Rescued from Seas of Mud

Our house stood about one-eighth of a mile off the highway. Buildings on about a third of the other farms in the area were also set well back, in some cases half a mile. Some chose this arrangement because the remote spot afforded a better building site than one nearer the road; others probably were motivated by a desire for seclusion. In a few instances, it appears, the building site was chosen before there was a road.

One advantage of the deep setback, we found, was that road dust, always abundant in summer, bothered us very little. Another was that a fairly large proportion of tramps and peddlers, deterred by the extra walking, passed us by. A lane, which before we piked it might become impassable at times in spring, led from the road to the house and extended to the barn.

Beyond the picket fence that enclosed our lawn, a wide open plot extended to the road. One day in early spring, Mike Geary, a dealer in threshing outfits, ran into some difficulty with a big steam engine that he was driving on the highway. Dad gave him permission to leave it temporarily in our lot. The ground was so wet and soft that the
drive wheels of the heavy machine cut long furrows a foot wide and nearly a foot deep. "Bill, I'm sorry about that," said Mike, as the two men gazed ruefully at the ugly gashes, "but I reckon neither of us will worry about it fifty years from now." No one had real cause for worry at that time or later, although the damage did appear quite serious. Some weeks later, the engine gone, we closed the wide furrows with shovels. Within a month rains and growing grass erased them completely.

Not long after we moved into the new house, the work of macadamizing the roads of Ridge Township got under way. Until that time public roads—even streets in town—were unpaved. All of these thoroughfares served fairly well when dry, which was the greater part of the year. Spring thaws and rains, however, turned them into quagmires, in spite of periodic grading and reasonably good drainage. Travel over them then was practically out of the question except for those who walked or rode horses. One could get through in a two-wheeled cart if he had a good horse and was neither too impatient nor too squeamish about being liberally spattered with extraordinarily sticky mud. Even with the limited traffic, the mud attained a tough, rubber-like consistency. A horse's feet would sink in ten inches or more, and when he lifted them, one would hear a resounding smack as the vacuum was broken.

In pioneer days, before much drainage work had been done, families moving in sometimes got bogged down completely in the big mudholes that dotted primitive roads in the Black Swamp. It is related that some of the settlers living near the worst spots took pains to keep them impassable by ordinary means. They maintained yokes of
stalwart oxen for the sole purpose of aiding mired-down travelers—at a price. The owner of a tavern near an exceptionally wide and deep mudhole that he never allowed to dry up is said to have exacted from the man who bought the hostelry from him an extra for the “travelers’ relief” concession.

With plows and scrapers, all of course horse-drawn, roadside ditches of our township were widened and deepened by our road builders. This was done to provide better drainage and to get material for higher, drier roadbeds. Bridges and culverts were repaired or replaced as necessary. Then crushed limestone, uniformly about the size of a walnut, was dumped inside plank forms on the graded roadbed. The stone, leveled to a depth of about eight inches, had a width of about twelve feet after the planks were removed. Constructing roadbeds and hauling stone provided for local people a great deal of employment, regarded at the time as lucrative—a man with a good team of horses could earn about $4 in a ten-hour day.

No water was applied to the stone, and nothing was done to compact or bind it. When the job was finished, there were two traffic lanes, the pike with sloping sides and, beside it at a lower level, what everybody called a “dirt” road. The stone was so coarse and loose that, except in passing someone else, no one ever drove on it unless the dirt road was quite wet and muddy. For that reason it took several years for regular traffic, aided by snows and rains, to get the stone ground down and firmly settled. Even then, the dirt road was preferred when it could be used because it was quieter under wheels and much easier on horses’ feet.
A picket fence extended the full length of our farm along the road. With its red, wooden slats, it was identical with the fences now erected each fall to serve as snow barriers along highways at points subject to heavy drifting. Often after a big fall of snow, westerly winds built up deep drifts just over the fence, inside the road. From time to time more snow was added to the drift so that an accumulation, the full four-foot height of the fence, might be piled up from one end of the farm to the other. Deep drifts also formed beside rail fences. Freezing after a light rain or after a slight thaw produced surface crusts on which we could, and often did, walk. We also found conditions then ideal for tunneling and excavating in the banks.

One time, after an exceptionally heavy fall of snow, the wind drove it well beyond the line of customary lodgment next to the fence and piled it three feet deep over the pike. Early the following morning, a dozen men of the neighborhood, armed with scoop shovels, set to work and opened a lane wide enough for traffic to get through. At the time it appeared that they had assembled spontaneously because each recognized that the work had to be done—telephones for calling them together were not available. It could have been that all or part of them had been somehow summoned by the township trustees; at the time each adult male was required to donate one day of road labor per year.

The establishment of a rural mail delivery route came soon after our roads were piked. Our address became R.F.D. No. 1 instead of Box 224 at the post office in town. Next, farmers began to consider the advantages that telephone service would give them. After several years of
dickerering, the telephone company extended lines from Van Wert, and we were put on a party line that served about a dozen farm homes.

We had a wall-mounted instrument with a crank that we had to turn to call a number. Visiting and gossiping were indulged in from early morning until late at night. Eavesdropping became a popular neighborhood diversion. If one wanted to make a call on an outside line, he had to lift the receiver, wait until those using the line had finished their conversation, then immediately crank vigorously to gain priority for a call to the operator. As time went on, the service was improved and modernized. Present subscribers are on party lines; but the number served per line is much smaller, and the instruments provided are of late design.

Improved roads, which facilitated the hauling of equipment and supplies, stimulated prospecting for oil and gas in our area, which, some believed, might prove to be a part of the rich Lima field to the east and south of us—for several preceding years a beehive of activity. Within a short time speculators and would-be prospectors had nearly all of the land about us under lease for oil and gas operations. Leases ordinarily ran through a term of several months and provided for necessary easements. The landowner was paid an initial sum, called a “bonus,” and was guaranteed a share of all revenues that might come from wells on his property, generally one-sixth. The bonus might be a very tidy sum in the case of a farm near a productive well. “Gushers” that flowed a long time were put down within six miles eastward of our farm. Southward about ten miles there were even more, most of them big producers.
Farmer owners of land on which bonanza wells were located became wealthy almost overnight.

Oil wells in the region were drilled to a depth of about fifteen hundred feet. The tall derricks, all of rough lumber, were put up by "rig builders" at well sites. Power was supplied by steam engines with boilers fired by coal or by oil or gas from a nearby well. Gas that came from oil wells was often treated as a waste product, being piped some distance from the well to feed an open flame that burned day and night. Occasionally farmers piped gas into their homes for lighting and heating.

A well was sunk about a mile east of our farm and another about the same distance west. Some oil and a little gas were found in each, but there was not enough in either case to be profitable; so plans for further prospecting in the vicinity were given up and leases were surrendered.

Some of the wells that started as big producers continued to yield oil in paying quantities for years. At last, however, almost all in the region failed and were abandoned. The derricks, the tanks, the pumping jacks, the central power plants with their gas engines, the pipe lines, and the big oily blobs over the ground all disappeared, and the lands were restored to their former function of producing crops.

A man in one of the big fields told me that abandoned wells were sealed by pushing a wooden plug deep into the bore, pouring in a quantity of rock cuttings, and finally dropping in an iron ball. Salt water is not known to have escaped from old oil wells to ruin nearby water wells, but some farmers suspect that the deep wells have played a
part in the failure of their water wells by draining the veins that originally fed them.

A pipe line carrying gas from fields south of us ran along the road past our farm. Soon after we moved into the new house, a tap was made into this main, and gas was piped in to the kitchen stove. There was a regulator, but the pressure fluctuated from very low to moderately high. The fuel was supplied at a flat monthly rate that would be considered only nominal now. The pressure at last became so low that we disconnected the pipe and went back to the use of wood.