

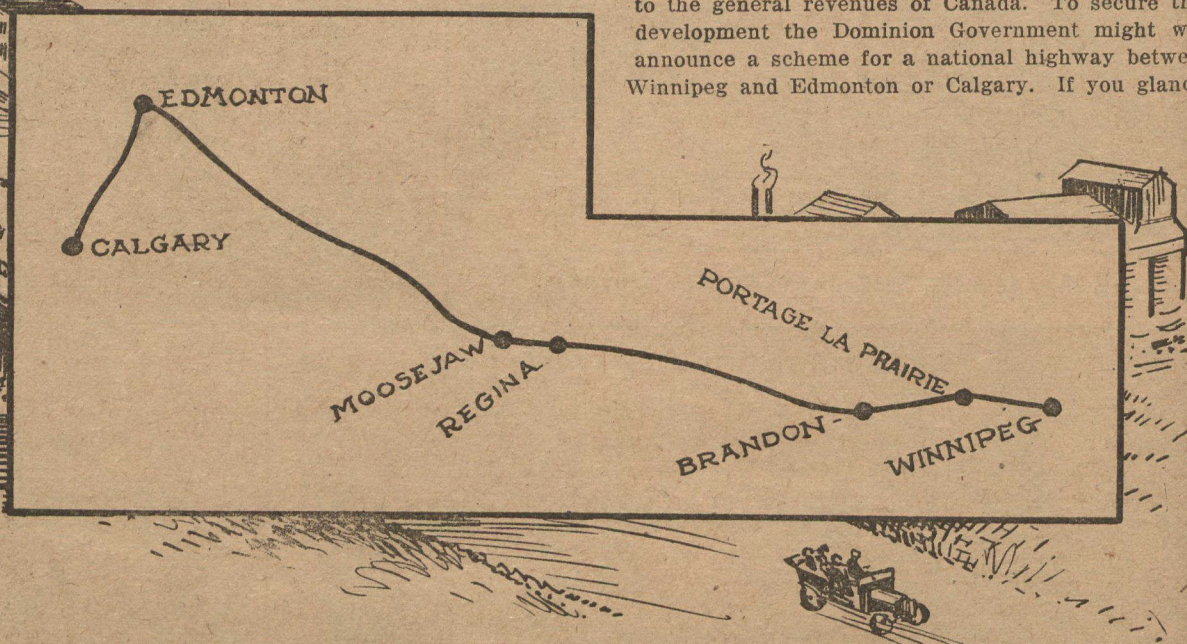
# A NATIONAL HIGHWAY

*What a great trunk road for vehicles and gasoline might do for the economics of Western Civilization. The practical, as opposed to the visionary side*

By HENRY LANCE

make must more or less pay their way for a time.

It is in a different mood that we need to approach the problem of national road building. Between Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary, is where we should first establish our national roads. They can be connected up later, if we find we can afford it, with roads in Ontario and in British Columbia, but on the prairie provinces it would be good finance to spend the money now. All Canada wants is to increase the population of the prairie provinces. The railways that have been built in those provinces constitute a national obligation, and everything that will increase their earnings is going to be a relief to the general revenues of Canada. To secure that development the Dominion Government might well announce a scheme for a national highway between Winnipeg and Edmonton or Calgary. If you glance



**W**E may admit considerable truth in the slogan: "Look after the roads and the railroads will look after themselves." We are not talking now about roads in Ontario, or in Eastern Canada, about which goodness knows enough might be said. What we are concerned with is the country between Winnipeg and the Rocky Mountains.

One who has not lived in the West has no conception of the roadlessness of that country. Perhaps you have read that book of Arnold Bennett's, "Your United States," in which he offers his comments on his American tour. Of the country west of Chicago he writes (one quotes from memory) "of roads in the European sense, there are absolutely none." That is the condition in Western Canada, except that you do not have to drag in Europe. Of roads in the Ontario sense, or the Maritime Provinces sense, or the Quebec sense, there are none at all. When the prairie is dry and hard in the summer it seems as if roads are not needed. There is no more pleasant riding, motoring or walking than along a smooth, well worn prairie trail. But no one knows just how bad those trails are in wet weather when the prairie "gumbo" becomes a mixture of heavy molasses and sticky fly paper. No one knows because no one can get far enough out really to find out how bad they can be. You are stuck fast long before you come to the worst.

You can get along to a certain extent on the prairies without roads. When the trails are hard they are delightful; frozen and snow covered they are good. But there are critical times in the farmer's year when he is marooned on the farm, doomed to wait there until the trails improve. It may be in the autumn when he has his wheat ready to haul to the elevator. With prices at their present level he may be anxious to get to the elevator, and he hitches four horses, if he is lucky enough to own them, to his wagon. When even feed wheat will bring a dollar a bushel you can afford a little extra horsepower in hauling. Not all a farmer's journeys are with wagon loads of money, and it is not good for either him or for his wife, and perhaps it is worse for the hired man and for the young people on the place to have to wait for long intervals between posts, or to delay going to church or to the neighbours because the roads are impossible. This social side of things has been recognized by western provincial governments in the extension of rural telephone services, so the farmer's voice and his spirit may still travel while he is bound down at home.

It is necessary to interject a warning against getting too severe an idea of western conditions from these statements. Let it never be forgotten that in

1915 the western provinces harvested three hundred million bushels of wheat, and the value of their farm products is not likely ever again to fall below half a billion dollars in any year. We have not yet begun to get from the west what it is capable of producing. We have not begun to get established, even in the oldest settled districts the number of people who should be living on the land, and who would be willing to be there under conditions that would prevail with good roads. We have not a fraction of the capital invested even in the most prosperous districts which should be applied to the land if good roads were available. We do not begin to give our western farmers their just social conditions under present conditions. What is more important, perhaps in the ideas of most of the rest of us is that we do not get our own just dividends from the west.

**A**DMITTEDLY it is a big problem. There is a tremendous stretch of country, and the mileage of roads required is staggering, until you begin to think of the other things implied in the settlement of a new country. Imagine what it means for even one hundred thousand new persons to go into a country completely unorganized, to establish their homesteads, to develop their trading centres, to organize their municipalities and their school districts, to proceed to borrow money as communities for public purposes. Soon there are schools where they are required, the new towns develop sidewalks, graded streets, water systems; churches arise. In a few years you have a well organized and well ordered community, self-governing and self-reliant. Have faith, then, that roads will not always be lacking. The west is developing its civilization and will have all that goes with it.

For the present there is a lot of road work that is beyond the municipalities; some, probably that is almost too difficult for the provinces to tackle at the present time; and here is where the Dominion Government might well come in. There has been some magnificent talk lately about an all-Canadian transcontinental highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, an excellent thing, no doubt, for the Americans who have got rich on war contracts. They would take pleasant long distance motor trips, and would doubtless spend large sums of money with more or less demoralizing effects on our simple manners. Unfortunately, even if the returns from the automobile tourist would make that a good investment we can-

not yet afford the amount. The improvements we at a map of the west and check off the cities you will see that such a road might properly run from Winnipeg through Portage la Prairie to Brandon in Manitoba, then to Regina and Moosejaw in Saskatchewan, turning sharply to the north to Saskatoon in the same province, then on to Alberta with either Calgary or Edmonton as destination. It should be a good road, probably of concrete or other material that will not be difficult to maintain.

The Dominion Government need not build the road. Rather let it announce the route, its standard of construction, both as to grades and materials, with provisions for culverts, bridges and the like, and offer a provincial subsidy of a stated amount for every mile of line so constructed, with interim payments for partial construction, and compensating payments for work of special difficulty. That done, the province can decide if it can go ahead at once, and how much of the cost will be assumed by the treasury, and how much the municipalities and the individual land owner along the route will be called on to pay. While such a road would be designed for through travel as soon as possible, its greatest immediate importance will be in the development of local traffic. With that in mind it will be quite proper for the provinces to proceed with the building of separate sections as material or labor are more plentiful, or as different localities are willing to assume a larger share of the cost.

**L**ET this first national highway be a real road. Take concrete construction sixteen feet wide as a standard, and vary it to macadam or gravel only as materials are specially available, or particular difficulties intervene. Saskatchewan has already experimented with making brick roads on a large scale, by the simple expedient of baking the natural clay on the ground, turned up over the top black loam of the prairie soil. The baking was accomplished by covering the road deeply with straw, otherwise a waste product destined to be burned in any event, and setting it on fire. A fairly satisfactory material is said to have resulted, but the cost was found to be too great to continue work to any large extent.

With a Dominion National Highway under construction in the three prairie provinces there would be an immediate demand for connecting roads to lead on to it. Here is where the Provinces might exercise their ingenuity in persuading and assisting