of reasons. First, it represented the federal government's entry into the discussion of road conditions, a presence that gained strength despite an initial wariness to assert influence. Second, the placement of ORI within the USDA suggested the extent to which the argument for good roads became an agricultural one. The pages of the *Kansas Farmer* indicated that farmers, with some exceptions, were not against good roads per se; they were worried about the imposition of external authority, concerned that they would have to build roads to suit the standards of wealthy urbanites, and aware of the potentially high cost of road improvement. Although farmers in general, and Kansas farmers in particular, frequently cursed the conditions of their roads, they did not trust the urgency with which many approached improvement.¹³ Finally, the ORI was one of a number of federal bureaus in this era that expressed concern, in typically progressive fashion, about the "amateurish" way in which Americans cared for their resources.¹⁴ From the 1890s forward, state and local governments, city- and townfolk, the press, and a growing number of farmers pushed ideas of progress that rejected earlier concerns about debt and entangling economic alliances.

The federal government, since Kansas' entrance into the Union, had given the state a small percentage

of the receipts from land sales to finance internal improvements. Despite such aid, the county was the governmental unit most responsible for building and maintaining roads in Kansas prior to the advent of the automobile. Traditionally the county levied road taxes, which residents could either pay in cash or in labor. Road districts were established and supervisors appointed, and charges of corruption and poor administration were frequent. Indeed much of the sentiment for adopting a system of county engineers and professional road crews played upon these issues. As the ORI evolved into the Office of Public Road Inquiry (1899) and then the Bureau of Public Roads (1905), the ideal of apolitical expertise, embodied by the highway engineer, asserted greater influence over the nation's development of a system of roads.¹⁵ Kansans resisted these trends; the state was one of the last to form a highway commission and was dead last in putting together a system of state aid for road building. It was not until the automobile became a common sight that Kansans were pushed to action.¹⁶

Along with pressure brought by groups such as the League of American Wheelmen and the National League for Good Roads (1892), the advent of rural free delivery (RFD) of mail in 1896 and its corollary that designated routes be properly maintained (1899) chipped away at rural resolve to maintain roads on their own terms. "Nothing else," historian Wayne Fuller argued, "brought the sense of urgency to the good roads movement that rural delivery did." The threat of discontinuing mail service as a result of impassable roads was a powerful one, and mail carriers provided farmers with constant reminders of such a

15. *Ibid.*

16. Mary Scott Rowland, "Managerial Progressivism in Kansas, 1916-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1980), 63; see also Arman J. Habegger, "Out of the Mud: The Good Roads Movement in Kansas, 1900-1917" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1971). Numerous articles in the *Kansas Farmer* are informative of the process by which Kansans came to accept more centralized and professional control over road construction. Rowland's dissertation also contains an important discussion of the politics of road building and maintenance, but she does not cover the years prior to 1916 in any detail.

12. I.O. Rambo, "Roads," *Kansas Farmer*, March 31, 1898, 211.

13. For an example of such a reaction, which is cited at length later in the *Kansas Farmer*, see letter from M. J. Wells, *ibid.*, January 27, 1892, 1.

14. Seely, *Building the American Highway System*, 11-23.

The advent in 1896 of rural free delivery (RFD) of mail and its stipulation that designated routes be properly maintained was a boon to the good roads movement. This RFD mail wagon was photographed in Wabaunsee County in 1899.



possibility.¹⁷ As national groups, including the federal government, increased their scrutiny of the condition of Kansas roads, and as agrarian political power rose and fell, a more subtle form of rhetorical pressure came to bear on Kansas farmers.

Populism had affected national perceptions of Kansans. An 1898 editorial in the *Kansas Farmer* made this explicit: "It was charged at home and abroad that the party was one of repudiation and dishonor, and the bottled up wrath of fools who had foolishly parted with their money was poured in multiplied measure upon our people."¹⁸ Populism was seen, by at least some Kansans, as an embarrassment. The press buttressed the accuracy of such perceptions, and the party's soiled reputation was turned upon Kansans as a matter of conscience—in the above case by a voice that purported to represent the interests of the farmers themselves. As William Allen White had portrayed his own state's farmers as backward in the 1890s, so the government, national organizations, and the press depicted the rural environment as impoverished and an embarrassment to the nation during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Progressives adopted the rhetoric of "backwardness," which the Republicans had so successfully used to combat

17. Wayne E. Fuller, "Good Roads and the Rural Free Delivery of Mail," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42 (June 1955), 67–83. The quote is from Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1964), 189.

18. "Why This Change?" *Kansas Farmer*, February 3, 1898, 76.

the Populists, and used it as a tool of persuasion to push rural improvement.

In a letter to the *Kansas Farmer* in 1892, Marcus J. Wells, a farmer from Woodston, Kansas, expressed a common reaction to the first phase of ferment for good roads:

What is the meaning of the effort of the metropolitan press to create an interest in good roads? Is the object to get really good roads, or to find investment for the money of our eastern capitalists? The farmers of our country should be cautious about accepting the calculations intended to prove the feasibility of building good roads and bonding our counties to pay for them. . . . Such figuring as this is responsible for much of our farm indebtedness today. . . . The mania for borrowing has resulted in improving farms for others to enjoy, and I submit that if we build public roads with borrowed money, we shall soon find ourselves in the condition to get little benefit from them. . . . Our farmers will do well to beware the voice of the siren speaking through the subsidized press of the large cities. It will lure them onto the rocks of destruction.¹⁹

19. Letter from M.J. Wells, *Kansas Farmer*, January 27, 1892, 1. Information about Wells' occupation was gleaned from the 1900 U.S. Census, Kansas, Rooks County.

Although his rhetoric was replete with distrust, Wells recognized the hazards of speculation, mortgaging, and bond issues, particularly railroad bonds, which had fueled Kansas' boom in the early 1880s and which had created havoc when prices bottomed out at the end of the decade.²⁰ Debt circumscribed agricultural behavior; the deeper a farmer sagged into debt, the more market production became a necessity and the more vulnerable the farmer became to economic and environmental cycles. Wells rejected a consumer ethic that suggested farmers spend their way to prosperity, insisting instead that farmers use fiscal logic to assess the reasonableness of road improvement. But Wells also recognized that the initial impetus for improved roads was in part an urban one. Although Wells may have accepted such a landscape as a goal, he insisted that rural road improvement be an indigenous and thoughtful process. He had to contend, however, with the powerful moral and aesthetic arguments—"the siren"—that connected status with the condition of roads.

While some Kansans formulated an argument for fiscal conservatism, others vilified that argument as an obstacle to progress and offered in its stead a vision of a modern prairie that only the courage to capitalize could achieve. Within a month readers of the *Kansas Farmer* were privy to another side of the story in a lengthy article by former governor George W. Glick. After pointing out the inevitable increases in land values that accompanied good roads and the monetary losses incurred by farmers due to poor roads, Glick played the booster:

Good highways make all the surroundings more pleasant; the easy inter-communication adds pleasure to the social conditions; friendships are nurtured and preserved; love of home and surroundings are instilled into the minds of the young, and in such localities family homesteads are occupied

for years. . . . These conditions are the direct profits that good highways bestow. . . . Poor teams, muddy dooryards, no barns, hungry cattle, and a score of yelping curs, are the unfailing sights exhibited to the unfortunate wanderer who is compelled to pass through that "vale of despond" where poor roads prevail.²¹

Glick appealed to a number of concrete concerns—the transience of the farm population and the flight of the young to cities, land values and the costs entailed due to limited access to markets—but he also conflated questions about rural identity and image with the issue of road improvement. Rather than addressing the legitimate fiscal fears of people like Marcus Wells, Glick tried to embarrass farmers into submission. He did this by placing poor roads within an aesthetic of rural poverty. Poor roads in particular and a disorderly rural environment in general were signs of the farmer's depravity. Glick encouraged farmers to view their surroundings as status writ large. Finally, Glick introduced the outsider as cultural voyeur and judge of moral probity, making it clear that farmers were being scrutinized by the nation. Whether poor or not, the farm family had to avoid the appearance of poverty at all costs, lest the value of their land depreciate and their social standing plummet.

Both Wells and Glick employed manipulative rhetoric, but while Wells depicted a distant enemy, Glick indicted the farmers themselves. And while a large number of farmers were likely more sympathetic to Wells' characterization of the situation, Glick's argument was not without its power. Instead of looking to the government or corporations themselves for regulation of market conditions that created economic inequality, boosters like Glick tried to persuade the farmers of Kansas that they alone were responsible for their predicament and that they alone could choose the path toward resolution. After 1896 many Kansas farmers assessed Populism's political demise in the progressive terms that served their foes

20. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion*, 74–83.

21. George Glick, "Public Highways and Their Improvement," *Kansas Farmer*, February 24, 1892, 4–5.

This commentary in a December 1914 issue of the Kansas Farmer illustrates a powerful argument in favor of good roads: aiding farmers in bringing their products to market and thereby decreasing monetary losses.



so well. The challenge to the direction of American economic growth that the Populists had posed was swallowed by a consensus that sought to incorporate agricultural demands into a larger ethic and rhetoric of progress and modernity. Even before this shift, however, other important themes emerged as part of the discourse on roads.

The logic and aesthetics of suburbanization played a major part in the argument for improving Kansas' roads in the 1890s. In a letter to the *Kansas Farmer*, John Van Voorhis Gould invoked a number of suburban themes. Citing one of the best reasons for promoting better roads, Gould suggested that "farm lands, not too remote from cities, would readily sell for suburban residences." This argument that good roads raised property values was ubiquitous. Continuing, Gould noted that roads "outlined with trees . . . would be very suggestive of boulevards, [and would] make cheerful and brighten the monotony . . . of farm life." Trees were lauded as the primary agents in the pastoralization of the Kansas landscape and betrayed the aesthetic preferences of many who populated the recently settled state. Consonant with one of the main themes of nineteenth-century reform, Gould expressed his faith in the potential moral benefits of a more ordered and attractive environment. Gould ended his exposition with some moralizing characteristic of the arguments for good roads. "I believe," he predicted, "that there would be fewer paupers and

less insanity in our land if we had a good system of public roads."²²

Scholars have tended to stress the urban origins of the suburban impulse, citing how transportation innovations like the streetcar and later the automobile allowed urbanites to reside outside of the city, and how urban life itself created the conditions under which the pastoral ideal of the manicured countryside flourished.²³ Discussions about improving roads in Kansas suggest that the imposition and adoption of these ideals by rural dwellers is a process that deserves more attention. While urbanites sought to infuse the city with the fresh air of rural living, farmers discussed the possibilities of urbanizing and modernizing the countryside in similar terms. In his study of the origins of the American suburb, John Stilgoe suggested that a "subtle shift in language" distinguished agricultural and suburban interests in the Country Life Movement, a distinction between moral

22. John Van Voorhis Gould, "Good Roads," *ibid.*, April 6, 1892, 5.

23. For an example of this urban interpretation of suburbanization, see Joel A. Tarr, "From City to Suburb: The 'Moral' Influence of Transportation Technology," in *American Urban History*, ed. Alexander B. Callow, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 202–12.

and aesthetic progress. Rural reformers bombarded country dwellers with the idea of “improvement,” while suburbanites, whose lives apparently were already “improved,” were instructed to “beautify” their surroundings.²⁴ A reading of the *Kansas Farmer* suggests the adequacy of Stilgoe’s distinction to a certain point. Most of the discussion through the 1890s focuses on improvement, which, although it had a powerful aesthetic component, was more practical in nature. With the arrival of the first automobiles in Kansas in the early 1900s, however, the *Kansas Farmer* supported an interest in beautification as well as improvement. And that interest was consistently professed by women.

Women played an important part in modernizing the countryside. Indeed evidence points to their unique, gendered role as arbiters of beauty and taste. Lucretia Levett insisted that women’s efforts remain distinct when she presented her paper, entitled “Roadside Adornment,” to a Farmer’s Institute meeting in 1904. “I do not wish to discuss the grading, draining, and working of roads,” she concluded, eschewing the technical drudgery of road improvement. “I will leave that to the men, but will speak of some things that may be done to beautify what is often an eyesore as well as a harbor of noxious weeds.” Levett, leaving the mechanics of improvement to men, embraced the challenge of beautification. Like George Glick before her, Levett invoked the gaze of the outside observer: “When we plant a tree by the highway, we are doing what we can to make the traveler who comes that way happier.” The presettlement plains and prairies were, in Levett’s mind, flat and featureless landscapes. Trees brought variety, beauty, and civility; they domesticated the countryside. After making the point that once Kansas was but a treeless plain, Levett jumped to the conclusion that “to-day its homes are beautiful,” leaving the readers to supply the apparently obvious logic that

24. John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 212–13.

trees equal beauty and that beauty equals prosperity. Levett urged Kansas residents to craft a new level of rural sophistication, one based on the appearance of grace and mastery.²⁵

Mary M. Bates, the wife of a Topeka florist and a member of a local forestry club, added leisure to beautification as an appropriate topic of female discourse. Like Levett, Bates insisted that all talk of constructing roads be left to men. In “Women! Talk Good Roads,” she urged women to take advantage of the fact that “the Lord gave women the gift of talk with the idea in view that they might keep at the men so they would do the work.” Besides suggestions for beautification, like clearing weeds and planting alfalfa by the sides of the road, the pleasures of driving concerned Bates. She wanted a beautiful countryside as a destination for her outings. Women, Bates implied, had a unique role to play in rural improvement, one defined by contemporary notions of gender and separate spheres. Without challenging male roles, Bates suggested that women could encourage and shape rural improvement by making it clear to their husbands how such efforts would increase leisure opportunities and thus female happiness. Bates and Levett illustrate how women’s voices became distinct ones in the debate over modernizing and beautifying the rural environment, particularly where roads and the automobile were concerned.²⁶

Yet another powerful strand of the argument for good roads combined an urgency to control and improve the environment with a need to think in fiscal terms about the condition of rural roads. These arguments took many forms, but all centered around the idea that bad roads cost farmers more money annually in hauling costs than would road improvement itself. Furthermore, good roads meant that the uncertainties of the natural setting—knee-deep mud, storms, snow, and ice—could be mastered, permit-

25. Lucretia E. Levett, “Roadside Adornment,” *Kansas Farmer*, October 6, 1904, 990.

26. Mrs. Walter Bates, “Women! Talk Good Roads,” *ibid.*, August 11, 1904, 794–95. Information about Bates’ identity was taken from the 1900 U.S. Census, Kansas, Shawnee County, City of Topeka.

Increased pleasure of driving and rural beautification were reasons for some supporters of road improvement, while other advocates sought to escape being mired in the mud of nineteenth-century conditions.



ting the marketing of products when prices were highest. Instead of eliminating the “gambling in grain” bemoaned by many, farmers were encouraged to grasp control of the system itself by reducing the obstacles between themselves and the market. As George Glick stated, “poor roads practically increase the distance to market.”²⁷ Farmers had a choice to make: either continue with roads that frequently were impassable but required minimal investment and therefore minimal debt, or capitalize the roadway and put themselves in a position where they would need the promised savings to repay the debt incurred. Arguments presented in the *Kansas Farmer* point to a strengthening of the latter position as farmers entered the twentieth century.

Playing on the familiar Populist theme that poor distribution was behind farmers’ economic woes, G.E. Miller of Republic, Kansas, concluded: “[The] remedy is not to be found in a return to the conditions of a century ago. . . . The genius of the past has given us an excellent system of production. We must provide an equitable distribution.” Other interests contributed their own logic. The Electric Wheel Company submitted an article that stressed the money-saving aspects of good roads, insisting that lowered shipping costs “would be sufficient to give every farmer an asphalt pavement from his front door to the nearest market.”²⁸

The promise of saving money by spending money gained credence as the shroud of agricultural depression lifted around the turn of the century. But the 1890s saw resistance. Farmers were not always inclined to swallow the logic of improvement. Mortimer Whitehead, a lecturer for the National Grange, warned about the danger of being seduced by arguments for good roads. “The alcohol of the sentiment,” he proffered, “is doing its work, aided and abetted by engineers, professors, and manufacturers of stone crushers, machinery men and dealers, and other ‘interested’ parties.”²⁹ Farmers, according to Whitehead, had to be ever on their guard against commercial predation in the guise of progress.

Others saw it differently. After arguing for the fiscal beneficence of improved roads, Elwood E. Douglas, a farmer from Melvern, Kansas, concluded that “beside economy from a business standpoint, a luxury of health and pleasure to all classes could be secured by having such public highways as this progressive age requires and is beginning to demand.”³⁰ Douglas implicitly suggested what others later made clear—good roads were an emerging national priori-

27. *Kansas Farmer*, February 24, 1892, 4. The phrase “gambling in grain” is borrowed from William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991).

28. G.E. Miller to *Kansas Farmer*, February 8, 1893, 6; “Good Roads Will Save Big Money,” *ibid.*, February 24, 1898, 123.

29. Information on Whitehead’s position comes from National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, *Journal of the Proceedings of the 27th Session* (Philadelphia: J.A. Wagenseller, 1893); Mortimer Whitehead, “Whence Came the Good Road Craze?” *Kansas Farmer*, June 14, 1893, 9.

30. Elwood E. Douglas, “The Good Roads Agitation,” *Kansas Farmer*, May 10, 1900, 394.

ty, perhaps even part of the nation's destiny. To him they were an essential nationalizing force, breaking down the divisive barriers of geography and class. Market access and the encouragement provided by rural free delivery were strong elements in the nationalization of this sentiment. Douglas, far from succumbing to the demands of urbanites or industrialists, saw good roads as part of a sensitive reading of the age itself. Although his comments were made a decade later, George C. Diehl, chairman of the National Good Roads Board of the American Automobile Association, echoed Douglas' sentiment:

every mile of improved road anywhere in the United States benefits all the people of the United States in almost equal degree. To improve the road over which the apple-grower of the Yakima Valley hauls his fruit to the packing sheds of the growers' association means cheaper apples for the people of Philadelphia, New Orleans, or Boston. A better road . . . means that the rural mail-carriers can make the trips from these post-offices to the farms along the route more regularly and eventually more frequently, and that by thus bringing the farmer into closer contact with the world markets not only is his selling power increased, but his buying power also.³¹

As the movement for good roads jumped into the present century, the interests of farmers in Kansas and the perceived interests of the nation as a whole were more frequently discussed as if they were one.

Perhaps no one better epitomizes the progressive impulse to improve and standardize the lives of rural Americans, through efforts like the Country Life Movement, than Theodore Roosevelt. In a rousing speech given at the Good Roads Convention, held during the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1903, Roosevelt urged the audience to consider the role of good roads in raising the level of

American civilization. Invoking the Roman Empire's road-building achievements, Roosevelt launched into a discussion of the conquest good roads would afford:

And we, to whom space is less of an obstacle than ever before in the history of any nation, we who have spanned a continent . . . we, who take so little account of mere space, must see to it that the best means of nullifying the existence of space are at our command.³²

Part of the goal of such conquest was economic. But Roosevelt, whose speech was reprinted in the *Kansas Farmer*, had social and moral concerns as well. Good roads, Roosevelt concluded, "are needed for their effects on the industrial conditions of the country districts, and I am almost tempted to say that they are needed even more for their effect upon the social conditions of the country."³³ For Roosevelt and many other good roads advocates, roads were the most representative physical symbol of the nation's strength—of the far-reaching connections between individuals. Their condition spoke directly of the strength of ties between groups, of access to the common goals of prosperity. Poor roads, in Roosevelt's mind, placed a portion of the populace in the retarded condition of spatial separation and isolation. Progressives like Roosevelt cringed at the notion of farmers mired in the mud of nineteenth-century conditions.

Perhaps no one piece of machinery was as responsible for the transformation of rural life in the early twentieth century as the automobile. Much has been written about the social and economic impact of automobiles and the good roads that accompanied them—how they put a significant dent in the cursed rural isolation, led to the rise and transformation of rural towns and economies, and expanded farmers' horizons. But little has been said about the ideological context in which the automobile became a chosen technology. How did farmers in Kansas greet the

31. George C. Diehl, "For Good Roads," *Harper's Weekly* 56 (April 6, 1912): 12.

32. Theodore Roosevelt, "Why Want Good Roads?" *Kansas Farmer*, May 28, 1903, 592.

33. See Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, particularly his chapter entitled "Annihilating Space: Meat"; Roosevelt, "Why Want Good Roads?" 592.

availability of automotive technology? How did farmers envision, and how were they encouraged to envision, the possibilities the automobile presented? That the farmers of Kansas did accept the automobile into their lives in a dramatic way is easy to establish. In 1914 the *Kansas Farmer* estimated that fifty thousand automobiles were in Kansas, thirty thousand of which belonged to farmers. In the 1920 agricultural census, the first census in which such categories as motor vehicle ownership were included, Kansas ranked third in percentage of farms that owned automobiles at 62 percent. Kansas was one of eleven states, all of them west of the Mississippi, that counted 10.7 or more automobiles for every hundred residents.³⁴

The promise of technology played a prominent role in Kansans' vision of the future. The *Kansas Farmer* expressed pride in the technological strides farmers had made, at the home and in the fields. "From a mere slave," an editorial concluded:

the farmer has come, with all these conveniences, to be a respected and intelligent individual. He has been emancipated from severe manual labor and has become independent. By machines his intellect is refreshed, his home made more pleasant. The farm laborer has not been thrown out of employment by the introduction of these machines. His labor is of a different kind, only.³⁵

A number of important buttons were pushed in this piece: the farmer's reputation as unintelligent, the appeal of the free-labor ideology, a connection between technology and democratic values, and the increased pressure for farmers to improve their surroundings. Machines afforded a new sort of freedom—freedom from excessive manual labor and a

34. "This and That for Good Roads," *Kansas Farmer*, December 12, 1914, 3; Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Volume V, Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 514; George Kirkham Jarvis, "The Diffusion of the Automobile in the United States: 1895–1969" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1972), 189.

35. "Invention—Its Relation to the Farmer and Farm Laborer," *Kansas Farmer*, July 31, 1895, 485.

fickle natural environment. Respectability and intelligence, this editorial intoned, arrived on the farm with the first friction matches and sewing machines, and above all else with the automobile. The machine meant modernity.

Farmers were no strangers to technology. The *Kansas Farmer* is replete with discussions of the merits of various technologies, from steam and wind power to gasoline and electricity. Frequently isolated from sources of mechanical expertise, farmers had to learn how to do repairs themselves.³⁶ Farmers were using steam-powered tractors as early as the 1890s, and they had some exposure to and experience with gasoline engines before the automobile appeared on the scene.³⁷ When the automobile did appear, however, it had to pass a few tests before farmers would admit its usefulness.

Prior to the automobile, the horse was the motive power of choice for transportation and travel on and from the farm. The shift from biological to mechanical power offered a few challenges. The earliest automobiles in the United States were expensive. Usually farmers first encountered the automobile in the hands of the rich urbanite out in the country for a joyride. Aside from the speeds these autos achieved and the annoyance of automobilists trudging through yards in search of water for radiators or the perfect picnic site, there were numerous instances of automobiles spooking horses. Many motorists were not sensitive to complaints that they used, monopolized, and frequently damaged roads that they had no part in

36. Michael Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America* (Hamden, Conn.: Anchor Books, 1979), 46, provides a lengthy discussion about farmers' familiarity with machine technology; see also Joseph Interrante, "You Can't Go To Town in a Bath-tub: Automobile Movement and the Reorganization of Rural American Space, 1900–1930," *Radical History Review* 21 (Fall 1979): 151–68.

37. Thomas D. Isern, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 71–72; see also Harry Morgan Mason, *Life on the Dry Line: Working the Land, 1902–1944* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992), 5. That same year a discussion was held concerning the importance of Kansas' petroleum reserves, with particular emphasis on the potential of gasoline power. Also around this time, advertisements for gasoline engines started to appear. See "Oil of Importance to Kansas," *Kansas Farmer*, April 15, 1897, 232.

maintaining.³⁸ The farmers, who paid the taxes for these roads, saw them as public in a limited sense; they were open to use for all those who paid for their upkeep. Urban motorists, on the other hand, not only transgressed this informal boundary but often made themselves at home in farmers' fields for meals or a night's sleep. Compared with the cities and towns of their everyday experience, the vast spaces of the rural countryside seemed unowned. The increased radius of the urban tourist contributed to conflicts over the use of rural public space, conflicts that farmers sometimes settled by littering rural routes with glass, logs, trenches, and the occasional blast of shot.³⁹

The challenge to the well-entrenched horse economy also was a major one. Farmers and other rural residents had significant capital tied up in horses and did not always respond positively to the notion of upgrading to an automobile. The automobile also threatened the horse-based economy of blacksmiths, breeders, harness and saddlemakers, and wagon and carriage manufacturers. The city of Lawrence provides an example of this scenario. In 1900 Lawrence had a strong horse economy with horse-drawn streetcars, eleven blacksmiths, five dealers in buggies and wagons, two carriage makers, five harness makers, and two carriage-painting specialists. By 1917, when an interurban line connected downtown Lawrence with Kansas City, no harness makers, carriage makers, or horse dealers were listed in the Lawrence city directory. The blacksmith count was down to eight and the town still had two carriage-painters, but both groups likely were involved in the automobile economy. In their places were numerous auto dealers and garages as well as supply houses and automobile liveries.⁴⁰

38. Joseph Interrante in "You Can't Go to Town in a Bathtub," 155, concludes that urban tourists "failed to see rural space as a living and working environment."

39. A number of authors discuss these conflicts at length. See Warren Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979); Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country*; Reynold Wik, *Henry Ford and Grass Roots America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).

40. Paul Caviness, "Building More History: The Automobile in Lawrence" (paper, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, 1985).

As the automobile age dawned, farmers encountered arguments, many of them quite scientific in their logic, for the economic merits of either the horse or the auto. Some insisted that automobiles, particularly the early ones that were expensive and unreliable, dried up even more of the farmer's capital and often put the farm family deeper in debt. Automobile boosters argued that autos were cheaper than horses to maintain, and that the increased mobility they afforded allowed farmers to save valuable time and money marketing their goods.

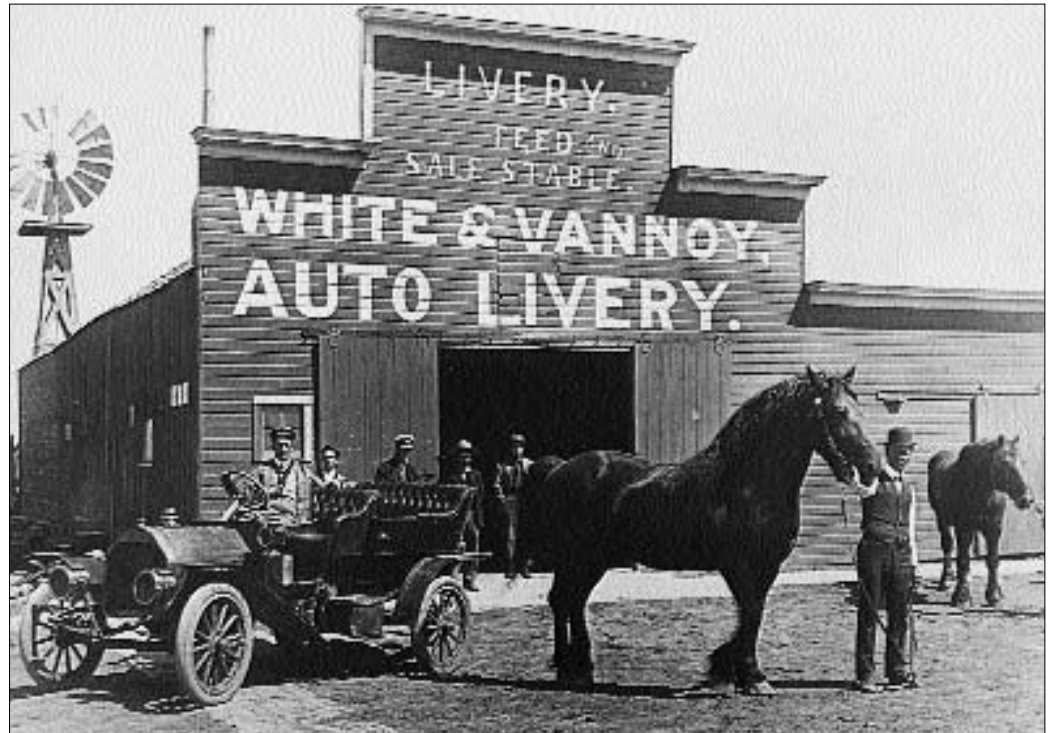
The first notice of the automobile in the *Kansas Farmer*, while ripe with suspicion, also gave reason for hope. Appearing in 1899 it began with a reference to the temperamental reactions of horses (a common theme) but proceeded right to the appealing possibility that automobile use would undermine the interests of the railroad stockholder. The editorial ends with a message of promise for the disgruntled farmer:

Whether this frightened stockholder is worse scared than he is likely to be hurt, or whether he has secretly disposed of his stock in the railroad and invested in automobile stock which he wishes to boom, can not be definitely determined at this stage of the proceedings. But the farmer who is somewhat remote from the railroad station, or who is somewhat exasperated by the indifferent service rendered by the 'calamity branch,' will not be averse to even a remote prospect of better service from the automobile.⁴¹

The automobile, whether it profited capitalists or not, was a potentially liberating technology once in the hands of farmers. Unlike the railroad it offered the farmer some control over marketing, even if only from farm to railhead. Although it took almost a decade before the automobile arrived in the hands of Kansas farmers in any great numbers, the discourse on good roads and the infusion and successful adoption of other technologies readied the farmer for the auto age.

41. "The Automobile," *Kansas Farmer*, July 20, 1899, 484.

The shift from biological to mechanical power offered a few challenges to the horse-based economies. In the early twentieth century many harness makers, carriage makers, and horse dealers were being replaced by auto dealers and garages, supply houses and automobile livery, which is evident in this 1909 photo taken in Tribune.



With the arrival of the automobile, a whole new round in the movement for good roads took shape. Farmers again were suspicious that urbanites and industrialists would have their way in the Kansas countryside. Jim Engle wrote an angry letter to the *Kansas Farmer* in 1906 protesting the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway's "Good Roads Train." The train, complete with road-building machinery and labor crews, traveled to numerous communities in Kansas and other states to build "object-lesson" roads. The logic was that once farmers experienced the pleasures of a good road, they would adopt the cause enthusiastically. Engle was not impressed: "if they mean to introduce the building of hard roads . . . by us farmers, they had better wait until we invite them." Moreover he had an idea of their motives: "No doubt," he concluded, "the auto people would like to have the farmers build hard roads for them to run their automobiles on." The tone of Engle's letter was so contrary to the editors that they felt compelled to follow it with a comment of their own: "The Santa Fe is to be commended for bringing before the people of the territory it traverses practicable methods of maintaining good roads cheaply."⁴² Joseph Satran of Wilson, Kansas, shared Engle's suspicion of the strengthening good roads movement. "To my mind,"

42. Seely, *Building the American Highway System*, 11–16; Jim Engle, "The Good Roads Train," *Kansas Farmer*, March 29, 1906, 353.

he grumbled, "the chief beneficiaries of the scheme are not the farmers, but the automobile maker, banker, capitalist, and political office-seeker. . . . In proof of my assertion just notice with what persevering persistency and rush they are pushing the scheme along."⁴³

Automobile makers, among others, were beginning to target farmers as their major market. Henry Ford presented himself as the farmer's advocate, attacking the evils of Wall Street financiers with an enthusiasm that befitted a struggling tenant farmer, not one of the world's richest men. Reynold Wik points out that Ford even "talked like a Populist."⁴⁴ In this sense, he provides a link between the Populist rhetoric of the 1890s and the Progressive concerns for modernization and efficiency in the early 1900s. The federal government's Office of Public Road Inquiry, transformed into the Bureau of Public Roads in 1905, pushed the cause of improving roads for automobiles with abandon and was chastised for inappropriate advocacy. Automobile clubs like the American Auto-

43. Joseph Satran, "Views on the Good Roads Proposition," *Kansas Farmer*, February 20, 1909, 14.

44. Wik, *Henry Ford and Grass Roots America*, 10.

mobile Association were a strong national force in pushing for an improved domain for the automobile. Finally, railroads were the largest backers of the good roads effort until 1916 when they realized that autos and a burgeoning trucking industry were bypassing rail transport altogether.⁴⁵

Many of the arguments for the purchase of automobiles and for good roads on which to drive them echoed the logic that guided the earlier good roads movement. Again farmers encountered pleas and seduction. A 1909 article encapsulated a number of these arguments: "Besides the returns in making markets more accessible and in comfort and pleasure of going about, the enhancement of land values on account of the good impression upon persons who pass or who may be looking for farms is a consideration of importance." Numerous other articles echoed these and other themes. "Aside from its worth as a pleasure car," reported a 1910 article, "it [the automobile] is an actual agency of progress and prosperity."⁴⁶ The automobile's promise was a simple one: to liberate the farm family from the ordinary agricultural constraints of time and space, and to supply the farm with the ultimate symbol of modernity and progress.

When Henry Ford began building inexpensive and durable cars that were ideal for the farmer, he went a long way toward smoothing over the automobile's initially rough reception. The *Kansas Farmer* reinforced this detente between farmers and the automobile, assuring Kansans that the automobile was in the picture to stay. A 1910 editorial sought to persuade farmers that it was "no longer a matter of pride or ostentation of wealth for the farmer to own an automobile but in very many cases is a matter of real economy."⁴⁷ The automobile offered to finish the job of modernizing the countryside:

Life on the farm is undoubtedly pleasanter, more healthful and more nearly ideal than it could ever be under the artificial conditions of the city, and the invention of the automobile has removed from the farm its objectionable features. . . . The automobile will revolutionize both life and labor in rural America.⁴⁸

Farmers were promised that the automobile would bring their business "more closely in touch with the merchants and bankers to [their] advantage."⁴⁹ Competition between auto makers for the farm market lowered prices to the farmer's advantage. Finally, the automobile revolutionized the social lives of Kansas farmers by allowing isolated farm families more frequent contact with cultural centers. The automobile promised individual agency, social improvement, and economic prosperity through mastery of environment and market relations. Its arrival tipped the scales in favor of road improvement.

Depictions of the rural environment as backward and progressive promises about the transformative properties of improved roads and the automobile warped the fiscal concerns expressed by many farmers. Such rhetoric, heavily reliant on a modern aesthetic, profoundly shaped the debates over rural road improvement and the adoption of the automobile that appeared in the *Kansas Farmer* between 1890 and 1914. Certainly the automobile and good roads offered numerous advantages to farmers. This cannot be denied nor should it be trivialized. But those who did choose to resist the advent of the automobile age found themselves in an increasingly untenable position—not because the automobile and the hard-surfaced road were part of the inevitable "next stage" in economic growth, but because so many believed them to be so and expressed their beliefs in language that distorted the logic of dissent.

45. Seely, *Building the American Highway System*, 16–23; see also William R. Childs, *Trucking and the Public Interest: The Emergence of Federal Regulation, 1914–1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 1–46.

46. "Good Roads," *Kansas Farmer*, April 3, 1909, 5; "The Farm Automobile," *ibid.*, August 27, 1910, 5, 8.

47. "The Farmers Buy Automobiles," *ibid.*, February 19, 1910, 4.


48. "The Automobile Belongs on the Farm," *ibid.*, April 9, 1910, 4.

49. "The Farm Automobile," *ibid.*, August 27, 1910, 5.

Perhaps no one piece of machinery was as responsible for the transformation of rural life in the early twentieth century as the automobile. With its social and economic impact came added incentive for improving roads. Here two couples enjoy an outing in Clay County.



Farmers' decisions were influenced by many other factors, public and private. Little has been said about other important considerations that may have contributed to the discourse on roads and the automobile. The economic recovery that characterized the first few decades of the twentieth century surely made buying an automobile and supporting good roads appear a better choice. In a 1914 editorial entitled "This and That for Good Roads," the author included a telling remark that "even bankers no longer oppose the motor car," perhaps indicating that the debt involved in purchasing an automobile was less risky in that prosperous era.⁵⁰ World War I intensified Plains agriculture and profoundly affected farmers' views of technology and the capacity of the market. The war years also revealed to Americans the limitations of railroad transport, as vital supplies often languished in rail yards

awaiting shipment. Nonetheless, the adoption of the automobile and hard-surfaced roads was irreversible. The spatial configuration of the rural environment changed—towns became more centralized and farming operations relied on more frequent visits to these centers—and with these changes the automobile became more of a necessity.⁵¹ The risks involved in making such a shift were painfully clear in another circumscribed choice that many Kansas farmers made in the 1930s—the choice to pack their belongings in their automobiles and leave their farms for the smoothly paved roads that headed west. 

50. "This and That for Good Roads," *ibid.*, December 12, 1914, 3.

51. Interrante, "You Can't Go to Town in a Bathtub," 151–68.