

BACK IN TIME

8,975 FEET OF BAD ROAD

By **DICK SHEARER**

The next time you venture out North Broad Street to Colmar, show a little respect for that 8,975 feet of roadway. It took 24 years, lots of fund-raising, plenty of political fighting and the arrest of three Hatfield Township supervisors to get it built.

The battle lines were drawn only a few years after the first horseless carriages rolled through these parts. We'll start in 1902 when the absence of a decent road between rapidly-growing Lansdale and one of the area's most important roads, Bethlehem Pike, consisted of a mud trail that was impassable in bad weather. It was duly noted that the public wanted something better.

Folks living along the pike complained about it and Lansdale's merchants got their hackles up because this lack of a decent road was keeping prospective customers and storekeepers apart. It wasn't a matter of building a turnpike; this short stretch amounted to less than two miles; paving it would cost about \$50,000, not a princely sum even in those days.

The issue lingered until after World War I when the condition of the road became a hot-button item. By 1920, those horseless carriages had grown into cars and trucks, and they didn't navigate Broad Street's muck like a horse or foot power could.

While residents in both the township and borough stewed, Hatfield's three-man board of supervisors balked at approving any major improvements, especially since they didn't consider paved road construction or maintenance a high-priority matter. Throw down a few loads of crushed stone and be done with it, they reasoned.

Had Broad Street been a state road they might have had a different opinion. Bethlehem Pike, for example, was a state road, and the Common-

wealth paid to build and maintain it. Several township residents – including the constable – felt otherwise and filed a complaint against the supervisors in Montgomery County Court demanding at least one decent road into Lansdale. The complaint was heard and the supervisor responded by arguing the cost would empty the township's coffers.

Lansdale's Board of Trade responded by forming a Good Roads Committee to lobby for a concrete road to Colmar that would be paid for by a combination of Hat-



North Broad Street in Colmar was finally paved in 1926.

field Township funds, donations from Lansdale businesses and the equivalent of matching grants from the county and state governments.

The plan, put together by Sam Conner, also featured a request for \$10 from the owners of all vehicles in the borough. We're not certain how well that idea was accepted.

Stick with us here. This tale gets even more complicated. Finally, with their feet to the fire, the supervisors joined an agreement stipulating that if the Good Roads Committee raised \$5,500, the county and state would kick in unspecified shares and Hatfield Township would pay the rest.

That was in March, 1923. It took five months to line up all the ducks but on August 6 when it was time to sign the agreement, Hatfield's supervisors refused, citing a clause that required the township to pay one-half

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24 YEARS TO PAVE 1.75 MILES

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of the maintenance costs of the road.

The deal was stuck in the mud, but not for long. Two Colmar residents, C. Wesley Stout and coal dealer Walter L. DuBois, had a warrant sworn out for the three supervisors – David N. Allebach, John A. Freed and Henry Godshall – charging them with maintaining a nuisance.

A hearing before Magistrate E.M. Harry was held August 15 in Norristown and lasted six hours during which time 14 witnesses appeared. The prosecution argued that the supervisors ignored the condition of Broad Street and instead of repairing it reduced taxes by two mills, that in spite of the fact that 72 percent of the township's residents signed a petition to have the road paved. Throughout the day witness after witness testified for or against the supervisors' position that building the road would be too costly for the township, but all agreed that it was desperately needed.

A week later the magistrate ruled the supervisors were guilty of maintaining a nuisance and fined them each \$25 plus costs, essentially slaps on the wrists.

The dispute would fester for three more years with plenty of lobbying here and there to come up with all the money needed to build and maintain a new Broad Street. In the meantime the road became known as a missing link – the last major byway to Lansdale that remained unpaved. As time went by, the cost estimate escalated from \$40,000 to \$57,000, and finally to more than \$59,000.

The big break came in February, 1925, when the

paving of Welsh Road between Lansdale and Willow Grove was completed \$17,000 below projections. Suddenly, all the money was on the table and the project could proceed. To be sure, there was still to be plenty of jockeying among the state, county, Good Roads Committee and Hatfield Township but considerable progress was made. Looking back at yellowed news clippings of the era, it appeared Hatfield Township got the best of the deal because the Good Roads group picked up a sizeable part of Hatfield's tab.

Construction took place during 1925, but one issue remained to be resolved - the three-block section of Broad Street between Seventh and 10th Street the part within the borough. It was not included in the deal. Lansdale Borough Council quickly approved the work in August, 1926, but not in time to officially open the Broad Street extension on Labor Day as all had hoped.

A large crowd turned out on Oct. 8, 1926 for a parade to celebrate completion of the road. The parade route was an impressive one – west on Main Street to Forty Foot Road, north to Unionville by way of Hatfield, east on Bethlehem Pike to Colmar and south on the new highway to Lansdale.

The Reporter described the celebration in much detail but most likely, citizens of the area felt a sense of relief. Twenty-four years to build less than two miles of paved roadway. It was a forewarning of what was to come when the Blue Route was proposed back in the 1950s.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The research for this story was conducted by LHS trustee Raymond Walton. His diligence is greatly appreciated.