



McHenry County Division of Transportation

Celebrating 100 Years, 1913-2013

Each month this year, a new article celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the McHenry County Division of Transportation will be featured in the Northwest Herald. The ninth article, printed at the end of September, talked about how road signs became a common sight throughout McHenry County. Watch for the next article on bridges to be published at the end of October.

MCDOT September Centennial Article

What does a tire company have to do with road signs?

With summer winding down, you perhaps enjoyed some bike riding experiences in McHenry County or elsewhere in America. A fun activity promoting good health for sure, but did you know that bicycles spawned the modern day road sign system used throughout the entire United States today?

When Benjamin Franklin (B.F.) Goodrich passed away in 1888, the company he founded helped America get around easier, faster, and more comfortable with the development of the pneumatic tire. It was the rubber tire that helped fuel the American bicycling craze in the 1890's. These "city folk" bicyclists now had the ability to explore the unknown countryside. There was no satellite navigation. Maps were of a larger scale and rarely showed country roads. As such, getting lost was a common part of the adventure. Seizing an advertising stroke of genius, the B.F. Goodrich Tire Company took the initiative to create road signs for the traveling public.

The earliest road signs were made from sheets of metal with dimples in them to create letters and numbers. Later versions were then coated with porcelain and painted bright colors to help them stand out and last longer. Warning signs were typically round with a red background and white lettering for things such as railroad crossings. Signs giving directions were also circular but had a blue background. Arrows would then point in the direction of a town with the town name and distance in miles printed on them. Lastly, all of these signs had the words *Goodrich* on top and *Tires* on the bottom to help promote the rubber tire maker.

For a brief period of time, porcelain signs were installed on roadways throughout the United States from 1910 to 1917. Although originally intended for bicyclists, they were helpful for that new mode of transportation that was just getting started, the automobile.

B.F. Goodrich also started publishing maps known as *Goodrich Route Books*. These early road maps were specific to a particular area, and included the location of the various signs along the routes (the first "You Are Here" type maps). These remained in use until the oil companies started making their own maps, of course for advertising.

With the start of World War I, new signs stopped being made to save the metal for the war effort. By the end of World War I in 1918, it has been estimated that as many as 10,000 of these road signs were in use throughout the United States. The signs served an important need of the day and are now hard to find. The McHenry County Historical Society has a collection in Union and you can still find a few posted on some of the private farms around McHenry County.

With mass production of the automobile taking off in the 1920's, the amount of travel around America increased substantially. With more travelers, the need to have more signs was quickly realized as well as the need to standardize the signs so that drivers would know that a round yellow sign in McHenry County meant the same thing in Iowa or Wisconsin.

As this was a nationwide issue, the Federal Government stepped in to make sure everyone looking at a sign saw the same message. The ads were removed and a national standard was established which is still used today called the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)*. Everything from the sign's shape, color, size, and lettering are all standardized.

Today, the McHenry County Division of Transportation (MCDOT) has a full service sign shop for the fabrication, installation and maintenance of all roadway signs in the MUTCD. The sign inventory maintained by the MCDOT has over 10,000 signs installed throughout the county highway system. Ironically, that number is as many as Goodrich Tires had installed throughout the entire United States in the early 1900's.

With so many signs to maintain, innovation at the MCDOT continues. The color material used is some of the most reflective material designed to withstand the fading caused by sunlight. When signs do need to be replaced, the sheeting can be stripped off saving the blank metal for a new sign. Signs can also be enhanced with blinking lights to make them stand out even more. These blinking lights are usually powered by solar energy using LEDs as they last longer.

So, the next time you go for a bike ride, know that you are participating in a part of history that has given rise to the modern road signs used on highways today. Happy and safe travels!

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