

THE HISTORY PAGE

'Good Roads Roberts,' father of Utah highways

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Janet R. Balmforth

Most Utahns accept without thought the thousands of miles of free-flowing highways that crisscross the state. ... Only when highway building and maintenance crews are slow in filling chuck-holes, salting and sanding icy surfaces, or delay in getting rid of detours does the motorist complain.

However, good roads have not always existed in Utah. Seventy-five years ago there were few hard-surfaced roads in the entire state.

Early Utah roads, like roads in most other parts of the country, were a mire in winter, dusty in summer, and full of ruts, rocks, bumps and hollows all year around. A majority of the people accepted these conditions as normal and saw no reason to change.

But in 1902 a group of people comprising the Republican party leadership of Cache County wanted to change the road-building system of the state. ... The Republicans staged a major upset by winning this election in strongly Democratic Cache County. ...

David Robert Roberts, the winning state representative, was an enthusiastic, hard-working, 31-year-old who took his new responsibilities seriously. During the next 10-12 years he devoted much of his time and money to the good roads project.



David Roberts

Those who knew David Roberts were not surprised by his tenacious fighting for the road system. He would have fought just as hard for any cause he felt was important. [He] was fiercely proud of his Welsh background, and in everything he did he wanted to prove himself and his heritage. ...

Roberts felt the same way about road building in Utah. Why did it take so long to convince others of the necessity for good roads? How could he speed up the process and assure the completion of good roads?

When the Utah State Legislature met in January 1903, Roberts introduced a bill "to provide for the establishment and cooperation of a system of state highways." It passed both the house and senate and was signed by Gov. Heber M. Wells. ...

In spite of continued efforts by Roberts, that legislative session accomplished nothing more toward road building. Two years later, in the 1905 Legislature, the re-elected Roberts wrote a petition that was sent to President Theodore Roosevelt and to Congress:

Whereas, the Hon. W. P. Brownlow, Congressman from Tennessee, has introduced into Congress a resolution providing for an appropriation by the Federal Government of \$24 million to be distributed among the States of the Union according to their population for Federal cooperation in road-building on condition that the states, counties and towns raise an equal proportion to that which they receive from the Federal Government ... Whereas, should said bill become law, the State of Utah will receive \$250,000 ... We, therefore, heartily endorse the provisions of the Brownlow Bill and desire its passage ...

The Utah State Legislature and the new governor, John C. Cutler, hoped that Congress would approve the appropriations for state road building, but Brownlow's bill was defeated and no federal money was received for Utah roads. Although the \$250,000 that was hoped for sounds small when compared to the \$70 million Utah received in 1977 from the federal government for highway construction, it was a large sum in 1905 and would have gone far in the road-building program. ...

Roberts did not run for reelection in 1906. However, that did not stop him from working for good roads. In the next two legislative sessions, 1907 and 1909, he lobbied for the roads and actually wrote all the bills presented on the subject.

In those days, special funds for the study of public problems were unknown; but Roberts, at his own expense, made it his business to know all there was to know about road building, not only in Utah but all over the United States and Europe. He secured and read all the available information. He wrote to authorities for advice, and he collected reports, surveys, cost sheets, and essays on good roads. He became an authority on the subject.

Roberts did his good-roads homework thoroughly. He had to in order to break the opposition he had encountered. With all the information he collected and with his own brand of enthusiasm, he hammered away at getting the road bills passed, but the 1907 legislative session ended with Gov. Cutler vetoing all road bills.

Roberts' persistence ... caused some legislators and others, in a spirit of jest and ridicule, to dub him "Old Good Roads Roberts." He later described a typical reaction to his efforts:

"... I remember, too, that during those years, on more than one occasion, farmers shook their fists in my face and said, 'D___n you! Why do you persist in the building of a system of roads with our taxes for the rich man to drive his automobile on, and to scare our teams off the road, causing them to run away and kill our families. We are not going to stand for it!'"

Trying to convince the farmers of Utah of the advantages of good roads to them, Roberts wrote articles for the Deseret Farmer and the Deseret News.

Discouraging as the fight was, by the end of the 1907 legislative session Roberts had many people thinking seriously about the road situation in Utah. Some were beginning to ask, "Why do we wallow in the mud and choke in the dust, and bruise ourselves over the chuck holes and rocks, and sweat and swear?"

As the fight continued, Roberts researched more, wrote and published more articles, talked with more groups and individuals, and prepared for his next attack on the Legislature. By late 1908, at the instigation of Governor Cutler, who was now convinced of the need for good roads, a convention of leading Utah citizens was called to discuss the problem.

This group, according to Roberts, "was a thinking body of men, full of interest, ideas, and experience. They had a fighting spirit and used it." These men favored the good-roads bills, but, as expected, they found bitter opposition from other groups. The attack was on, and Roberts was in the thick of it.

As the convention proceeded, it became a scene of tumult. The Salt Lake Evening Telegram for Friday, January 13, 1909, headlined the battle: "Good Roads Convention in Tumult — Cat-calls And Cries Of 'Sit Down' When Roberts Was Speaking — Politics Creeps Out During Argument." A front page article described the scene:

"Stinging insinuations were flung back and forth in the Good Roads Convention this morning when D. R. Roberts began to submit his measures. A war of words as heated as anything ever heard in a local convention burst forth and was still crackling sharply when an adjournment was called at noon. Roberts, facing four hundred delegates, talked for his proposed commission to consist of the Governor, the State Engineer, and the State Treasurer. ... [Roberts] shouted, 'This motion to adjourn will not muzzle me!'"

This convention must be considered a success. It made plans to organize all efforts toward good roads. The members of the 1909 Legislature and the citizens of Utah were deluged with publicity about the advantages of good roads. Articles appeared in local newspapers, and talks were given by supporters all over the state. The governor appointed a select committee to decide what was needed in the way of road construction and maintenance. Roberts wrote the bills, and they were given to various members of the Legislature to present.

Seven bills were presented: H.B. 55, an administrative bill to create a State Road Commission; H.B. 56, a maintenance measure to establish a system of road construction; H.B. 57, an administrative measure defining the power of county commissioners over roads; H.B. 58, a district revenue measure to provide for a special road tax; H.B. 59, a revenue measure to provide for the annual vehicle road tax; H.B. 60, an administrative measure to provide for the use of convicts and prisoners in road building; and H.B. 61, a maintenance measure providing for compulsory wide tires on vehicles and addressing problems of the flooding of roads by irrigation waters and the trampling by sheep and cattle.

Roberts wrote of this success:

"... That was the result of six years of struggling ... I have written briefly only a small part of what happened. It was a hard financial strain on me at the time. I never received a dollar in assistance to pay expenses in all the work I did. No pay for my time, only as a member of the legislature I served in. During the last part of the 1909 campaign, I put up the last collateral I had to borrow the last \$50 I needed to pay my expenses to see it through, now that we were so near the goal."

In the years that followed, Roberts continued the fight to keep the roads of the state growing. As late as 1915-16 he was still writing articles for newspapers and farm journals trying to convince some of the still reluctant farmers that good roads were necessary for the development of the state. But the biggest part of the battle was over, and Utah roads were on their way. As the residents of the state became aware of the advantages of good roads, every county and hamlet demanded their share of the money and construction crews to build and maintain the roads in their areas. ...

Today, there are more than 23,000 miles of surfaced roads in the state of Utah. Utahns no longer have to be convinced that good highways and roads are necessary. In a modern automobile, it takes about an hour and a half to drive from Ogden to Provo on the freeway.

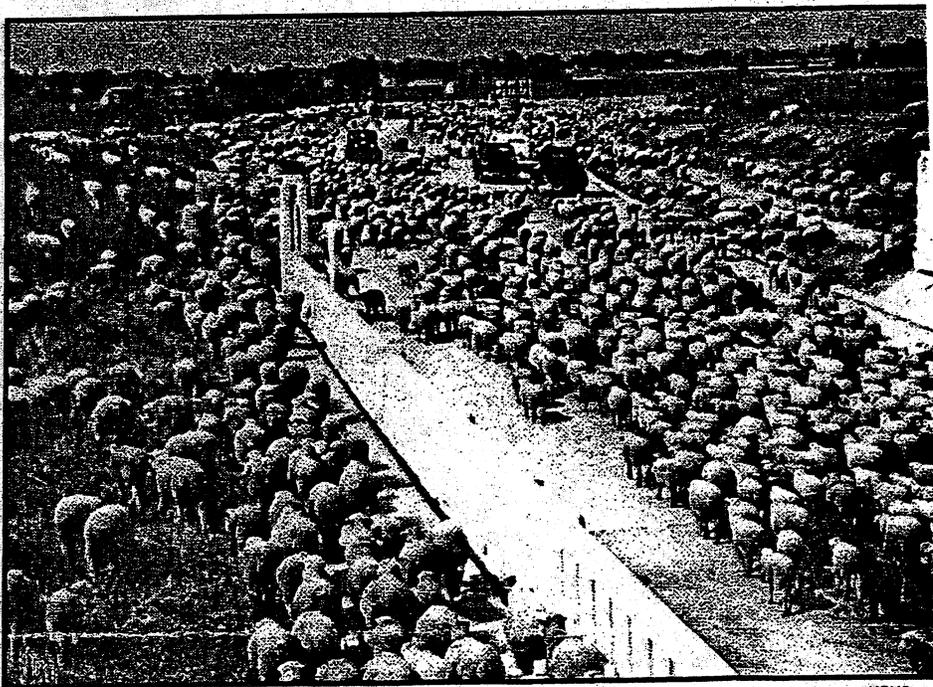
It is an easy trip. There are no herds of cattle or sheep meandering back and forth, blocking the way. There are no runaway irrigation streams making mud holes and furrows down the length of the highway. And there are no irate farmers cursing and shaking their fists at the passing traffic.

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Horse power: Dr. A. L. Inglesby and Wallace Bransford in a Pierce Arrow are pulled from the mire on a trip to Grand Canyon.



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A once-common sight: Sheep would clog the highway between Provo and Salt Lake City in the semiannual trek to summer or winter ranges.