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## Robert White Memoir

**W585. White, Robert** (1886-1979)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 25 mins., 12 pp.

### BATES EXPERIMENTAL ROAD PROJECT

Robert White recalls the construction and operation of the Bates Experimental Road, and discusses railroad and highway transportation near New Berlin in the early 20th century.

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 for the Oral History Office on June 24, 1975. Jane E. Knepler transcribed the tape and edited the transcript. Robert White 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.

Robert J. White was born in New Berlin, Illinois on September 26, 1896. He continued to live in that area all his life. During the 1920's he was able to observe the construction and operation of the Bates Experimental Road. In addition to these recollections, Mr. White discusses railroad and highway transportation around New Berlin in the early 1900's.

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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Robert J. White, June 24, 1975, New Berlin, Illinois.

Jane E. Knepler, Interviewer.

Q. Bob, do you happen to remember or do you think you know where you were when you first heard of the building of the Bates Experimental Road?

A. I was working at the W. E. Gregory Garage in New Berlin.

Q. Do you remember how the people around you reacted to the news? Was there any discussion of it?

A. Oh, there was just ordinary discussion. People never thought much about it. It was something new. Just passed it over. It was something that was going to happen.

Q. Was there any hope for local employment on the road at that time, or were the people here pretty well employed otherwise and not interested?

A. Well, there wasn't. Most everybody was employed because it was a farming community and the farmers, well, they wasn't interested in it. And there was very few jobs outside of the farm work available and very few people to get them.

Q. Do you think there was any economic impact on New Berlin? Were there any facilities for workers to stay or eat here or in Bates and go back and forth to work at various times?

A. There was nothing in Bates at all and very few places in New Berlin that you could get room and board. There was only one; in fact, there was only one hotel that I know of at that time.

Q. What was Bates like at that time?

A. Well, as I remember, Bates was just small. It wasn't even incorporated. They had an elevator or two there and at one time they had a little grocery store, and I believe they had a post office at one time. But it was out of there before my time. And there were just four or five houses there. It was just very little. The Wabash had a depot there and they had an agent there that took care of (clock strikes half-hour) the farmers that shipped their grain out of those elevators and all the stuff that came in at Bates. The farmers had stuff come in on the railroad and it was all picked up at the depot there.

Q. Was there any stockyards?

A. No stockyards.

Q. Do you know who farmed the land where the road was laid?

A. No, I really don't. I don't know, but it was a piece of land alongside the railroad. There was no other road there other than the railroad running by there and that road paralleled the railroad between Curran and Bates.

Q. There had been no direct road between Curran and Bates?

A. No.

Q. On this side of the railroad?

A. No, it was all farming land.

Q. What was the purpose of the Experimental Road as far as you know?

A. Well, as I understand it, they decided that they'd have the Experimental Road built up of different kind of roads. I don't know how many different kind there was, but there was an awful lot of different kind of roads. They was seeing which road that could be built the cheapest that would stand up the best on the Experimental. And it was quite a project at the time, as I remember. There was a lot of people watching it and seeing what was going on and how it was standing up. In fact there was several foreign delegations came in from foreign countries to study this road and see what was going on and how it was standing up.

Q. Were there people from other states as well as from foreign countries?

A. I think there was, yes, but of course they didn't make much ado over them. Whenever a foreign delegation came in there was a big write-up and quite a big ado about it.

Q. Did you learn most of what you learned from the newspaper or did you make any direct trips out there to take a look at it?

A. No, I don't believe I ever was out there at all. But all I heard about was from the newspapers and local talk about it.

Q. How did they determine which were the best types of road?

A. Well, they run these trucks day and night to break up the roads. Then they would tell which one would stand up the best. And those trucks run day and night for months until they broke all the road up until they found out which [one they] couldn't break up and which stood up the best.

Q. What kind of trucks were they using?

A. Well, I don't know as I remember. They was just ordinary trucks at that time loaded down with bricks and stuff to have way extra weight on them so that they would break up the road quicker with [the] weight of trucks.

Q. If these trucks broke down, were any of them brought in to repair at your garage?

A. No, they never. We never got any work off the road at all. Probably they all had some connection with Springfield which wasn't too far away.

Q. Do you have any idea why they built the road at Bates instead of any other place in the state?

A. Well, they was close to Springfield and that was a suitable place for them to try out and I think they tested the ground. They wanted to find out something [about] how the ground was. That was a very suitable place so they decided to try that road there. It was close to Springfield. It was the best place they could find.

Q. Could you hear the noise of the trucks or anything or was there any indication [of complaint]? You said they ran day and night.

A. No, we never could hear them from New Berlin. In fact, we had to take a side road; on the road we [took] you could see the trucks running, but you couldn't hear any noise. In fact, I don't think they caused any disturbance at all to the people.

Q. You don't have any idea how many trucks they were running?

A. No, I don't, but they had quite a stream of them. There was trucks coming and going all the time.

Q. If they were operating at night, did they have lights on the trucks?

A. They had lights on the truck and besides they had electric lights there strung up along the poles, but I don't know whether it was done by a power plant. I believe it was. My opinion is that they had a power plant there that was set up to make the electricity for the lights. [It] wasn't very well lit up though. I talked to some of the fellows and they said it was pretty dark but you could still see the road pretty good. At that time they didn't have very good lights on trucks. Truck [lights] didn't throw out very good.

Q. Did you ever hear of any accidents down there?

A. Really, I never heard of an accident down there.

Q. Did they succeed in breaking up the road pretty well?

A. Yes, they broke up several places, because I've talked to fellows that that was their job--hauling bricks and stuff to repair the roads so they could get over them and try to go on to the next place.

Q. In other words, if one strip broke down, they'd repair it so that the trucks could keep going on the other?

A. That's right. Of course, they'd take all the data and see how many hours it took to break it down and all, but then they'd have to fix it up so the trucks could get by on the others.

Q. How big was New Berlin in those days?

A. It was about 650 inhabitants, something like that.

Q. And what are there today?

A. Well, there's quite an argument over that. The last count was 750, but I think there's probably about 850 now because there's been a new addition built up.

Q. About how much later was the main highway built through New Berlin here?

A. Well, I couldn't say for sure, but I think it was five or six years probably. As I remember, shortly after.

Q. Did that employ local people?

A. Yes, there was a lot of local people worked there. Most of the farmers came in, young fellows, and went to work on the roads.

Q. Would this be year-round work for them when they were working on the roads?

A. Well, [it] was long as they was in the distance here. But if they moved too far away most of them stopped. Some of them went on with other projects.

Q. Just how did they go about putting down the materials for the highway here in New Berlin?

A. Well, they had a place here in town where they loaded the trucks. They had little trains that run on railroad tracks. They carried them out to the mixer on this railroad.

Q. Was this different than the Wabash tracks?

A. Oh, yes. They was laid down along the side of the road. They'd haul the cement and gravel right out to the mixer, maybe seven or eight miles they'd haul them.

Q. And they would mix it at the site and then put it down?

A. Yes. It'd all be mixed, but they'd have to water it from down that way.

Q. Was that the first paved road in this area, US 36 here?

A. Yes, I believe it was. It run from Springfield to Jacksonville.

Q. Do you know who was governor when it was built?

A. Yes. Len Small was governor. He was known as the "hard road governor". He started it, took credit for starting it anyhow, projects.

Q. Do you know where the first Illinois 1 was laid?

A. Which one was I?

Q. It's on the eastern part of the state.

A. Oh! It runs to Chicago. Yes.

Q. From Kankakee.

A. From Kankakee to Chicago. Yes, that's right! That's when Len was governor.

Q. Why do you think that was the first highway?

A. Well, I think that was his connection into Chicago. He could go from there to Chicago by hard road.

Q. That was his home?

A. I think so.

Q. Then he could take the train to Springfield?

A. Yes.

Q. Were there any other early roads under his administration that you know of?

A. Well, there was a road run from Alexander, a little town west of here, to Ashland, Illinois. It was a lot of talk at the time of why they built a hard road when there wasn't much traffic on that. But there was a nice hard road laid from there. And New Berlin was kind of upset because there was, well, I bet there's ten times as much traffic between New Berlin and Pleasant Plains as there is between Alexander and Ashland. So a lot of people couldn't understand why they ever built that road, and then the report got out that one of the governor's secretaries lived in Alexander and she wanted that road built across there and they built it. Of course, that was just what people said. I don't know whether that was true or not.

Q. In other words, he accommodated those around him as well as himself?

A. That's for sure! (chuckles)

Q. Do you think that the building of the highway through New Berlin brought more business to the town?

A. Yes, I think it did, quite a bit, more so than it does now, because now the [cars] go through pretty fast. They don't stop in New Berlin much anymore. But when it first started, why the cars wasn't so fast and people didn't get so much mileage. They stopped and the filling stations would profit by it.

Q. Were there restaurants in New Berlin that profited by this?

A. Well, there was a couple of restaurants and they done a pretty good business when they was building 36 there, because there was a lot of them moved into town and stayed there.

Q. Do you think that travelers stopped in New Berlin restaurants after the . . .

A. Not too often, no. Because [it] was just a small town and they generally stopped at bigger towns for--see we're right between Springfield and Jacksonville. It's just about eighteen miles either way. They'd slow down, a lot of them would, and they'd look around, and then they'd take off again, (chuckles) didn't see anything.

Q. The other road that is in this neighborhood, this spur road to Berlin, how much later than 36 was it that they built it?

A. Well, that was several years later. I wouldn't know exactly what time it was, but it was quite a bit later. There was awful bad roads between New Berlin and Old Berlin. They finally got a road through. The county built it. Then the state took it over afterwards. But to start with the county put up the money to build it. They also built a road from 36 to Loami.

Q. Which one was built first, the one to Berlin or to . . .

A. To Berlin.

Q. To Berlin?

A. Yes.

Q. Was that the customary way to go to Springfield from New Berlin before 36 was built, to go to Berlin and take the State Road?

A. That was one of the ways, yes. You could go through this other country [road], but that was the best way. We used to go on the Old State Road.

Q. You couldn't see the site of the Experimental Road from the Old State Road, could you?

A. No, not from the old state road. There was another road we generally took through. They went out what they used to call the Gibson Lane and then went into Springfield on this side of Springfield, and pretty near everybody would take that road some, most of the times. It would depend on which side of Springfield they wanted to go to.

Q. Were they traveling mostly by automobile when the Bates Experimental Road was built, or were they still using some horses and buggies?

A. No, they was traveling mostly by automobiles then. Of course, not like they used to. When I first worked in the garage, in the winter time they would run their cars in the garage and leave them there all winter long and never take them out until spring. Because the roads was impassable, pretty near. In fact, there's some pictures of the roads

that run down there before 36 went through and you couldn't hardly drive a wagon through there. It was so muddy and bad.

Q. At that time, then people in the country came into town with horses and buggies?

A. Sometimes, they'd even come horseback, (chuckles) the roads would be so bad.

Q. If they wanted to go to Springfield, was there a bus?

A. There was trains. We had three passenger trains a day, three going each way. Now we don't have any.

Q. When did passenger train service discontinue here?

A. Let's see. I was in the post office when they took the last train off and it was, oh, I don't know. I've got a post card telling about the last trip that a mail clerk made on it but I forget the date. It was about ten-twelve years ago, when they took the last train off. Used to be a mail train run from Springfield down through Waverly and that-a-way on the C. P.

Q. Did it make passenger stops here?

A. Oh, yes, the trains did. We used to get all our mail by train until they put the trucks on. They quit carrying the mail [then]. Yes, the depot used to have to bring the mail over from the depot to the post office. The agent had to haul the mail over.

Q. When you first became postmaster, what year was that?

A. Let's see. That was 19--. Well, I'll tell you for sure. I've got it down here. Yes, 1935! I always get that 1936. It was 1935, 1935, and I served thirty years.

Q. Was the highway to Berlin built when you became postmaster?

A. Yes.

Q. It had been built by that time?

A. It had been. Yes, yes.

Q. Who was stationmaster when you became postmaster?

A. Let's see. J. W. Foutch. We had three trick operators all the time, three men worked the clock around. Now they're even taking the only one we got away. So we'll be without a depot.

Q. But there was a station agent at Bates?

A. At that time there was.

Q. At the time of the building of the road?

A. Yes, they had a regular. He worked eight hours a day. There was also one at Curran. There was a post office at Curran, but the post office at Bates had been out for years. Of course [at] that time the mail was brought in by trains to all those offices.

Q. Do you think Bates would have evolved as a community at all if it had not been for the railroad?

A. No. No, I don't think so. I think that's the way it started to start with. They had a little settlement there and had a depot. And of course they had two elevators there at one time.

Q. At that time, was there also the Island Grove elevator?

A. Yes, there was.

Q. Was there a station there too?

A. Well, they called it a station but there wasn't nothing there but the elevator. But I think the trains would stop there and pick up passengers. You had to flag them down.

Q. And then beyond that, the next stop would be Alexander. Was that right?

A. Yes.

Q. Then was there another stop between Alexander and Jacksonville?

A. Well, if there was, it was just a flag stop. I don't believe there was, as far as I know.

Q. There's an elevator there, I know.

A. Yes, there's an elevator there.

Q. I don't even know what they call that.

A. That's--let's see. What is that? I forget what they do call that. I don't know. I guess mostly call it elevator. (chuckles) It's got a name.<sup>1</sup>

Q. The way the road [was] built there presented quite a hazard, didn't it?

A. Yes, the elevator's setting right in the middle of the road. They just went around it. It's caused a lot of wrecks down there. People have got killed there.

Q. Have you ever been on that road when there's been one of those fatal wrecks?

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<sup>1</sup>The name is Orleans. (J. E. Knepler)

A. No, I never have.

Q. Do you believe that the testing of the road at Bates led to a better quality of roads?

A. Oh, yes. They claimed it saved millions of dollars building roads by having that experiment. They found out that they could build roads so much cheaper and better by this experiment. Well, I guess it was a great thing that was done.

Q. Do you think there are very many people in the community today who realize that that experiment was run right here in the community?

A. I don't believe so. You can't find many people talking about it. You can talk to them and they say they knew it was out there and that's about all. The road ran down there, people worked it day and night, but outside of that they--in fact, it's been a long time ago. It's been about fifty years ago.

Q. How about the younger people? Do they know?

A. Oh, they don't know. They don't know or care. (chuckles) (tape is stopped for a few minutes)

Q. A little while ago I asked you if very many people from the New Berlin area were employed on the Bates Experimental Road. Where did most of the employees come from, if they didn't come [from] here?

A. Well, I heard there's an awful lot of them that come from Loami.

Q. That's farther away than New Berlin?

A. Well, it's a little farther, yes.

Q. Do you have any idea why there may have been more people from that area even though they had to come farther?

A. Not unless there's a little politics mixed in it. I don't know, but, of course Loami was a Republican township and Republicans were in power, while New Berlin was a Democrat stronghold and so a lot of people figured that that was one reason we didn't have many people working. Of course, that's just talk to them.

END OF TAPE