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John C. Ruble Memoir

R825. Ruble, John C. (1903-1978)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 40 min., 20 pp.

BATES EXPERIMENTAL ROAD PROJECT

Ruble discusses New Berlin, Illinois, the Depression and businesses in the 1930's. Also recalls the construction of U.S. Route 36 and the impact of paved roads on the area.

Interview by Jane E. Knepler, 1975

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Jane E. Knepler on July 21, 1975 for the Oral History Office. Jane E. Knepler transcribed the tape and edited the transcript. John C. Ruble reviewed the transcript.

This is one of a series of tapes made on a project about the building and testing of the Bates Experimental Road. The Illinois Legislature approved this road before the United States became involved in World War I, but the actual road construction did not begin until the war ended. Construction took place during two summers, and testing lasted until late in 1922. Delegations from other states and foreign nations often visited this site. Data recorded during testing was used in determining materials for hardroad construction, not only in Illinois but nationwide and worldwide. It has been overlooked for a long time as an important chapter in highway construction.

John C. Ruble was born in Berlin, Illinois on December 6, 1903. Continuing to live in that area all his life, Mr. Ruble completed schooling and held a series of jobs as house painter, construction worker and railroad employee. He also worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. In several of those positions he had an opportunity to observe the construction and operation of the Bates Experimental Road. He also recounts community life in the villages of Berlin and New Berlin.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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John C. Ruble, July 21, 1975, New Berlin, Illinois.

Jane E. Knepler, Interviewer.

Q. John, can you tell me what you remember about the Bates Experimental Road?

A. I don't remember too much about it only watching the trucks of a night.

Q. Where were you when you were watching the trucks?

A. I was in Berlin, there.

Q. How far away were the trucks?

A. Oh, at least five miles.

Q. And you could see them?

A. Yes. I seen the lights.

Q. Could you see the lights on the truck or was there a light along the right-of-way?

A. The lights were on the truck.

Q. Did you ever visit the site of the Experimental Road?

A. Oh, I been through there a number of times while they was working.

Q. Can you tell me about what types of equipment and so forth they were using to work?

A. I wish you hadn't asked that, because I can't. (chuckles)

Q. Do you remember the building of Route 36 here in New Berlin?

A. Oh, yes. I worked on it a number of times.

Q. What kind of work did you do?

A. I worked in the cement house. I even helped build that little railroad going east to Bates.

Q. What was the purpose of the little road?

A. It hauled the material out.

Q. When you say you worked in the cement house, would you tell me exactly what you had to do?

A. Well, just carry cement out of the car into the cement house. Had to fill it clear to the top.

Q. You carried from the railroad car?

A. Yes.

Q. And how did you get it up to the top?

A. Carried it.

Q. Did you have a stairway of any . . .

A. No, just walked on the cement there, the piles of cement, just went over the top of them. Walk up and drop it, and go back and get another one.

Q. Carried one at a time?

A. That's all.

Q. How much did they weight?

A. Ninety-four pounds.

Q. What time of the year was it when you . . .

A. That was in the spring.

Q. Oh what year?

A. 1922.

Q. Was that pretty hot work?

A. Well, yes.

Q. What did you do in the building of the little railroad?

A. Well, I just helped lay track, was what I did out there. They'd bring it out on little cars, and about four of us would pick up a track and carry it up and lay it. Bolt it together and go back and get us another one.

Q. Did they have ties under the track?

A. No, they was all built together. All in one, all in the section, they was metal and they was all built together.

Q. When they were laying this railroad, was it a narrow-gauge railway or was it . . . Do you know about approximately how far apart the rails were?

A. Well, they was about thirty inches or something like that, maybe. I'd say thirty inches.

Q. Did they have a special train that they used on this track?

A. I don't know exactly. They just had little motors that pulled it out there. They pulled a number of cars at a time on it.

Q. Besides the track what did they carry on the cars?

A. Cement and all that.

Q. Did they mix that in New Berlin before they took it out to the site or did they carry the cement out in the bags and . . .

A. Well, I don't really remember.

Q. How did they get the water to the site?

A. It was piped out from the reservoir at New Berlin there.

Q. How large was the pipe?

A. It was about two inch.

Q. Did they have a pump of some sort in the reservoir?

A. Well, I don't know. They evidently had to have there at the reservoir. I don't really know.

Q. There wasn't a water tower there was there on the railroad that they could have used the . . .

A. Well, there was at one time, but I don't know whether they used it or not.

Q. Do you know about how long it took to build that highway?

A. No, I can't answer that.

Q. How long did you work?

A. Why, about two months.

Q. How did you happen to quit?

A. Well, I was offered a job of painting, so I took it.

Q. And you've been painting ever since?

A. That's right.

Q. Do you happen to recall what wages you made working in the cement house?

A. No, I don't.

Q. How did you happen to get the job?

A. Well, I went there and asked for it.

Q. Did you apply to work in the cement house or just to do any kind of work?

A. Just to do anything.

Q. Were they more or less employing anyone that happened to come along and want a job, or do you think they brought in labor?

A. Well, I couldn't really answer that, but I know they were hiring everybody.

Q. Do you know of some other people around New Berlin that worked on that highway?

A. Well, most of them are dead.

Q. Can you tell me who they were?

A. Well, Ed Cole and John Miller. Ed Cole and John Miller, why they laid pipe out to the end of the line.

Q. That was pipe for the water?

A. Yes, yes for the water.

Q. What type of mixer were they using?

A. Well, I can't answer that even. I'm . . .

Q. I guess you've seen a lot of different types of mixers in your time?

A. Quite a few, yes.

Q. Did you feel that painting was a better job and better paying than working on the roads?

A. No. I'd been used to painting. I painted, you know, ahead of that, for about several years ahead of that. Ones I took.

Q. How far had the road extended from New Berlin east in the summer of 1922?

A. Well, not over two miles.

Q. It had reached Bates yet?

A. Not when I worked on it, no.

Q. Where did they start laying exactly?

A. Well, I don't remember.

Q. Did it come from the west into New Berlin or did they start in New Berlin and lay both directions?

A. I don't remember that. (chuckles)

Q. Do you know if they had started building anything west when you were working there?

A. I don't remember.

Q. Do you remember how wide the pavement was when it was laid the first time?

A. No, I don't.

Q. Did they put any curbs in New Berlin, or was it just the straight highway?

A. No, just the straight highway, I'm sure. The curbs came later.

Q. And it was dust at the side of the highway?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you remember when they laid the road to Berlin?

A. Well, that was in 1930.

Q. What was that road like before the hard road was built?

A. It was all right in the summer, but it was almost impassible in the winter. It was so bad you couldn't even get over it.

Q. If you had to go to New Berlin, how would you go?

A. Well, you had to go afoot sometimes or horse.

Q. You mean horseback?

A. Yes. I remember when you couldn't even get through that old road.

Q. Was it worse from Gibson Lane here on in to Berlin than it was from Gibson Lane to New Berlin?

A. It was worse from Gibson Lane in to New Berlin.

Q. How did the people from New Berlin then get to Springfield?

A. (laughs) Best way they could is all I can think.

Q. They would have had to use the train, I suppose?

A. I don't know.

Q. They couldn't get to Berlin to use the State Road?

A. Well, sometimes in winter it was impossible.

Q. Did the ground freeze up sometimes in the winter?

A. Well, yes.

Q. Could you get over it if it was frozen?

A. Well, sure. Yes.

Q. But you might start out in the morning and come back and not get through because it had thawed during the day. Is that it?

A. That's about right.

Q. Did you go to school in Berlin?

A. Yes.

Q. How large was the school when you went there?

A. You mean the number of pupils?

Q. Do you remember, approximately?

A. I'd say about seventy.

Q. Did they operate two rooms or one?

A. They had three rooms.

Q. Was it the same building that it is now?

A. Yes.

Q. How many grades did they teach in Berlin?

A. They had the ninth and tenth there then when I started.

Q. Did you go through the tenth grade in Berlin?

A. No. (laughs) Eighth grade was as far as I ever got.

Q. How did you happen to quit at eighth grade?

A. Well, Dad took me out to help him, help him paint.

Q. Your father was a painter?

A. Yes.

Q. How old were you then, when you started painting?

A. Let's see. I was about fourteen.

Q. What did you principally paint, when you started painting?

A. Just houses.

Q. Was this outdoor painting?

A. Yes.

Q. You do some indoor painting now. Did you start doing indoor painting then, or did you learn that later?

A. Oh, yes, I helped Dad and he done it all. We did, you know, like any kid would do, you would start out painting down low, and then we went up.

Q. Did you do any farming at all?

A. No.

Q. Have you lived all you life in this area?

A. That's right.

Q. Were there any particular times during your life that you remember especially well as being perhaps exciting or critical to the people around New Berlin?

A. Just about in the thirties is all.

Q. Is that the time that stands out most vividly in your memory?

A. Just about, yes.

Q. And why?

A. Well, it was hard times.

Q. Can you tell me what you mean by it was hard times for you in particular?

A. Well, there wasn't any work. And I joined the CCC's [Civilian Conservation Corps]. I done anything to make a go of it.

Q. What did you do in the CCC's?

A. Well, we did a little bit of everything.

Q. Were you in Illinois when you were working in the CCC's?

A. Yes, I was at Camp Lincoln here in Springfield. I was stationed at Camp Lincoln.

Q. And what kind of work did they do here in Illinois?

A. Well, I helped build Washington Park Lagoon out there.

Q. Was that pretty much hand labor?

A. It was every bit hand labor, yes.

Q. How did they take the dirt out?

A. Oh, with wheelbarrows. You can't believe it!

Q. Where did they take the dirt?

A. Well, they loaded it on trucks. And that island out in the lagoon there, we built that with wheelbarrows, pushed it up.

Q. Were there any other projects that you remember?

A. Yes, we set out trees around at the different parks.

Q. What parks in particular?

A. Washington Park. And out at Carpenter Park. We did a lot of work out there, built bridges and all that sort of stuff.

Q. Would these bridges be across creeks or . . .

A. No, just across a ravine.

Q. Were they on footpaths?

A. That's right.

Q. Did you do any other work, other than around parks?

A. No, that was about it.

Q. How long did you spend in the CCC's?

A. I was there ten months.

Q. When you left, did you leave voluntarily because you had other work?

A. No. I was off about four days longer than I should have been.

Q. In other words, there was a limit to the amount of time you could spend in the CCC's?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you remember what they paid in addition to your board and room?

A. No, it seems like it was . . . I can't say exactly, because I don't remember. Seems like . . . it was thirty dollars a month and all keep, clothes and all that.

Q. Were you allowed to bring your clothing home at the end of your service?

A. Oh, yes. No one else would want them.

Q. Did you consider yourself lucky to have a place to live and have food at that time?

A. Well, that was about the way it was.

Q. What was your father doing at that time?

A. He was trucking.

Q. There just wasn't painting for him to do?

A. No, he quit painting and went to trucking. I don't know why.

Q. What did he haul at that time?

A. Livestock or anything. Moved people and all that sort of stuff. Anything, like I said, to make a living.

Q. Did you raise any food or have any animals that helped with the situation?

A. We had a nice garden. That's about all.

Q. What did you raise in your garden?

A. Well, just every kind of vegetable was all.

Q. Did you have any fruit trees?

A. Well, there was a few, but not many.

Q. What kinds?

A. Mostly plums and apples.

Q. How did you keep the vegetables and fruit for the winter?

A. Had to can it.

Q. Was this in glass jars?

A. That's right.

Q. Do you have any idea how many jars or the size of jars that your mother would put up to get through that time?

A. Oh, five or six hundred.

Q. Quarts?

A. Quarts, yes, quarts.

Q. Did she do pickling and that sort of thing?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Jams and jellies?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you have any chickens or source of meat on your place?

A. Yes, we had chickens.

Q. Did you buy meat or do without?

A. Well, if you was lucky, you had the money to buy it then.

Q. Sometimes, and sometimes not?

A. That's right.

Q. Was it possible to buy things like lard and butter other than in the store?

A. Well, we didn't. Always bought out of the store.

Q. Where did you trade?

A. Amrhein's.

Q. In Berlin?

A. That's right. Fred Amrhein.

Q. What sort of store did Amrhein have at that time?

A. Well, he had a little bit of everything.

Q. He had a full line of groceries?

A. He had a full line of everything.

Q. Dry goods?

A. Yes, and all that. (laughs)

Q. Clothing?

A. I remember we would go in there and he'd say, "Don't ask me what I got. Tell me what you want." That's what he'd say.

Q. Shoes?

A. Yes.

Q. Boots?

A. Yes.

Q. Coats?

A. Yes.

Q. Dry goods?

A. That's right.

Q. How about hardware?

A. He had some of that, too.

Q. Would you say you could buy fence, nails?

A. You could do all that.

Q. Tools?

A. Yes.

Q. It was a general store then?

A. That's right.

Q. How large was the building?

A. Oh, it had to be ninety or a hundred feet long, at least thirty feet wide. It was a long building.

Q. Was it more than one story?

A. No, it was just one, but he had a warehouse right next to it, that he kept stuff in.

Q. How did he get his supplies into Berlin?

A. Well, they'd haul them in a wagon from New Berlin.

Q. With horses and a wagon?

A. Yes.

Q. They came to New Berlin by train, I suppose?

A. Yes.

Q. Were there any other businesses in Berlin in the thirties?

A. Yes, Joe Striegel had a store. You wasn't around here, was you? Joe had a store.

Q. Was this a grocery store?

A. A grocery store, yes.

Q. Was it entirely groceries?

A. Almost, yes.

Q. Were there any garages or blacksmith shops?

A. Well, there was two garages. Howard Pitt run a garage, and Koke run a garage.

Q. Which Koke was that?

A. That was Bill Koke, William Koke.

Q. Did they have gasoline or anything like that at that time?

A. Amrhein sold gas. He had a pump right in front of his store.

Q. Then you could get almost anything there?

A. Sure, that's right. (laughs)

Q. Did Joe Striegel handle anything except groceries?

A. It was mostly groceries, yes.

Q. Did he handle fresh meat?

A. Oh, yes. He bought chickens too, for years.

Q. You mean live chickens?

A. Yes.

Q. Did either of the stores in Berlin buy cream?

A. Not that I can remember.

Q. Did they buy eggs?

A. Yes, bought eggs and butter and all that.

Q. Were there any other businesses in the thirties in Berlin?

A. There was three taverns.

Q. Do you remember who operated the taverns?

A. Roland Amrhein operated one. Amrhein and Homer Schaffer and Leonard Lawrence.

Q. I suppose these taverns opened up after the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment?

A. Yes. They had a few speakeasies there ahead of time. (laughs)

Q. You wouldn't want to tell me who had them, would you?

A. (laughs) Yes, there was a number of them. Monk Sharp had one. They called him Monk Sharp. There's one I won't mention, but . . .

Q. Where did they get their liquor?

A. Well, some of them made it.

Q. Did people come from other places to Berlin because of this?

A. That's right, they sure did.

Q. In other words, it was quite a prosperous town before the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment?

A. Yes.

Q. Besides the school and these business places, what other buildings were there than houses?

A. Well, you mean anything like churches?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, just the Berlin Christian Church was the only church.

Q. Was there a post office?

A. Yes. Andy Amrhein for a while, and Joe Striegel. Let's see, I don't know when Joe took over even. They both had them in their stores. Amrhein had them in his store, and then Joe Striegel had it in his store.

Q. And then was there a post office after those stores discontinued?

A. Oh, yes. Let's see, I don't know when it did go out, but Nora Striegel ran it for a long time, but I don't know just what years.

Q. That was a building by itself?

A. It was the building Joe Striegel had his store in.

Q. And, there was the town hall, right?

A. The town hall's right, yes.

Q. What was the park in Berlin like in those days?

A. Well, there wasn't nothing in it but trees, that's about all I could say.

Q. Did they keep it mowed, and was it a recreation area?

A. No, they didn't do much to it at that time.

Q. There's a town well, isn't that right?

A. There's two of them. One on the southeast corner and one on the northwest corner.

Q. Of the park?

A. Yes.

Q. Did very many people use the water from those wells?

A. Yes.

Q. Were they the principal supply for the houses around there?

A. No. They only used them when the wells around went dry. Some of them would go dry, and they'd haul the water from the town wells.

Q. They were deeper wells then than most of the people had?

A. They must have been because they seldom ever went dry.

Q. Do you know if they use those wells at all today?

A. Yes, they do, the one on the southeast corner. Every once in a while, when the wells are going dry, they haul water from there.

Q. How many businesses are in Berlin today?

A. (laughs heartily) There's none.

Q. Do you think that the population of Berlin has changed in numbers?

A. Just about the same.

Q. Do you know about how many people live there now?

A. Well, they say there's two hundred. I guess that's the way it is.

Q. Are most of the people living in Berlin today people that have lived there most of their lives or their families?

A. Well, the biggest majority, yes.

Q. Not too many new people move to Berlin?

A. Yes, there have been a number move in.

Q. Do they stay very long when they move in?

A. Yes, there have been several of them build homes.

Q. There was no change with the coming of better roads. Do you think that the coming of better roads had something to do with some of the businesses going out of business in Berlin?

A. Well, I'd say yes.

Q. But it didn't have any effect on the population of the town?

A. It didn't seem to.

Q. Where do most of the people in Berlin shop today or go for gasoline or to visit taverns and so forth?

A. Well, the biggest majority goes to New Berlin.

Q. There's a lot of traffic that travels through Berlin?

A. There is now, in the last ten years, a lot of it.

Q. You live along the highway?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. And do you notice the difference?

A. Oh, yes. It's quite noticeable.

Q. Where do you think most of that traffic comes from?

A. Well, there's an awful lot that work in Springfield that lives in Jacksonville.

Q. And they use that road rather than Highway 36?

A. That's right.

Q. Is that a shorter road, or do you think it's less congested traffic?

A. It's about the same distance, but I guess it's not so busy.

Q. Do you think it's a safer road as far as accidents are concerned?

A. Yes, I'd say it was.

Q. And yet it was engineered before 36 was put through?

A. Yes. Well, it used to be the old Ocean-to-Ocean Highway at one time.

Q. The Old Jacksonville Road?

A. The Old Jacksonville Road, yes. When I was, that was back in 1917, when it was the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway.

Q. Do you know where it started on the east coast?

A. No, I don't. It was marked on telephone poles, you know, red and white bands around the telephone poles.¹ You followed them.

Q. Do you remember any major changes in that road from that time?

A. Yes, I should say. I don't know just when it was widened and resurfaced, but it was quite a difference.

Q. Did they make any big changes as far as the roadway that they followed, in curves and such?

A. Oh, yes. They cut the corners.

Q. Was that after the building of 36 or before that?

A. That was after it. It was after. I couldn't say when.

Q. When that was the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, what kind of traffic followed it?

A. Well, there wasn't much traffic then.

Q. Was there any truck traffic?

A. No, no truck traffic. It was all automobiles, tourists. And when we first moved where we do now, there was a grove of black locust trees, and the people would camp there of a night. They'd pull in and camp, ask if they could stay all night. Some nights there'd be six and seven cars there.

Q. Would they use tents?

A. No.

¹After the close of the interview, Mr. Ruble showed the interviewer on a post beside the garage how these marks were painted: about five feet above ground on the pole--a red band and a white band, each about six inches wide.

Q. Just slept in their cars?

A. Any way they could. And, Dad would go out and talk to them. Boy, Dad loved to talk, and he got a lot of information from them.

Q. Where would these people be coming from or going to?

A. Well, they was just traveling. I don't really know where they . . . mostly Model T's and Buicks was pretty near all that stopped there.

Q. Do you know of any other areas along here where tourists would have stopped?

A. No.

Q. It's been an interesting place to live and watch the world go by, right?

A. That's right.

END OF TAPE