

ROADSIDES: THEIR USE AND PROTECTION

THE PROTECTION OF ROADSIDE BEAUTY

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Is roadside beauty only soil deep? As a veteran "scenic sister" of the Garden Clubs and Roadside Councils, I share responsibility for the misconceptions that have arisen from ill-considered roadside-beautification projects. But the era of planting for the sake of planting is past. Civic leaders are increasingly aware of the complexity of the roadside problem. The roadside, as with every other aspect of the complete highway, should spell the successful blending of safety, utility, economy, and beauty; and the greatest of these is beauty--- beauty that is not mere ornamentation but beauty in the broad sense that embodies all of these other factors.

The consideration of roadside beauty starts with the conception of the highway. Its achievement depends upon the degree with which the highway fits into the topography of the countryside. This truth has long been accepted in principle, but in practice too often modern technical skill is employed to overcome nature, not to work with it. No amount of embellishment can transform a yawning cut or the steep bank of a high fill into a thing of beauty. Beauty destroyed by the stripping of vegetation along the borders of the traveled way cannot easily be replaced. Disregard of the good earth has resulted in a similar lack of respect by the owners of adjacent property, in expensive maintenance, and in a needless toll of human lives. The parkway has proved the practicability of planning for beauty. When such planning is utilized in all road building, we shall have safer, more economical highways and more beautiful roadsides.

The landscape and maintenance men who have to cope with the highway after it is built realize the importance of planning for the roadside. But how can the construction engineer be reached? A modest though interesting attempt has been made in New Jersey.

At the request of the Blue Star Memorial Highway Committee of the National Council of State Garden Clubs, Professor Philip Elwood outlined a course on roadside development for civil-engineering schools. Its purpose was to bring to the future highway builder the principles of landscape design and the cultural implications of the highway. We still hope to see this plan materialize in its original form. Meanwhile, condensed into a series of four lectures by Oliver Deakin of the New Jersey State Highway Authority, it has been put into effect at Rutgers University and at Stevens Institute of Technology through the sponsorship of the New Jersey Roadside Council. Outstanding landscape architects and planning consultants have been engaged as lecturers. At Rutgers, the series, called The Spencer Miller, Jr., Lectures¹, has been given in conjunction with the Engineering School for three years; at Stevens, called the Horace Brown Lectures²,

¹/ In tribute to Spencer Miller, Jr., Highway Commissioner of New Jersey, 1942-1950.

²/ In tribute to Horace Brown, pioneer in obtaining roadside protective legislation in Vermont.

for two years. Judged by the response from both faculty and student, the approach is a sound one. It is a long-term educational program. So is the highway a long-term investment of the state.

It is in the field of education and public relations that the energies of civic organizations can be most effective. Mrs. William L. Lawton, during a quarter-century of pioneering as head of the National Roadside Council, demonstrated that there is a genuine and continuing interest in the protection of the American landscape. Mrs. Lawton's point of attack was the billboard menace. Her emphasis upon safety and zoning provided a pattern followed by Mrs. Cyril Fox in Pennsylvania and by others in states where exceptional progress has been made. Mrs. Lawton's surveys (printed in the "National Roadside Bulletin") have been a source of reference for officials as well as for laymen. Memorials, clean-up drives, and roadside plantings of the less experienced have served to awaken a local public interest. They remain, for the most part, oases in a spreading roadside blight. The vast potential of organized civic groups to promote good roadside practices is as yet untapped.

"Safety and Beauty Coast to Coast" are the watchwords of the Blue Star Memorial Highway. This project of the National Council of State Garden Clubs was conceived as a living memorial in tribute to those who served in the armed forces of World War II. Following a designated route along the interregional highways of the United States, each state is privileged to participate through the development of suitable memorials.

The Blue Star Memorial Highway, because of its national scope, brought to us forcibly the need of a program integrated with that of the highway departments of the nation. We found that not only were the sponsoring State Garden Club Federations, in many cases, unfamiliar with the manifold problems of roadside development and maintenance, but that there was a great diversity of thinking among the highway departments. Some departments were reluctant to cooperate in any way in the undertaking. Some had highly developed roadside programs; others were negligible. It is my earnest thesis that a plan at the national level be worked out for closer collaboration between official agencies and the voluntary groups who seek to preserve the beauty of our countryside.

Such a plan involves first the establishment of standards both of maintenance and of roadside practices which bear the stamp of official approval. These may have to be minimum standards. Once the start is made, the level of the standards will tend to increase. Great progress in this direction has been made in recent years through the research sponsored by the Highway Research Board and independent agencies. The interchange of ideas and information afforded by the Short Courses have resulted in far more unified thinking. On the popular side, the American Automobile Association has assembled findings in a handbook of Roadside Protection which is invaluable for groups seeking to organize. The next step is to provide the yardstick by which to operate. Secondly, such a plan involves the formation of a committee, or the recognition of a group already organized, to act as a clearing house—a medium whose function would be to keep abreast of new developments and policies and to disseminate the information to the groups who can utilize them.

The character of the current Model Mile contests, safety campaigns, and roadside-rest programs indicates that many state highway departments recognize

the public-relations value of these projects. If I may be permitted another illustration from my own state, I should like to cite the "Roadside Survey of Approval" conducted annually by the Garden Club of New Jersey. At a specified time, Garden Club surveyors cover the entire state highway system to list the commercial establishments which add to the attractiveness of the highway. A point system of judging is used, based on suitability, sign policy, maintenance, and landscaping. Those which are rated 85 percent or over are inspected by official representatives of the State Department of Health, Conservation, and Highways for conformity to governmental regulations. The certificate that the winners receive has become the hallmark of roadside enterprise. The Highway Department now furnishes every applicant for access to a highway with a set of the Garden Club standards. The State of New Jersey awarded the Garden Club its highest honor for this project in 1950.

The million miles of surfaced highways will continue to present a multitude of problems. Unknown miles of land will be taken for new highways. The urge to correct or to protect them will manifest itself in countless projects. If the standards for an educational program are widely assembled and properly channeled, the contribution of civic groups to roadside protection and beauty will be infinitely increased.