

CHAPTER XVI

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS

Although the population of Pleasants county has decreased about two thousand since the census of 1890, due to causes that have been related in a previous chapter, the prosperity of the people has increased materially. The truth of this is borne out by a comparison of the assessed valuation of this and neighboring counties.

Omitting the valuation of public utilities, which would really make a still better showing for this county, but which cannot be considered altogether a portion of the bona fide wealth of the people, it may be shown that the average per capita of real and personal property in Pleasants exceeds that of either Tyler or Wirt, and is only slightly inferior to that of Ritchie county; and if the personal property alone be considered, the average per capita of Pleasants is equal to that of Ritchie, somewhat greater than that of Tyler, and almost twice as great as that of Wirt.

The average inhabitant, man, woman and child, of Pleasants county is quoted on the assessor's books as possessing almost five hundred dollars in personal property, and it may be reasonably assumed that this is only a fraction of the average wealth, because of the inability to obtain complete returns and because of investments outside of the county. However, this may be taken as a fair indication of the general prosperity which obtains here.

Another index to the same purpose is found in the financial condition of the two local banks, each having

started with a modest capital and gradually increasing, until now their combined assets amount to more than two million dollars; and the mercantile establishments afford still further proof in the fact that without a substantial citizenry they could not maintain such variety and quality of wares.

If a former resident of the county, after an absence of twenty-five or thirty years, should now return, he would find many alterations for the better, and he would appreciate the improvements more than we, who have scarcely noticed their steady growth.

He would remark upon the almost total disappearance of the many little groceries which once were strung along the highways at intervals of a few miles, supplying the needs of their immediate neighborhoods and affording convenient resting places for the slow-going travelers; their business is now taken care of by larger establishments, seated at greater distances, in which merchandise of greater varieties and better quality is handled.

He would find residents of the rural sections enjoying practically all the advantages of residing in a well organized community; more sanitary conditions in and about the houses, and a general use of telephones, whereby the people are kept in closer touch with each other and radios give them the news and amusements of the nation.

He would see a greater area of improved land, with much more attention to cultivation, with an increased air of comfortable conditions in the many outbuildings, neatly constructed and painted.

He would see children carried to school in automobiles, over roads which he avoided in his own school days because they were so rough and muddy that walking on them was difficult; and he would notice particularly that all the children are well-clad, and that the apparel of the older pupils is as modern as that of the largest population centers, in a most marked contrast to the garments worn by the preceding generation.

A large part of this change is due to better roads and the general use of automobiles, enabling the farmer and his family to travel in less than an hour the distance which

formerly required a full day with the team. Thirty years ago comparatively few had ventured farther than Parkersburg or Wheeling, and one who had been at Pittsburgh or Cincinnati was regarded as a great traveler; but in these latter days motor vehicles carry increasing numbers to the most distant parts of the United States.

With this broadening of vision things are now done on a larger scale. The necessity of having good roads has become so apparent that people are no longer content with mending the mud holes of an old road with a few loads of coarse rock—they demand that the entire road be rebuilt and covered with a durable surface of cement or gravel. In October, 1925, the magisterial districts of McKim and Lafayette voted in favor of an increased levy to raise the sum of \$5,000 a year for improving three sections of roads, and the county commissioners agreed to devote \$10,000 a year out of the general county road fund for that purpose. The roads marked for improvement were that leading from the Ellenboro Pike down Turkey Run and up the Left Fork of French creek to the Wiley schoolhouse; that beginning at the Washington district line near the Shilling farm on Middle Island Creek and leading up McKim creek and Shawnee run, passing Pine Grove Church to Hebron; and the third section extending from the Pike at the head of Whiskey run through the village of Adlai, up Rock run and across McKim to intersect the second named road at Pine Grove Church. Much of these sections has been graded, and the creek road covered with gravel up to the mouth of Shawnee.

The road from State Road No. 2 up Cow Creek to Schultz has also been vastly improved. Formerly it followed the bed of the creek so closely that it crossed that stream at least a score of times within six miles, with not one bridge in the entire distance. Teaming was a great difficulty and motoring was often impossible. The commissioners took the road completely out of the creek, locating it on the northern side, and made a good grade all the way. Also the road up Triplett run passing the old sanitarium to Horseneck has been graded and coated with gravel.

Pleasants now has outlets on surfaced roads to the

North by way of Woodsfield and Ohio Road 8 to Cleveland; to the East over the Northwestern Pike, now known as U. S. Road 50; to the South over State Road 2, with No. 16, the Florida Short Route, nearing completion; and to the West by several roads leading out of Marietta and Parkersburg.

From the earliest times the passage of the river here has been effected by ferry. The first ferryman within our recollection was B. F. Pickens, who carried passengers over in a skiff and had a small flatboat, propelled with two oars, for wagons and cattle. For a time in the days of the greatest oil excitement a steam ferryboat was used, a typical boat of the shuttle style. The ferry rights were bought by Charles F. Ruttencutter, who made considerable improvement in the service, and finally passed into the hands of Hiram A. Carpenter, who greatly increased the capacity and service, also improving the landing on the Ohio shore, regrading and paving it and erecting a concrete retaining wall.

With better roads and many motor cars it became evident that no ferry service would be adequate to meet the new demands of traffic, and after careful consideration Mr. Carpenter was convinced that the time had arrived when a bridge was necessary. When he announced his intention of having a bridge built, the project was regarded by many with incredulity. There was already a bridge at Marietta, eighteen miles down the river, owned by the West Penn Electric Company, and another at Parkersburg, only twelve miles below that; and although both of these bridges were paying large dividends, it seemed hardly reasonable, to the doubting ones, that a third bridge, so near those two, would be a profitable investment.

But Mr. Carpenter had noticed the great increase in traffic over his ferry, and naturally concluded that if a ferry could draw traffic to such an extent the attraction of a substantial bridge would be much more effective, and he also reasoned that automobiles are getting more numerous every year. Men were stationed along the principal roads leading this way, enumerating the traffic and the "prospects," and their report was so encouraging

that capital was easily interested. A bill permitting construction of the bridge was passed by Congress in February, 1927, but it was not until August that a commission of officials of the War department met at St. Marys to examine further into the feasibility of such an undertaking. The commission reported favorably to the head of the department at Washington, but the matter had to follow the regular slow routine of business so that the final approval was delayed until the first of October.

The company, incorporated as the Clarksburg-Columbus Bridge Company, was organized by electing H. A. Carpenter president and R. L. Griffin secretary. Plans of the bridge were drafted by the J. E. Greiner Company of Baltimore, being substantially the same as those of the bridge over the Ohio at Point Point Pleasant, which was then under construction. The resident engineer was J. W. Richardson of Baltimore, who had spent several years in South America on railroad construction and was engineer of the Point Pleasant bridge. The contract was let to the General Contracting Company of Pittsburgh, the work of erecting the piers being in charge of Harry Bogan; but the superstructure, or bridge proper, was let to the American Bridge Company, George Compson in charge.

Immediately material was ordered from Pittsburgh and shipped by boat, and on Sunday, November 6, the first actual work was done in excavating for the anchorage pier at the foot of George street. All through the Winter the work was carried on, although frequently interrupted by high water. The three piers and the two terminal or anchorage piers were completed in the Spring of 1928, and then the erection of the steel superstructure was begun.

Instead of using steel cables, eye-bars fifty feet long were used to suspend the bridge, this being the second structure of the kind in America, the first being the Point Pleasant bridge. The total length of the bridge including the approaches is 1902 feet; the length of the steel work is 1771 feet. The roadway is 27 feet wide, and at the highest part is 93 feet above the normal height of the river in the pool, and 40 feet above the 1913 flood. The length of the main span is 700 feet, affording ample space for the navigation of steamboats and large fleets of barges.

By reason of the enormous tensile strength of the eye-bars and the improved method of construction, this bridge is pronounced probably the strongest that spans the river. Coated with lustrous aluminum paint, when seen at a distance it bears a striking resemblance to the delicate arch of a spider's web; but its roadway, covered with two and one-half inches of amesite, feels as solid as if one were walking or riding over a hard surfaced street.

The bridge was completed in time for the opening celebration on October 25, in about two weeks less than a year from the time when work was begun, November 6, 1927, and on that occasion there gathered in St. Marys the largest assemblage ever held in this county. A count was made of the number of cars entering by the several roads, and they numbered 5,326. Estimating four persons to the car, there were more than twenty thousand visitors in attendance, besides the greater part of the people of St. Marys. People within a radius of one hundred miles showed their interest by attending, and it sorely taxed the abilities of the hotels, restaurants and church societies to feed the multitude.

There was a procession of the high school bands of New Martinsville, Marietta and St. Marys, with the Citizens Band; pageants showing the progress in methods of travel both on land and water; addresses by prominent men, their voices carried by microphones to loud speakers on both sides of the river. Twin children of Mr. Carpenter, only twenty-two months old, Mary Helen and Barbara Ann, loosened the bow-knot of a ribbon stretched across the bridge, and another daughter, Rebecca, broke a bottle and christened the structure the Short Route Bridge. The celebration was closed with a fine display of fireworks at the lower point of the island, which had been cleared of trees for that purpose.

The Short Route Bridge has been hailed as the connecting link of the nearest route from Cleveland to Florida, by way of Ohio Road 8 and West Virginia Road 16; also as the nearest route from Columbus to Washington, District of Columbia, via the Northwest Pike, now U. S. Road 50. In fact, the highway from Athens, Ohio, via

Barlow, Marietta and St. Marys to Ellenboro, has been designated as North U. S. 50.

A peculiar feature of the bridge is a ramp leading from the first pier down to Middle Island, thus connecting that valuable tract directly with the main land. While almost all the island is above ordinary high water, the southern part, opposite the city, is rather low, yet the surface can be raised, at a moderate expense, by building retaining walls and filling with dredges from the river, and it could then be used either as a city park or as a site for manufactures.

Next in vital importance to making good roads and the building of the bridge was the erection of a new court house, a matter, which, as we have seen, had been agitated for many years. In 1919 it was believed that the time was ripe to again submit the matter to a vote of the people. The great European war was just ended; the allied forces had effectually broken the power of Germany and Austria, and had compelled them to accept abject terms of peace; America, entering the war at a time when it seemed that France and Italy were about to be crushed, had turned the tide, and American boys led the hosts in driving the invaders back beyond the Rhine. Proud of their achievements, the whole country anxiously awaited their return from the field of victory, apparently desirous of honoring them in every possible manner.

It was a propitious moment to make an appeal for a memorial to their courage and ability, and in Pleasants it was thought that no more fitting testimonial to them could be offered than by building a new county capitol in which the names of all those from this county who participated in the war should be inscribed and perpetuated. The returning soldiers should be greeted with a vision of work actively begun on such a monument.

A petition, signed by 132 voters, was presented to the county court on January 4, 1919, asking for a special election at which to submit a bond issue for a memorial court house. On January 27 the court issued an order for such an election, to be held March 11, for an issue of bonds to the amount of \$150,000. The project seemed to meet with a favorable reception, many urged it and

few openly objected, but it failed of the three-fifths vote required by the law. A majority of 589 voted for it, while 521 voted against it.

For the first time a majority of the people favored a new building, so it was apparent that the sentiment of the people had changed from the vigorous opposition of previous years, yet no further attempt was made to secure a new county building until it was made absolutely necessary "by act of God," as the old chroniclers were wont to say.

In the course of a furious electric storm on the night of July 6, 1923, a bolt of lightning struck the cupola of the old court house, partly destroying it and so damaging the entire building that Homer B. Woods, judge of the circuit, held it to be unsafe. The commissioners were compelled to choose between holding an election for the issuance of bonds or to erect a new court house and jail piece-meal from the proceeds of an extraordinary levy.

Wisely they decided to submit the matter to the people; but it was feared that a proposal for \$150,000 bonds would be rejected, so the amount suggested was \$100,000, a sum utterly inadequate for the completion of an appropriate structure, yet sufficient to provide for the more immediate needs of the county. The election was held on August 14, and met with gratifying support, 1083 voting for it and only 215 against it. Only four precincts gave a negative majority.

In the meantime, the offices had been moved into other buildings. Those of the county and circuit clerks and of the assessor, with all their records, were installed in the Haddox building, in which the terms of court were also held, while the sheriff's office was established in the second floor of the Phillips building. In passing, it may be said that the convenience of having the county offices in the heart of the business section of the town was frequently commented on by people having business in them.

The square on which the old court house stood had been donated by A. H. Creel, providing a reversion to his heirs or assigns in case it should cease to be used for the county building, so the commissioners did not feel justified

in abandoning that site. Besides, the place is far above the reach of the highest floods; it occupies a prominent position in the landscape, being visible for miles up and down the valley, and it is venerated by history and tradition. There the people had been accustomed for many years to gather on great public occasions; many notable men had addressed them there in the stirring days of the Civil War and in political contests. It was rich in old-time memories, albeit it was difficult of access; but this objection the commissioners removed as far as lay in their power.

They purchased the property on the east, thus extending the square to Barkwill street, and they also bought two small strips on either side of the approach up the hill. This additional ground enabled them to set the new court house farther from the brow of the hill and to make a very moderate grade from Third street up, with plenty of room for a separate jail and jailer's residence, and also for the parking of cars, a very needful provision in these days.

The plans selected were drawn by Holmboe & Pogue, architects of Clarksburg, and after meeting with some disappointment in awarding the contract for building, on May 20, 1924, the bid submitted by Putnam & Foreman of Marietta was accepted. The contract called for erecting and equipping the building, except the finishing of the basement and leaving the facade and cornices plain, for the sum of \$99,983.

The tasks of demolishing the old building and erecting the new were begun almost simultaneously in August of that year, and on September 3 the cornerstone was laid with imposing Masonic ceremonies by Grand Master Fred C. Steinbecker of Wheeling. The orators of the occasion were Judge Homer B. Woods of Ritchie county and Clyde B. Johnson of Charleston, formerly a resident of Pleasants.

Work was pushed so rapidly through the Winter that in the following Spring the county officials moved into the new building, all completed except the basement. The wonder is that with labor and material so high, such a structure could have been made with the small sum at the