

A CITY'S PAVING PROBLEMS*

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WHAT are a city's paving problems? A wag once defined them as raising and spending money, more money and still more money, principally for the personal benefit of the spenders, meaning the politicians, and the spendees, meaning their politico-contracting friends. Many true words are spoken in jest; for several exposures have proven that the politician spenders and the contracting spendees were both the agents of the same selfish and corrupt interests. In most North American cities, at least until recently, the situation could very well be summed up in the words of Mr. Wag.

Even in my own day, and I am not yet an old man, most paving was laid primarily for the graft there was in it and only secondarily as a roadway covering intended to resist wear and render community service. Thank our lucky stars, municipal affairs on this continent are steadily improving, and we now quite frequently lay pavements primarily for use, both with municipal paving plants and through agreements with legitimate contractors working on a business basis.

Behold an Optimist!

Do not think, from the few preceding words, that the writer is a confirmed pessimist. My years of experience as a roustabout in the paving industry would not justify my being such. I declare myself an optimist; for, as I have just said, paving is now sometimes laid on our streets for the purpose of being travelled upon.

I wish first to give a vivid cross-section view of the paving business as I knew it but a few years ago, in order that the progress which has been made since may be fully appreciated. Present city administrators not only have to shoulder their own paving burdens, but the children must still suffer for the sins of their fathers, especially their "city fathers."

The Paving Promoter

I have been in Montreal, connected with the firm of engineers and chemists of which I am now a member, and acting professionally for both the city of Montreal and the province of Quebec, and others, since 1916. In that period, I have seen various promoters attempt to put paving deals over in Montreal, but I have not seen one succeed. At the same time, it is necessary to say that when first I became familiar with the situation in that city, there were still some very strong odors from deals that had gone before; but these odors are gradually becoming fainter and fainter, and soon, I believe, the paving promoter who makes a business of putting something over on cities will be unknown in those parts.

These gentry seek fields where returns are both easy and safe. Yet what would we have done without the self-same paving promoters in earlier days? It is safe to say that, at least prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, no new pavement could have been extensively introduced without them. They did business as we, in our ignorant carelessness, made it necessary for them to do business. Why blame the Romans for being Romans in Rome?

Paved With Politics

If the citizens have neglected their duties as such in the past, and have permitted their municipal affairs to be handled by a few professional politicians of the self-seeking class, what right have they now to object if they find that there was more politics put into their pavements than wear value for the money spent?

Why should they complain, for instance, if told that the money wasted in paving some of their streets, if saved and put at compound interest, would have created a fund that

would keep a proper pavement repaired and renewed until doomsday? Yet, this is a fact; and now they face the unpleasant necessity of raising money to pay for new pavements on streets where they have not yet finished paying the bonds issued to build the old ones that have prematurely passed away.

Montreal's Reputation

Some years ago I was in Albany waiting for a train to Montreal for my first visit, and at the club I happened to meet a paving man who was accustomed to do business there. To my inquiry as to conditions in Montreal, he said: "Oh, you don't need to go to the city hall at all. Business is done over the bar of the Blank hotel. If you have the price, the contract is yours." Now this was probably a case of illustration by exaggeration; but everyone knows that in years gone by some of the conditions in Montreal were pretty bad. It is against the results of those conditions, coming to light on the streets to-day, that the present city administration must provide, and for which provision the citizens must now pay.

An Engineer's Business

I might be asked, as a member of the engineering profession, why the former city engineers permitted such paving work to be done. I would reply that it was because they could not prevent it, and the citizens would not help them prevent it. In those days, an engineer holding public office in the gift of politicians was supposed to draw his salary and mind his knitting; in other words, to speak only when he was spoken to. If he did not adhere strictly to professional matters in the narrow sense in which the term was then too often interpreted, and leave civic or political or business matters alone, he was apt soon to be seeking another job; and little the careless citizens of those days would have worried about whether he got it or not.

To the credit of the profession in the city of Montreal, be it said that some of the former city engineers insisted upon a broader definition of their professional duties, and the struggle for honest paving was well under way when I first came to know the facts concerning Montreal.

Municipal Junketing

Paving is a very dry subject. It is dry even in the province of Quebec, where we have a reasonably moist law. Therefore, a little humor may not be amiss before venturing upon the waste of the paving Sahara. I will not say this story is true, nor name the man, nor even tell the cities concerned, for the story is quite as good without.

Many know that in the past, when a city was contemplating a large amount of new paving work, it has been customary for the city fathers to make it the occasion for appointing a not too small committee of themselves and friends to visit several other cities in quest of knowledge concerning the latest fads and fancies in pavements, at the expense of the city treasury.

Very frequently such junketing parties originating near the Pacific Ocean will find their way to the Atlantic seaboard, and take in or be taken in by Washington, Philadelphia, New York and Boston. In some one of these cities, most of the large paving interests that maintain promoters throughout the country will have a main office, attached to which is an experienced guide who knows the ways and vagaries of of municipal junketeers.

Notifies Home Office

The Pacific coast promoter, of course, notifies his home office of what is coming its way, and when; also what the deal will be worth if it can be put over. He will mention such details as whether Deacon John Doe, who is an eminently respectable member of society and a Sunday school superintendent in his home town, most enjoys prize fights, horse races or poker.

He is also apt to mention the particular competitor whose pavements should come in for some scientific knocking; for every paving man knows that an experienced guide can pilot a party around for a week without ever taking them over a bad

*Article based on notes of a recent after-dinner talk at the Kiwanis Club, Montreal.