

“WHO WANTS A CAR, ANYWAY?”:
IMPROVED ROADS, SNOWPLOWS, AND THE
TRANSPORTATION REVOLUTION ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND,
1900-1970

by
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Abbreviations

<i>1949 Royal Commission</i>	<i>The Royal Commission on Transportation: Submissions by the Province of Prince Edward Island</i>
Acc.	Accession Number
A.R.D.H.	Annual Report of the Department of Public Works and Highways of Prince Edward Island ¹
<i>Assembly Journal</i>	<i>Journal of the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island</i> ²
P.A.R.O.	Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island
R.G.	Record Group

¹ The Department of Public Works and Highways were one entity until 1955, when they were separated. For the sake of simplicity, all annual reports involving highways are abbreviated as A.R.D.H. Until 1943, an annual report covered the preceding fiscal year ending 31 December. From 1944 onward, an annual report covered the preceding fiscal year ending 31 March.

² The increasing number of government departments in the postwar period meant that too many annual reports were being appended to the end of the *Assembly Journal*. From 1966 onward, annual reports such as the A.R.D.H. were published on their own.

The difficulty is that now the frost is coming out of the O'Leary road, and everyone is getting stuck, who wants a car anyway? Just about a hundred yards from the manse there is the worst mudhole in P.E.I.—for two weeks now there have been an average of six cars a day stuck there. It is a spot that has a never ending fascination for my husband, about three times every day he suddenly darts out the back door. When I yell at him where is he going (just checking up on him!) his answer is always, 'Just wanted to see who's stuck in the mud hole now.'

Joan Archibald Colborne, Springfield West, P.E.I., to family,
25 April 1949³

³ Joan Archibald Colborne, *Letters from the Manse* (Charlottetown, Island Studies Press, 2003), 67.

A CURIOSITY.—A single seated steam waggon passed through the city this week on its way to the owner, the Rev. Mr. Belcourt, Rustico. When we saw it, the waggon was drawn by horses, but it furnished with a steam engine, &c., and can be propelled by steam. It is the first vehicle of the kind introduced into this Island.

The Charlottetown *Herald*, 19 December 1866, 2

Remembered for his role in founding the Farmer's Bank in Rustico, Prince Edward Island, parish priest Georges Antoine Belcourt was also the first person in British North America to buy, import, and drive an automobile. He cruised around Rustico on numerous occasions between 1866 and 1869.⁴

The Island's relationship with the automobile thus runs longer than any other part of Canada. After its cameo appearance in Rustico in the 1860s, the automobile would return to Prince Edward Island in the first decade of the twentieth century. As historian Edward MacDonald observes, over the next 100 years, it would, "more than any other single factor, transform Island life."⁵ Assisted by roads paved with asphalt and plowed free of snow, the automobile rendered horse-drawn vehicles, coastal ferries, and passenger trains obsolete. By the 1960s, Island society had moulded itself around paved roads, snowplows, and the automobile. Life on Prince Edward Island would never be the same.

⁴ Rudy Croken, "Father Belcourt's Automobile Untangled," *The Island Magazine*, no. 85 (Spring/Summer 2019): 41, 43-44.

⁵ Edward MacDonald, *If You're Stronghearted: Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2000), 12.

I

Despite its clear singular importance to Island history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and despite increasing concerns over its contributions to modern issues such as climate change, historians have written little to date about the automobile and its history on Prince Edward Island beyond its initial ban. Even less has been written about the Province's program of road improvement and snowplowing in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, which enabled the automobile to take over as the predominant form of transportation on the Island. Perhaps the best extant source on P.E.I.'s transportation revolution is MacDonald's *If You're Stronghearted*, in which he gives the transportation revolution extensive but necessarily shallow and speculative coverage within his wider narrative of twentieth-century Island history. MacDonald covers the revolution from multiple angles, including those related to the substance of the revolution and its cultural and social effects.

Automobiles, road improvement, and snowplowing had important social and cultural effects, including a hollowing out of Island communities and suburbanization. But these developments could only take place following the successes in road improvement and snowplowing achieved by the Provincial Government (that is, "the Province"), the topic upon which the following discussion dwells. By doing so, an investigation into the transportation revolution in a level of detail absent in *If You're Stronghearted* is made possible. MacDonald's piece overlooks the repetitious and non-linear nature of the Province's road improvement and hard-surfacing program between the 1940s and 1960s, and it fails to provide much detail on the extensive and accompanying snowplowing program that the Province undertook. In fact, these were crucial factors of the transportation revolution, and they each placed the Province under

intense strain. Although MacDonald only hints at rural Islanders' role in the revolution, they were central: they pushed the Province for better road services in summer and winter.

The Island government also faced pressure to improve its roads from external sources. In *The Summer Trade: A History of Tourism on Prince Edward Island*, historians Alan MacEachern and Edward MacDonald address the pivotal role of the P.E.I. tourism industry in bringing about the transportation revolution in favour of automobiles and improved roads.⁶ They show that motoring tourists came from areas where the automobile and improved roads were firmly established. When they arrived on Prince Edward Island, the Province did not want to disappoint them with lacklustre road services. But just as the Province worked hard to improve its roads to cater to motoring tourists (and used tourism's economic potential as a lever to access federal funding for road construction), it worked even harder to cater to Island motorists, who were year-round drivers (and could vote in provincial elections).

It seems that other Island historians have spent most of their time investigating the early history of the automobile on P.E.I. Automobile enthusiast Rudy Croken revisits the automobile's earliest history on the Island in his account in *The Island Magazine* of Father Belcourt's horseless carriage. Other historians have mostly focused on the initial banning of the automobile on the Island. Historian Deborah Stewart draws on oral history to address the public reception of the first automobiles on Prince Edward Island in her 1978 piece in *The Island Magazine*, "The Island Meets the Auto."⁷ Katherine Dewar addresses the same topic in "John A. Dewar: The Principled Maverick." In this piece for *The Island Magazine*, Katherine Dewar relates how John

⁶ Edward MacDonald and Alan MacEachern, *The Summer Trade: A History of Tourism on Prince Edward Island* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022).

⁷ Deborah Stewart, "The Island Meets the Auto," *The Island Magazine*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 1978).

A. Dewar stubbornly fought the eventual repeal of the automobile ban.⁸ Both Stewart and Dewar’s pieces stress how Islanders’ decision to ban the automobile in 1908 appeared reasonable at the time. Historian Sasha Mullally adds to the conversation with her *Island Magazine* article, “The Machine in the Garden: A Glimpse at Early Automobile Ownership on Prince Edward Island, 1917.”⁹ Mullally examines the urban-rural divide in support of the automobile in its early days on the Island. She makes the point that it was rural Islanders’ belated embrace of the automobile in the 1910s that made repeal of the ban possible. In fact, rural Islanders—the vast majority of the population—increasingly lobbied the Province for better road services in summer and winter well after the 1910s, and this pressure motivated the postwar transportation revolution.

The arrival of automobiles and improved roads on Prince Edward Island can only be understood within the larger paradigm of modernization. Much of the existing literature about modernization on the Island focuses on the years spanned by the Comprehensive Development Plan (C.D.P.), 1969—1984, and its ambitious designs to transform P.E.I.’s economy and society. The most useful works on this era include *The Life of the Party: A History of the Liberal Party in Prince Edward Island* by Wayne MacKinnon, *The Garden Transformed* edited by Verner Smitheram, David Milne, and Satadal Dasgupta, and *Alex B. Campbell: The Prince Edward Island Premier Who Rocked the Cradle* by H. Wade MacLauchlan.¹⁰ In *If You’re Stronghearted*, MacDonald suggests that rapid modernization actually began in the immediate postwar era and

⁸ Katherine Dewar, “John A. Dewar: The Principled Maverick,” *The Island Magazine*, no. 43 (Spring/Summer 1998).

⁹ Sasha Mullally, “The Machine in the Garden: A Glimpse at Early Automobile Ownership on Prince Edward Island, 1917,” *The Island Magazine*, no. 54 (Fall/Winter 2003).

¹⁰ Wayne MacKinnon, *The Life of the Party: A History of the Liberal Party in Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Liberal Party, 1973); Verner Smitheram, David Milne, and Satadal Dasgupta (eds.), *The Garden Transformed: Prince Edward Island, 1945-1980* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1982); H. Wade MacLauchlan, *Alex B. Campbell: The Prince Edward Island Premier Who Rocked the Cradle* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2014).

that it “was not a violent new departure” but a “dramatic quickening of trends” whose origins lay in the first couple of decades of the century.¹¹ This position seems to hold, as the rapid rise in automobile use and the rapid improvement of the Island’s roads in the 1950s and 1960s constituted an acceleration of transportation trends that began before the Second World War. Moreover, the developments of the 1950s and 1960s created the template for change that provincial administrations in the C.D.P. years relied upon.

In her History honours essay, ““No Power on to Wash,”” Emily Christina Holloway also identifies the 1950s and 1960s as a period of rapid change on Prince Edward Island. Relying primarily upon diaries, she centres her discussion on the introduction of electricity and electrical devices, including the television and radio, although she also acknowledges the gradual expansion of pavement across the province. She concludes that modern technology brought better material conditions to Islanders but simultaneously hollowed out their communities, erasing traditional elements of Island culture, including oral storytelling.¹² Although important, these social and cultural ramifications of pavement’s arrival on Prince Edward Island would have been impossible without the Province’s extensive road improvement and snowplowing programs, whose catalytic roles are traced here.

In an unpublished research paper, Carolyn Roberts tackles a different victim of rapid postwar modernization: Prince Edward Island’s inland ferry system. She argues that the arrival of automobiles and improved roads in the 1950s and 1960s was the death knell of that marine transportation network, which could not compete with the speed and unscheduled nature of

¹¹ MacDonald, 226-227.

¹² Emily Christina Holloway, ““No Power on to Wash’: Modernization on Prince Edward Island in the Nineteen Fifties and Sixties,” Honours Essay, Department of History and Classics, University of Prince Edward Island, 2003, 7.

efficient auto traffic.¹³ Roberts' essay is an effective way to get one's mind around the pre-Second World War era of transportation on the Island. It shows just how revolutionary the changes subsequently brought by the automobile and improved roads were.

The transportation revolution was not restricted to Prince Edward Island, of course. In "The 1950s: The Decade of Development," her chapter in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, historian Margaret Conrad describes the many modernization revolutions hitting Atlantic Canada at this time, including those in economics, health, technology, and social relations. She discusses the "Atlantic Revolution"—how Atlantic governments, relying heavily on federal financial support, expanded in size and resources and intervened more directly in the economy than ever before.¹⁴ Conrad's chapter informs the Atlantic Canadian context within which the transportation revolution on Prince Edward Island occurred, and it also bolsters the argument that the Island government expanded to respond to pressures from Islanders to improve summer and winter driving conditions.

The Island's experience was also an echo of the wider postwar transportation revolution that occurred throughout the rest of North America, especially in the United States. The role of the automobile in modern North American society has been studied extensively, which reflects its central importance. These studies have addressed the social, cultural, economic, environmental, and intellectual sides of this history. For example, in *Republic of Drivers*, Cotten Seiler provides a complex cultural and intellectual history of the automobile in the United States. His most pertinent conclusion is that automobile use became so engrained in the U.S. that even

¹³ Carolyn Roberts, "The Inland Ferry System of Prince Edward Island," unpublished research paper, University of Prince Edward Island, 2001.

¹⁴ Margaret Conrad, "The 1950s: The Decade of Development," in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

though Americans thought that the automobile granted them liberty, they did not have the freedom to choose a way of life not based on the automobile.¹⁵

Gabrielle Esperdy's *American Autopia: An Intellectual History of the American Roadside at Midcentury* introduces the idea of "autopia" to describe a place where governments make decisions around what is best for an automobile-using public.¹⁶ In *Car Country: An Environmental History*, Christopher Wells considers the results of such a governmental disposition on the built environment. When a government prioritizes investment in infrastructure that encourages car use and discourages other forms of transportation, it creates what Wells calls "Car Country."¹⁷ To one degree or another, each of these interpretations bears on Prince Edward Island's experience of the automobile. In particular, Islanders pressured their government to prioritize programs that would benefit automobilists, with the result that the Island's built infrastructure began to heavily favour car use. The Prince Edward Island from the 1950s onward can thus be seen as meeting the definitions of both an "autopia" and "Car Country."

¹⁵ Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Gabrielle Esperdy, *American Autopia: An Intellectual History of the American Roadside at Midcentury* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

II

I can remember the first time we met a car on the road when we had a horse. The poor animal near went crazy with fear. Pop said that a car had no place on a horse's road. I bet he never thought the time would come when a horse would have no place on a car's road.

A woman from Fort Augustus, P.E.I., interviewed by David Weale¹⁸

The horse was still king of the Island's roads in the early twentieth century, but they were nothing to write home about. Narrow, crooked, and lined with hedgerows of trees, they were "poorly conceived, poorly ditched, poorly graded, and poorly regarded," as Edward MacDonald observes.¹⁹ They posed their fair share of problems in all seasons, but spring was a nightmare. Under the onslaught of spring rains, the Island's red clay roads became "a sucking mud as thick as chocolate pudding."²⁰ It was customary for the provincial government to close these quagmires for the duration of spring through an Order-in-Council. Once the roads had solidified at the beginning of summer, Islanders still had to cope with suffocating dust kicked up by traffic. If Islanders were lucky, fall would be cold, and the roads would be firm. Otherwise, they were in for a repeat of springtime conditions. Winter brought lots of snow and little choice but to forego the blocked highways in favour of paths broken through fields and across frozen waterways.²¹

¹⁸ Marian Bruce, *Remembering Old Dan: Farm Horses and People of Prince Edward Island* (Murray River, P.E.I.: Epona Publications, 2011), 133.

¹⁹ MacDonald, 11.

²⁰ MacDonald, 16.

²¹ MacDonald, 11.

As MacDonald puts it, the roads were, in a word, “purgatorial.”²²

So, who or what had the responsibility to take care of these wretched routes?

Traditionally, ordinary Islanders built and maintained roads as a fulfillment of their statute labour duties. This system dated from the early days of British settlement on Prince Edward Island in the late eighteenth century. Like many other British North American jurisdictions at the time, the Island did not have a central government strong enough to levy a road tax, collect it, and pay for road work. Instead, it relied on ordinary Islanders to conduct the road work in what was essentially a system of forced labour. In 1853, shortly after achieving responsible government, Prince Edward Island became the first and only province ever to tie its franchise to statute labour. From then until 1901, all Island males who wished to vote had to fulfill their statute labour duty.²³

While most road work was performed by ordinary Islanders, the P.E.I. government started to become more directly involved in road development starting in the 1870s. As with other North American jurisdictions of the era, Prince Edward Island was experiencing a “rising population, increasing mail routes, improved vehicles and more extended travel,” which the Province noted in an internal “Road Report to Present Time” in 1962.²⁴ Automobiles were still in an early stage of development and were not available or affordable for most people, so they were

²² MacDonald, 11.

²³ Usually, the franchise was tied to property ownership. Historian Colin Grittner has argued that P.E.I. tied its franchise to statute labour because there were not enough male property owners on nineteenth-century P.E.I. See Colin Grittner, “Working at the Crossroads: Statute Labour, Manliness, and the Electoral Franchise on Victorian Prince Edward Island,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 23, no. 1 (2012): 101-130.

²⁴ “Road Report to Present Time,” November 1962, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 199.

not the “improved vehicles” to which the report refers.²⁵ Rather, the report is likely referencing improved horse-drawn carriages (and perhaps the odd bicycle).²⁶

These changing conditions necessitated a stronger government involvement in road development. In 1877, the Island government created the Department of Public Works, which marked the critical first step in the eventual transition in responsibility over roads from ordinary Islanders to the State. This transition was occurring elsewhere in North America for similar reasons. Dubbed the “Good Roads Movement,” it lasted from roughly the 1870s to the 1920s in the United States but likely somewhat longer on Prince Edward Island.²⁷ As the demand for better roads continued to rise over the next century, the P.E.I. government’s responsibilities grew accordingly.

As the Island government expanded its role in road development—a provincial jurisdiction under the terms of the *British North America Act, 1867*—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Canadian federal government continued to administer the Prince Edward Island Railway (P.E.I.R.), which fell within its jurisdiction. While most Islanders at the time relied on horse-drawn vehicles for travel within their communities, they often took the train on longer trips. It was an integral part of economic and social life on the Island, connecting the province’s communities like never before.²⁸ The railway continued to expand in size and use

²⁵ MacDonald, 12.

²⁶ Cycling had become popular in the United States and Britain at the time, and this popularity extended to P.E.I. Islanders rode in bicycle road races as early as the 1880s. See “Bicycle Race, Great George Street, c. 1920,” Charlottetown Stories, Heritage Office, City of Charlottetown, accessed 16 May 2022, <https://charlottetownstories.wordpress.com/picturing-a-city-exhibits/picturing-a-city-the-bicycle/bicycle-race-great-george-street-c-1920/>.

²⁷ S. Croce Kelly, “Good Roads Movement,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 14 May 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Good-Roads-movement>.

²⁸ MacDonald, 10.

over the first two decades of the twentieth century.²⁹ By the 1920s, the railway was the primary means of long-distance passenger and freight transportation on the Island.³⁰

Well before the first truck-and tractor-mounted snowplows took to the Island's roads in the 1930s, teams of "snow-fighters" manually cleared accumulated snow from the tracks of the Prince Edward Island Railway. Edward MacDonald writes that "[t]he railway's light, narrow-gauge engines, sharp curves, and heavy grades were easy prey for the massive blizzards that came howling down on the province." Islanders had their work cut out for them. Lawson MacDonald remembered his younger days working as a snow-fighter near Summerside during the winter of 1922—1923, when the Island was walloped with 129 inches of the white powder: "The engine took a run at the drifts and then we'd have to get down and dig the old train out, dig the wheels out. And she'd get back out of that and take another shunt and hit her again and go about half a length of herself and we'd dig her out again."³¹

To go to all this trouble to keep the train running suggests that it had become an important fixture of transportation on the Island by the 1920s. It had left its mark on the province. By making long-distance overland travel feasible for the first time, the Prince Edward Island Railway redirected patterns of commerce and settlement to inland areas, literally making towns in some instances.³² But, as historian Boyde Beck pointed out, "some historians ask why the Island bothered to build a railroad in the first place, given its abundant harbours and fine network of rivers that could convey goods and people as efficiently—and cheaply—as locomotives."³³

²⁹ The Murray Harbour Branch Line opened in 1906 and brought railway service to southeastern Queens and southern Kings counties for the first time.

³⁰ MacDonald, 148.

³¹ MacDonald, 148.

³² D. Bailey Clark, "A New Criterion for the Creation of Towns: The Prince Edward Island Railway and Kensington," unpublished research essay, University of Prince Edward Island, 2020).

³³ Quoted in Roberts, 1.

Beck was referring in part to the extensive network of inland ferries that once existed on Prince Edward Island between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Due to the many bays and recesses along the Island's coasts, travel by road was often more circuitous than by water. The ferries also plied up and down the Island's many rivers, which were natural thoroughfares. Once frozen in winter, many of the waterways that the ferries maneuvered in the summer months—such as the Montague River between Lower Montague and Georgetown or Charlottetown Harbour between Queen's Wharf and Rocky Point—became ice roads taken by Islanders on horse and sleigh.³⁴

³⁴Roberts, 4.

III

There's a thing running around the country here by the name of an automobile, and I'm going to set down some rules for dealing with this man-of-war. If you see it coming on the road, get out of the wagon as fast as you can, and hold your horse by the head. Better still, if you see a gap in a fence or a gate, drive into the field until this thing passes by.

An Emyvale priest in an address to his congregation³⁵

The fate of Father Belcourt's automobile is not known, but, between 1869—the year of his departure from Rustico—and 1900, Prince Edward Island was automobile-free. Islanders may have even forgotten about the contraption as they continued their mostly rural lives, their communities connected by horse-drawn carriages, the railway, and the inland ferry network. The arrival of the first modern car on Prince Edward Island in 1900 shattered this paradigm.

By 1908, six more cars had appeared, and Islanders were unnerved. The automobile posed an immediate threat to the well-being of Islander's beloved horses. Historian Deborah Stewart records Islander Willie MacDonald speaking of his younger days in West Point, when his horse encountered a car on the road, spooked, took off, and was "so scared" that "[s]he never was anymore good after that."³⁶ Besides, only wealthy urbanites could afford cars, and this was out of step with the identities of most Islanders, eighty percent of whom lived in rural areas.³⁷ Early automobiles were also notoriously prone to breakdowns and flat tires. And what about

³⁵ As recounted in Bruce, 132.

³⁶ Stewart, 10.

³⁷ MacDonald and MacEachern, 55-56, 62.

those wretched Island roads? Surely, they were unfit for automobile use.³⁸ When Premier F.L. Haszard's Liberal government banned the automobile completely in 1908, there was near-unanimous agreement among the Island's lawmakers.³⁹

Islanders, most of whom were rural, had banned the automobile because it clashed on a practical level with their longstanding horse-based society. However, the few cars that had arrived on Prince Edward Island—even though they were expensive and unreliable—seemed to portend something greater. This was not a passing fad or a one-off “curiosity,” as Father Belcourt's steam wagon had been. The automobile was storming the rest of the continent, and it was here to stay. Rural Islanders seemingly knew that the automobile threatened to overturn their way of life, and, like their cherished equines, they dug in their heels.⁴⁰

Further developments on and off Prince Edward Island would change this situation. In Michigan, the American car manufacturer Henry Ford introduced the Model T the same year Islanders banned the automobile. Produced using his revolutionary assembly lines, the Model T was the first car that was affordable to the workers who made it. It marked a watershed transition. One of Islanders' chief concerns about the automobile—that it was only used by wealthy urbanites—was now becoming less and less true as more Model Ts rolled off Ford's assembly line.⁴¹

Automobiles were becoming less expensive, and, as a parallel trend, many Islanders—especially those engaged in the booming silver fox farming industry—were becoming wealthy enough to afford one.⁴² Increasingly reliant on touring American motorists, the Island's nascent

³⁸ Dewar, 5.

³⁹ Mullally, 16.

⁴⁰ Dewar, 4.

⁴¹ MacDonald and MacEachern, 62; Vincent Curcio, *Henry Ford* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 65.

⁴² MacDonald and MacEachern, 62.

tourism industry suffered, its advocates argued.⁴³ In 1912 and 1913, various members of the Island's business community campaigned for the ban's repeal. The solidarity of Islanders' anti-automobile stance was beginning to crack.

Increasingly aware that automobiles were the future, Premier J.A. Mathieson was open to allowing a limited degree of automobile use on Prince Edward Island. He also well knew that most of the Island's rural population was against any repeal. As a compromise, his Conservative government introduced a new *Automobile Act* in 1913, which would only become law once approved by Islanders through a plebiscite.

The plebiscite's results revealed Islanders' polarized opinions on the automobile. Rural Islanders threw the idea of repeal in the Premier's face, with up to ninety percent of them voting against the automobile.⁴⁴ Yet voters in Summerside and Charlottetown expressed equally strong sentiments in favour of the automobile. In an effort to satisfy both urban and rural Islanders, Mathieson's government amended the *Automobile Act* to allow individual communities to decide whether they would allow automobile traffic on their roads on specified days of the week. The mostly urban community of Charlottetown Common and Royalty wasted no time. Shortly after the law was enacted, its members voted to open their roads to the automobile.⁴⁵

In an overwhelmingly rural province, the automobile would not take root as long as Islanders living in the country continued to resist it. The 1910s were a crucial period, then, because they witnessed rural Islanders eventually embrace the car. Despite their fierce resistance at the outset of the decade—there are stories of slashed tires, barricaded roads, and confrontations between pitchfork-wielding Islanders and automobilists—rural Islanders reversed

⁴³ MacDonald and MacEachern, 62.

⁴⁴ Dewar, 5.

⁴⁵ Dewar, 5.

their staunch anti-automobile position in a remarkably short period. Historian Sasha Mullally has argued that this was not a passive act on the part of rural Islanders; they were not yielding to “modernity.” She notes that North America’s rural population was enjoying new wealth resulting from increased wartime food prices, and car manufacturers, cognizant that they had saturated the luxury car market, began to look for a new base of customers. They found it in the rural population that could now afford automobiles for the first time. Companies like Ford courted the rural population by designing cars “for utilitarian purposes and priced for the agrarian market.” Mullally explains that North American farmers “‘tamed the devil wagon’ by weaving it into rural culture, existing patterns and modes of farm labour, and used it to expand traditional transportation systems.”⁴⁶

The groundswell that had quickly emerged to ban the automobile in 1908 thus receded by 1919. That year, the Province passed an Order-in-Council that removed any remaining restrictions on automobile use on the Island. Rural Islanders had seemingly embraced the automobile because it was a better fit for their lifestyles than the existing overland transportation options. Horse-drawn vehicles provided direct service to one’s home, but they were unsuitable for long-distance travel. Although imperfect and often annoyingly slow, the train offered the prospect of long-distance travel from one tip of the Island to the other. But even though there were train stations in communities across the province, most people did not live near one, and they had to find their way back and forth between their homes and the platform. Likewise, those using the train’s freight service still had to transport their goods to railheads. In a province whose population was not clustered in metropolitan areas, public transportation infrastructure was necessarily limited in its reach, no matter how meandering a route it took.

⁴⁶ Mullally, 18-19.

The 1920s would thus be the last decade of growth for the Prince Edward Island Railway. While it had been an integral part of Island life since its inception in the 1870s, it was notoriously flawed. As Edward MacDonald has pointed out, “[i]t was one of the crookedest railways in North America,” which contributed to the slow travel times. Built in narrow gauge, it was unable to connect with the Mainland’s wider standard gauge lines for the first five decades of its existence. The federal government belatedly finished converting the railway to standard gauge only in the 1930s, and the Island received diesel locomotives in the late 1940s, well before any other province.⁴⁷ Yet it was not enough.

While still the preferred option for bulk cargoes, the railway did not make a profit, and Islanders eventually grew tired of its meandering routes and slow travel times—especially after a better alternative, the automobile, became available. Assessing the railway in 1949 in a brief to a federal royal commission on transportation, the Province criticized the “heavy curves, the excessive mileage between comparatively adjacent points, [and] the wonderfully intricate pattern of rails east of Charlottetown.”⁴⁸ Unable to offer a similar level of unscheduled freedom and rapidity, the Prince Edward Island Railway began to cede dominance in freight and passenger travel to the automobile starting in the 1930s.

⁴⁷ MacDonald, 149, 242-243.

⁴⁸ *1949 Royal Commission*, July 1949, 84.

IV

Like many other inventions, the motor car commenced as a toy, then as a luxury of the rich, while now it ranks as a comfort of those in moderate circumstances and may even become a necessity of life to the masses.

The Canadian federal government in the 1924 *Canada Year Book*⁴⁹

Amid the cresting stages of the Good Roads Movement that had been sweeping North America since the 1870s, the Canadian federal government passed the *Canada Highways Act* in 1919, the same year that the Island's legislature swept away any vestiges of the automobile ban. The automobile seemed capable of replacing the railway as the country's chief transportation network in the twentieth century, but for that to happen, Canada's thoroughfares needed some attention.

Although roads within each province fell within provincial jurisdiction, the Act authorized Ottawa to fund forty percent of the work done by provinces participating in the program over the next ten years. Prince Edward Island was a comparatively poor member of the Dominion and thus incapable of improving its roads at an adequate pace and on a sufficient scale on its own. Under the Act, the Province was eligible to receive \$623,845 from the federal government so long as it spent \$1.56 million from its own coffers. Although the Province had to borrow most of its share, it managed to use most of the money available from Ottawa.⁵⁰ The *Canada Highways Act* marked the first of many times over the next fifty years that the Province would rely on the federal government for financial assistance in improving its roadways.

⁴⁹ *Canada Year Book, 1924*, 609.

⁵⁰ MacDonal, 116.

The Island government's road improvement program of the 1920s was the biggest it had ever undertaken, with the Province improving about 751 miles of mostly clay roads within its 3,500-mile road network.⁵¹ The Department of Public Works raised and widened the roadways, and it also added camber to them. This arch in the middle of the road allowed rainwater—the nemesis of the Island's red clay—to run off more efficiently into newly created ditches. On the well-travelled highways into Summerside and Charlottetown, the Province applied “[a]bout fifty miles’ worth” of imported gravel.⁵²

Much of the work of improving the roads as part of the *Canada Highways Act* was carried out by Islanders fulfilling their statute labour duties. Statute labour had been abolished in 1901 but returned in 1912. Although Islanders no longer had to work on the roads if they wanted to vote, they still had to perform the duty if they wanted to avoid paying the Road Tax. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, it seems that most Islanders opted to work on the roads instead of paying the tax.⁵³ By 1932, the Province had amended the legislation governing statute labour to make it easier for Islanders to notify the Province that they were opting to work instead of pay, which is a sign that few Islanders actually paid the tax. At this point, the Department of Public Works noted that most of the work that Islanders did on the roads as part of statute labour involved “split-log road dragging and assisting in other highway maintenance work.”⁵⁴ The majority of Islanders were farmers, and the split-log dragging was something that would have been relatively easy for them to do. They would have likely had experience with it from dragging their own farm lanes.

⁵¹ MacDonald, 116.

⁵² MacDonald, 117.

⁵³ L.B. MacMillan, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” 31 December 1936, A.R.D.H., 5, *Assembly Journal*, 1937.

⁵⁴ H.H. Shaw, “Provincial Engineer’s Report,” 31 December 1932, A.R.D.H., 5, *Assembly Journal*, 1933.

Although many Islanders were obligated to work on the roads, there is little doubt that there was a “patronage bonanza” in the government department responsible for highways from the 1920s onward, as suggested by Edward MacDonald.⁵⁵ Even though ordinary Islanders continued to be required to work the roads until the late 1940s, plenty of the necessary work was done by employees of the department. It was here that an opportunity for patronage lay. Patronage was an entrenched part of Island life, and patronage appointments to work on the railway were common in the early 1900s.⁵⁶ From the 1920s onward, the department responsible for highways was receiving sizable chunks of funding in the provincial budget, not to mention the federal funding that the Province also received for road work. The governing party thus had many opportunities to reward supporters by giving them jobs working on the roads.⁵⁷

Despite these improvements, much of the work that the Department of Public Works did on its clay roads was undone when the snow melted and the mud season returned, and the Province still had to close many of its roads every spring. The Island government also struggled to pay its share of the program’s costs.⁵⁸ And its financial problems would continue, as the widened roads demanded more maintenance than earlier iterations.⁵⁹

These federally driven road improvement efforts came at a time when the number of automobiles on Prince Edward Island was growing exponentially. There were 26 cars registered on the Island in 1913, 303 in 1917, 1,419 in 1920, 2,583 in 1925, and 5,430 in 1928.⁶⁰ Despite this remarkable rise in automobile use, Islanders of the 1920s “had the fewest cars and the most horses per capita in Canada,” as historian Marian Bruce observes.⁶¹ In the mid-1920s, one in

⁵⁵ MacDonald, 117.

⁵⁶ MacDonald, 10.

⁵⁷ MacDonald, 117.

⁵⁸ “Road Report to Present Time.”

⁵⁹ MacDonald, 117.

⁶⁰ MacDonald and MacEachern, 63; MacDonald, 118; *Canada Year Book*, 1930, 652.

⁶¹ Bruce, 134.

every 35 Islanders had a car, while one in 14 had a car in the rest of Canada and one in six in the United States.⁶² Most rural Islanders would not purchase an automobile for another couple of decades, in part because their utility remained limited; the Island's roads were still unusable most of the year, despite the Province's efforts in road improvement as part of the *Canada Highways Act*. Those Islanders who owned automobiles had to put them up on blocks for the winter and spring.⁶³ Until the Province improved the Island's roads sufficiently and made them usable in all seasons, the automobile's effect on Prince Edward Island would be limited, and the transportation revolution would remain incomplete.

⁶² MacDonald, 118.

⁶³ Mullally, 24.

V

Looks like a creek—but it’s just one of the gaping fissures in the McIntyre highway. These cracks stretch half way across the road. They were patched up last week, but how long will the patches stand up to motor traffic? This is the kind of work for which the Lea Government is mortgaging every farm in the Province, borrowing money right and left and spending it like drunken sailors.

The Charlottetown Guardian, 20 July 1931⁶⁴

The clay roads that Islanders had improved in the 1920s were a step in the right direction, but they remained heavily flawed. Something more impervious to the Island’s winters and springs was needed. Prince Edward Island was not alone in this struggle against Mother Nature, and it looked to its North American neighbours for guidance. Since the early 1900s, numerous jurisdictions in the United States and Canada had experimented with various types of products that created a hard surface on the road. The primary problem for a place like Prince Edward Island was cost. Most types of durable hard-surfaces were out of the Island’s economic reach.

Knowing that it needed to find a way to hard-surface the Island’s roads, the Department of Public Works sent its Deputy Minister to a conference on asphalt pavement in Memphis, Tennessee. Various southern states had figured out how to use local sand material as a low-cost form of aggregate in their asphalt mixtures, and the Liberal government in office at the time—led

⁶⁴ “Camera Reveals Unvarnished Truth about McIntyre Election Highway,” *Charlottetown Guardian*, 20 July 1931, 1.

in this venture by the “flamboyant Public Works Minister, J.P. ‘Big Jim Bill’ McIntyre”—wanted to see if such a method of paving would work on Prince Edward Island.⁶⁵

The Department of Public Works laid this experimental type of sand-asphalt on a stretch of Malpeque Road in front of St. Dunstan’s University.⁶⁶ Although the asphalt only covered about a mile, it launched a firestorm of political debate. The Conservative-leaning *Charlottetown Guardian* condemned the amount of money spent on the project, especially after the road soon started to crack: “The work was completed this summer. What will it look like after the frost gets at it?” The Conservatives successfully framed the 1931 provincial election as one over road quality, which, as Wayne MacKinnon observes, “always spelled difficulty for any government, as the demands for better roads were never satiated.”⁶⁷ The McIntyre Highway’s failure in part lost the Premier Walter Lea’s Liberals the election, but, more broadly, it foreshadowed the troubles that the Island would face over the coming decades. Until the advent of all-weather highways in the 1960s, the combination of Prince Edward Island’s sandy soils and its climate—especially the springtime freeze-thaw cycles—was a pavement killer.

Even before it had laid this first type of experimental and, ultimately, unsuccessful type of pavement, the Province was contemplating keeping the Island’s primary trunk roads open through the winter. The City of Charlottetown had begun treating its residents to snowplowing services, and rural Islanders wanted the provincial government to provide something similar. The Department of Public Works’ District Engineer for Queens County, J.A. Reardon, noted in 1928 that the prospect of plowing the Island’s roads had not yet been seriously considered, but “the increasing number of motorists, wishing to take advantage of as long a motoring season as

⁶⁵ MacKinnon, 95.

⁶⁶ The first experiments with hard-surfacing were actually done within the municipalities of Summerside and Charlottetown during the 1920s. See MacDonald, 117.

⁶⁷ MacKinnon, 96.

possible, feel that the Department should make an attempt to maintain the principal highways for winter motoring.” In response to this pressure from rural Islanders, the government took stock of its potential snow-clearing abilities: it had “six heavy tractors” that it could affix with snowplows.⁶⁸ If the Province went ahead with an extensive snowplowing effort, it mused that it could recoup most of the costs involved from its tax on gasoline, for which there would be more demand in winter if the roads were plowed.⁶⁹

Shortly thereafter, the Department of Public Works began to acquire its first snowplows, which it likely mounted on its tractors, as Reardon suggested. In 1930, its list of machinery owned by the Department included a LaPlant-Choate V-plow.⁷⁰ The V-plow was shaped like an arrowhead with the point facing forward to punch through the snow. A year later, the Department had added a “Baker Trip-Blade Snow Plow.”⁷¹ The trip-blade plows featured a straight blade with a “trip-edge.” The bottom edge of the blade was flexible and could recoil back to absorb the shock of hitting a hard object on the road without damaging the plow or vehicle.

The trip-edge blade was presumably important because the Department of Public Works had to plow mostly gravel or hardened clay roads, whose uneven surfaces would offer plenty of resistance to any snowplow blade. Even with this technology, the solution for better snowplowing services was the same solution for mud-free travel in the spring and dust-free travel in the summer: paved roads. Now, however, roads took on new importance as make-work

⁶⁸ It is important to note that “snowplows” were the metal blades affixed to the front of snow removal vehicles, which were originally tractors and later trucks.

⁶⁹ J.A. Reardon, “Division Engineer’s Report for Queens County,” 31 December 1928, A.R.D.H., 15, *Assembly Journal*, 1929.

⁷⁰ “List of Machinery Owned by the Department of Public Works,” 31 December 1930, A.R.D.H., 53, *Assembly Journal*, 1931.

⁷¹ “List of Machinery and Equipment Owned by the Department of Public Works,” 31 December 1931, A.R.D.H., 299, *Assembly Journal*, 1932.

projects during the dark days of the Great Depression. The Conservative government of William J.P. MacMillan coordinated with Ottawa to build the first edition of the Trans-Canada Highway in 1934. With federal help, the Province bounced back from its blunder on the MacIntyre boulevard. The Trans-Canada Highway laid a paved strip of asphalt from Summerside in the west to Charlottetown in the east, with a portion in the middle connecting to the ferry terminal at Borden.⁷² In piecemeal fashion, the Province continued to pave its roads so that, by 1940, there was a continuous stretch of paved road “from Montrose in the west to Montague and Souris in the east, a sort of asphalt equivalent to the Prince Edward Island Railway,” as Edward MacDonald relates.⁷³

Although most of the Island’s roads remained unpaved, the provincial government plowed ahead with its snow-removal program. In 1935, the Department of Public Works acquired a four-wheel-drive truck to which it affixed a snowplow.⁷⁴ The following year, the Department added two Sargent snowplows (which were likely V-plows) and two more four-wheel-drive trucks, for which it now had two snowplows as optional attachments.⁷⁵ The Department upped the ante in 1939, acquiring a Walter Snow Fighter, a seven-ton truck specifically built for operating a snowplow. Two Adams plows (likely V-plows), a Frink snowplow, and even a plow made by Bruce Stewart & Company of Charlottetown rounded out the Department’s arsenal of seven total snowplows.⁷⁶ By the end of the 1940s, the Province scaled back its use of tractor-mounted plows, as those mounted on trucks were much more

⁷² MacDonald, 162.

⁷³ MacDonald, 203.

⁷⁴ “List of Machinery and Equipment Owned by the Department of Public Works and Highways,” 31 December 1935, A.R.D.H., 51, *Assembly Journal*, 1936.

⁷⁵ “List of Machinery and Equipment Owned by the Department of Public Works and Highways, 31 December 1936, A.R.D.H., 65, *Assembly Journal*, 1937.

⁷⁶ “List of Machinery and Equipment Owned by the Department of Public Works and Highways,” 31 December 1939, A.R.D.H., 118, *Assembly Journal*, 1940.

effective. Plowing with trucks also meant that tractors could be saved for road construction in the summer months.⁷⁷

To help its snowplows, the Department of Public Works erected snow fences in areas prone to drifting, and it did considerable clearing of bushes and trees in areas where snow often collected, areas known to the Department as “snow traps.”⁷⁸ Although removing snow from the roads was the Department’s primary concern, the icy surface left behind made wintertime driving dangerous. So, the Department began an extensive program of salting and sanding the roads.⁷⁹ Some vehicles, like the Walter Snow Fighter, seemed to have been equipped both to plow and sand the roads simultaneously.

⁷⁷ R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, “Deputy Ministers’ Report,” 18 December 1949, A.R.D.H., 3, *Assembly Journal*, 1950.

⁷⁸ William H. MacDougall, “County Engineer’s Report for Prince County,” 31 December 1941, A.R.D.H., 20, *Assembly Journal*, 1942; William H. MacDougall, “County Engineer’s Report for Prince County,” 31 December 1940, A.R.D.H., 29, *Assembly Journal*, 1941.

⁷⁹ R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, “Deputy Ministers’ Report,” 23 November 1948, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1949.

VI

Snow plowing of our principal roads now is an accepted feature of Public Highway Service. As a measure of its effect on the business life of the Province extra gasoline tax receipts show it to be a surprisingly good investment. But the added benefits to a rural community in matters of health, religion, education, and social life are incalculable. Once experienced they tend to become indispensable.

R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, Deputy Ministers of the Department of Public Works and Highways, 23 November 1948⁸⁰

Like many other areas in Canada, the Island suspended major infrastructure projects until the end of the Second World War.⁸¹ With the return of peace, the Province dove back into road construction. In the mid-1940s, under the administration of the Island's "Farmer Premier," J. Walter Jones, the provincial government adopted a new standard for all paved and non-paved roads. The narrow and often tree-lined roads of the early twentieth century had made it impossible to get snow up and off the side of the road sufficiently far to prevent it from immediately drifting back in. Under the new standard, roads were widened, subgraded, and raised higher than the surrounding countryside, giving snowplows enough room to push the snow

⁸⁰ R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, "Deputy Ministers' Report," 23 November 1948, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1949.

⁸¹ MacDonal, 203; C.W. Gilchrist, "Roads and Highways," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed 14 May 2022, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/roads-and-highways>.

well off the road. The Province hoped that this new standard would “give all-year service instead of being snow blocked three or four months each year.”⁸²

The Province had to do something to improve winter travel by automobile, as the number of rural Islanders attempting to use the roads in the winter had been increasing steadily over the previous few years. Islanders had been enjoying the conveniences granted by the automobile during the summer ever since the ban on it had been repealed, but now they were unwilling to go without them throughout the rest of the year, including winter and spring.

Heretofore, the automobile made rural life on Prince Edward Island more convenient—in the summer, at least. Islanders in rural areas were, by definition, spatially separated. With the automobile, rural Islanders could easily overcome the distances between them and their neighbours on the one hand and between them and those in urban areas on the other. In a sense, the automobile offered rural Islanders the best of both worlds. They could enjoy their autonomy on their rural tract of land, and, whenever they chose, they could hop in the car and travel to their neighbours’ places or into urban areas to shop, work, conduct business, visit, and seek entertainment. Island farmers still relied on the Prince Edward Island Railway to ship their produce in the 1940s, but the automobile—and plowed and paved roads—made it easier to get their produce to the railhead, including in the spring, whose early stages could offer a surprise snowfall and whose later stages turned roads into quagmires.⁸³

Once accustomed to all the ease and convenience that the automobile had introduced into their lives during the summer, it is hardly surprising that rural Islanders demanded that they be

⁸² R.G. White, “Report of the Construction Engineer,” 30 June 1947, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1948.

⁸³ R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, “Deputy Ministers’ Report,” 18 November 1949, A.R.D.H., 3, *Assembly Journal*, 1950.

able to use their automobiles year-round, including during the spring mud season and during snowy winters. From these sentiments came the pressure to pave and plow roads.

This pressure was characterized by an upward spiral effect: the more that the Province improved and plowed roads, the more Islanders' expectations grew. Islanders—especially those in rural areas—became used to a level of convenience that did not involve breaking a winter road with a horse and sleigh or struggling through the mud, and they were increasingly unwilling to go without it. Rural Islanders had been the catalyst for the adoption of the automobile in the late 1910s and the 1920s. Now, they were behind a new push for paved and plowed roads.

In the 1920s, “improving roads” involved ditching and cambering and widening. In the 1930s, it meant some form of pavement on major arterial highways. By the late 1940s, Islanders and their government expected more. The Province’s ultimate goal was to lay pavement on the roads that it had been upgrading to higher standards. The hard-surface would make the mud bogs of spring—and, sometimes, of late fall—more passable and would keep dust levels down in summer. Marian Bruce notes that, thanks to pavement, the process of “scraping the roads clean in winter” would be made easier as well.⁸⁴ After the experiments with varieties of hard-surface such as sand-asphalt failed in the early 1930s, it appears that the Province settled on “light pavement” as its primary type of hard-surface from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. Throughout this period, light pavement comprised from one-half to three-quarters of the new pavement that the Province laid each year.⁸⁵

To lay light pavement, road crews first built up the road’s subgrade to the desired standard and primed it with liquid asphalt “at the rate of 1/3 gallon per square yard.” The next

⁸⁴ Bruce, 135.

⁸⁵ For example, in 1949, light pavement comprised about two-thirds. In 1952, light pavement was about one-half. In 1955, it was about eighty percent. Figures are calculated from the various Annual Reports of the Department of Public Works and Highways from the era.

step involved spreading a presumably slightly thicker layer of liquid asphalt. They then added some aggregate—for example, stones and gravel—to the liquid asphalt, after which they pressed the aggregate into the liquid asphalt with a roller. The road crews would then lay another layer of liquid asphalt and another layer of aggregate, and then roll the two of them together.⁸⁶ This light pavement was cheaper than its eventual successor, the thicker standard pavement. It was undoubtedly an upgrade over clay roads, but it was still rudimentary: one Department of Highways official called it “stabilized gravel surface.”⁸⁷ And it still did not fully resolve the issue of springtime travel, as it was so light that the Province had to impose weight restrictions on vehicles every spring. Even with such restrictions, light pavement had a lifespan of about fifteen years.⁸⁸ As a result, roads paved in the 1930s needed to be re-paved by the 1940s. Light pavement might have been cheaper to install, but it was clearly not cost-effective over the long-term.

The Province was unable to bring all its roads up to its latest height-and-width standards all at once. Most of the Island’s roads had not yet been paved either. So, even though snowplowing efforts reached new heights in the late 1940s, many Island roads remained unplowed. Probably for that reason, many Islanders still used the passenger train from December to March. In fact, it was only in winter that Islanders now used the passenger service in any significant numbers. The Province acknowledged in its brief to the 1949 Royal Commission on Transportation that, during the rest of the year, “the public prefer to travel by automobile or by bus, which saves time and provides a more direct service to rural communities.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Clifford Sherren, “Pavement Maintenance Foreman’s Report,” 31 March 1954, A.R.D.H., 18, *Assembly Journal*, 1955.

⁸⁷ John Gilmore, “Maintenance Engineer’s Report, Queens County,” 31 March 1955, A.R.D.H., 6-7, *Assembly Journal*, 1956.

⁸⁸ 1949 Royal Commission, 22.

⁸⁹ 1949 Royal Commission, 11.

While the passenger service might have only been useful in winter, the Island's trains were still crucial to the Province's economy as carriers of freight in all seasons. In particular, the Island relied on the railway and ferries to transport its agricultural produce, and that was no small thing. At the time, agriculture comprised about half of the Island's economy.⁹⁰ Although the Province recognized that trucking was also a vital component of its economy, it seemingly saw the railway as the priority. At this time, trucking provided services that the railway presumably could not, such as the export of live lobster to markets in the United States.⁹¹ To truly compete with rails, however, heavy trucks required extensive hard-surfaced roads. The 1950s would try to deliver them.

Despite its primary importance in the workings of the Island economy, the railway was admonished by the Province as providing for "deplorably slow movement of freight, passengers and mails" throughout the province.⁹² By 1949, the railway's slowness was a well-worn criticism, but there is a theme of modernity here—a concern with profit as a function of time saved or wasted. In the coming two decades, as hard-surfacing technology improved and the Province could plow roads throughout the winter, the train's role in passenger travel all but evaporated. As this process unfolded, the train became only justifiable economically as a freight vehicle.

As the Province involved itself more and more in road improvement and plowing, roads became increasingly more complicated to construct and maintain. Under these changing conditions, the statute labour system made less and less sense. Most Islanders continued to pay their Road Tax through labour in the years immediately following the Second World War, but

⁹⁰ *1949 Royal Commission*, 24.

⁹¹ *1949 Royal Commission*, 16.

⁹² *1949 Royal Commission*, 84.

the Province now noted that the work Islanders did to pay their Road Tax—namely, split-log dragging—was becoming obsolete.⁹³ An engineer in the Department of Highways stated that “modern equipment and machinery” required “[s]killed workmen and operators.”⁹⁴ Moreover, the process of modern road work required bigger road crews that the Province needed to employ at certain times of the year and in certain locations. The Province did not have this level of control over who decided to pay their Road Tax in labour, when they would be available to do so, and for how long.

In 1948, the Province permanently abolished the Road Tax and the associated statute labour system. By abolishing statute labour, the Province provided its Highway Foremen with a more flexible form of labour. With extensive labour now required on the roads throughout most of the year, it was likely easier for the Province to rely on employed (and skilled) workers whose schedules they could control more readily. As a Department of Highways official noted, the “discontinuance of Statute Labor left the Foremen free to do work at a time when it was needed and to make use of any labor that was available when required.”⁹⁵ That road construction and maintenance had become professionalized did not put an end to patronage appointments, which undoubtedly continued after the final abolition of statute labour.⁹⁶ But this practice was likely tempered by the fact that only an increasingly select few Islanders who had the proper training and qualifications could do the significant aspects of modern road work. From now on, patronage more often would take the form of the governing party prioritizing the improvement or plowing

⁹³ William H. MacDougall, “County Engineer’s Report for Prince County” 31 March 1947, A.R.D.H., 10, *Assembly Journal*, 1948.

⁹⁴ William H. MacDougall, “County Engineer’s Report for Prince County,” 30 June 1946, A.R.D.H., 10, *Assembly Journal*, 1947.

⁹⁵ W.H. MacDougall, “County Engineer’s Report for Prince County,” 31 March 1949, A.R.D.H., 6, *Assembly Journal*, 1950.

⁹⁶ MacDonald, 239.

of its supporters' roads. It also likely involved provincial administrations awarding contracts to favoured firms.

The abolition of statute labour also marked the Island people's final exit from caring for their roads. The transition to full government control that began in the 1870s with the establishment of the Department of Public Works was now complete. As the provincial government expanded its size, resources, and responsibilities during the 1930s and 1940s in areas like healthcare, education, and welfare, it was also expanding greatly its responsibilities with respect to roads.⁹⁷ Yet the Province was expanding in order to meet the demands of Islanders. Arguably, only this expanded State could have met their desire for better services at the time, roads included. Private companies or individuals could not.

As in the 1920s, the Province experienced the disadvantages of widened but yet-to-be paved roads. Since they covered more surface area, the roads required near-constant attention from the Province throughout the spring and summer, and they were a drain on the Province's highway construction budget.⁹⁸ In the late 1940s, horse-drawn split-log drags were only used in spring as soon as the snow melted to smooth the clay roads. On gravel roads and on clay roads packed hard in the summer, motor graders smoothed out the inevitable ruts and bumps. These motor graders ran all spring, summer, and fall until the snow came, sometimes grading the same stretch of road twice a week.⁹⁹

The dust that automobiles created while riding on non-paved roads was also a "considerable problem during the summer especially during the tourist season," as the

⁹⁷ MacDonald, 230-232.

⁹⁸ John Gilmore, "Maintenance Engineer's Report (Queens County)," 31 March 1953, A.R.D.H., 5-6, *Assembly Journal*, 1954.

⁹⁹ J.A. Reardon, "County Engineer's Report for Queens County," 31 March 1949, A.R.D.H., 19, *Assembly Journal*, 1950.

Department of Highways observed. Sometimes, the dust produced was so copious that it caused a safety hazard; drivers could not see where they were going. Until the mid-1960s, the Province invested in various products to keep the dust levels down, importing railway car after railway car of calcium chloride and oil, which it spread in high-traffic areas that did not have pavement, such as the main streets of towns and in front of churches.¹⁰⁰ The Province's expanded responsibilities over roads left it searching for ways to offset the increasing costs associated with maintaining the new standards that it had adopted. While the Province was responding to Islanders' demands for pavement, it also seemed to imply that paving roads brought the added bonus of requiring less maintenance.

From the 1940s onward, it seems that Prince Edward Island was an example of what historian Christopher Wells calls "Car Country." Wells defines Car Country as a place where the automobile and roads constitute the dominant form of transportation to the detriment of public transit, and he establishes a test to assess whether an area is suitable for public transit. For a public transit system to work, the area's population must be distributed densely enough that "just about anyone can leave home and take a short walk to a transit stop," and each stop in the system must offer "a diverse mix of incentives to exit and spend time and money in nearby businesses." If these conditions are met, then the population is "likely to use the system heavily—even if they own cars."¹⁰¹

These criteria fit a modern metropolitan area like London or Paris quite well. However, if a place's population is distributed sparsely in rural areas, it will be difficult for people to reach the public transit stops. Moreover, if each stop has little to offer in terms of incentives to

¹⁰⁰ Clifford Sherren, "Pavement Maintenance Foreman's Report," 31 March 1951, A.R.D.H., 25, *Assembly Journal*, 1952.

¹⁰¹ Wells, XXV.

disembark and spend time and money, people will not gravitate toward the system. The Prince Edward Island of the early twentieth century had no major metropolitan areas, and its population was spread out among rural areas. Over the first few decades of its existence, the Prince Edward Island Railway, the Island's public transit system, had bent commerce and settlement patterns towards the middle part of the province through which it ran. But its reach was limited. During the Second World War, the presence of thousands of servicemen without cars inspired the creation of short-lived bus services, but they struggled to survive the return of peace.¹⁰² And much of the Island's permanent population was miles removed from the nearest railway station. Under these conditions, automobiles running on good roads offered obvious advantages to the majority that the railway did not serve directly. By the end of the 1940s, Prince Edward Island had become Car Country, and this status would be consolidated in the coming decades.

¹⁰² Allan Graham and Jessie Graham, "Prince County's Forgotten Military Past," *The Island Magazine*, no. 1 (Fall/Winter, 1976).

VII

Thanking you for your interest in the former matter of electricity and trusting you will do all in your power towards this matter of pavement.

Mrs. Wendall MacLeod, Forest Hill, to Premier Alex Matheson, 8 October 1958¹⁰³

I assure you that I appreciate the word of thanks on the electricity which your district was able to obtain. I do know electric power has made a great change in many communities in the Province. If we are able to get paved roads on the same basis, I think many of the hardships facing the people of this Province would be solved more rapidly.

Premier Alex Matheson to Mrs. Wendall MacLeod, Forest Hill, 10 October 1958¹⁰⁴

The 1950s witnessed the widescale arrival of the two principal pillars of modernization on Prince Edward Island: electricity and pavement. While also engaged in bringing the lights to Islanders, Premier Alex Matheson's Liberal administration anticipated the day when the province's roads were truly of a modern standard.

In the 1955 Speech from the Throne, Matheson's government laid out its vision for the future of road transportation on Prince Edward Island. "This program of improvement, which is

¹⁰³ Mrs. Wendall MacLeod, Secretary of the Women's Institute of Forest Hill, to Premier Alex Matheson, 8 October 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

¹⁰⁴ Premier Alex Matheson to Mrs. Wendall MacLeod, Forest Hill, 10 October 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

being pushed forward as fast as possible, has now reached the point where my Government can foresee the day, not many years distant, when all our highways will be standardized”—that is, raised and widened to the degree decided upon by the Jones administration in the mid-1940s. The Speech went on to say that Matheson’s government “looks to the time when, having modernized our road system generally, it will be possible further to improve these roads where traffic is so heavy that a higher standard of surfacing will be needed.”¹⁰⁵ The line of progression here is clear: improve the roadbed first, then improve the road surface. Throughout the 1950s, Matheson’s government endeavoured to standardize all the Island’s roads and cover them with an improved hard-surfacing product. A monumental task, indeed, and one that warranted the creation of a Department of Highways, which was split from its twin, the Department of Public Works, in 1955.

The goal behind these efforts was to provide usable roads in all seasons. Automobile use on Prince Edward Island reached new levels in the postwar era, and Islanders wanted to drive in summer and winter. Better roads and better equipment allowed for easier snow removal, yet it was still impossible to remove snow after heavy storms. In *Letters from the Manse*, Joan Archibald Colborne recounts the many times that she and her husband would get stuck when trying to take their car on unplowed roads in the late 1940s and early 1950s. One evening, her husband was leaving to go to a nearby church service. A neighbour picked him up “with the car, well stocked with shovels and two other men.” On the return journey from the church later that night, “they had a team of horses pulling the car most of the way and four men shovelling and pushing.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Speech from the Throne, 8 February 1955, *Assembly Journal*, 1956, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Colborne, 43.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Province's snow-removal teams and machines were over-taxed and breaking down. At this time, the Province also noted with concern that non-paved roads simply could not bear the unprecedented volume and weight of automobile traffic. Even in 1963, when the Province had already paved 962 miles of its 3195.7 miles of roads and improved 1483.3 miles, the Prince County Engineer noted that "[t]he maintenance of clay and gravel roads is increasing each year due to the ever growing increase in number and heavier loading of motor vehicles. More motor grader hours are required to keep roads smooth for travel, resulting in less hours being allotted for the construction of highways by Department owned machines."¹⁰⁷ Needing to find ways to improve and pave roads faster, the Island government responded by changing the way it allocated its resources and by securing more money for paving programs from the federal government.

Instead of putting its resources into maintaining non-paved roads, the Province now prioritized road paving and only did light maintenance on other roads. The thought here was presumably to solve the problem of maintaining non-paved roads by replacing them with paved ones. The adoption of wider road standards meant that the Province frequently had to clear brush and trees from the roadside. In 1952, the Province started to do this work in the fall so that the road in question could be widened right away during the summer construction season. This decision was a matter of the allocation of resources. Bulldozers and other equipment were needed for both road construction and road clearing. By clearing roads in the fall, after the paving season was over, the Province could free up this equipment to be used immediately in the summer.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ William H. Ward, "Maintenance Engineer's Report (Prince County)," 31 March 1963, A.R.D.H., 11, *Assembly Journal*, 1964.

¹⁰⁸ R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1953, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1954; John Gilmore, "Maintenance Engineer's Report (Queens County)," 31 March 1954, A.R.D.H., 6, *Assembly Journal*, 1955.

The cost of road construction had exposed an inescapable reality. According to the *British North America Act*, intra-provincial roads fell under provincial jurisdiction, yet the federal government commanded significantly more resources. Happily, for Prince Edward Island, both levels of government had a vested interest in improving Island roads. In 1950, the Province received a significant boost to its paving efforts when it reached a funding agreement with the federal government to build the second iteration of the Trans-Canada Highway. In fact, the Province was so anxious to get construction underway that it actually began preparing the roadbed before Ottawa officially announced the project. As evidence of the Province's struggle to keep up with Islanders' demands for better roads, the Department of Public Works and Highways "decided that our Trans-Canada route was too urgent to be further delayed," as related by Deputy Ministers R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan.¹⁰⁹ This version, subsidized by Ottawa on a 50:50 basis, would connect the ferry terminal at Borden with that at Wood Islands, a distance of over 70 miles.¹¹⁰

The new road involved one of the first significant uses of standard, three-inch asphalt on Island roads. Standard pavement was also known as "hot plant-mix asphalt" because the liquid asphalt and the aggregate were pre-mixed at an asphalt plant and then laid down while still hot.¹¹¹ Standard pavement was more expensive than other forms of paving but also thicker and more durable. And durability was crucial in a province where spring heaves took a heavy toll on roadbeds and road surfaces.

¹⁰⁹ R.G. White and P.A. Murnaghan, "Deputy Ministers' Report," 23 November 1948, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1949.

¹¹⁰ R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1963, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1964.

¹¹¹ This, by the way, is why road paving using standard asphalt can only be done in the summer: a cold environment would cool down the hot asphalt too quickly as it was being applied.

The financial assistance from the federal government presumably helped the Province afford this higher quality form of pavement. For provincial paving projects that lacked federal financial assistance, the Island continued to use light pavement as its primary hard-surface into the mid-1950s. In 1954 alone, about eighty-two percent of new pavement laid by the Province was light pavement.¹¹² However, as the Province hinted in its Speech from the Throne in 1955, it was not satisfied with light pavement's performance on the Island, especially in springtime. Cycles of freezing and thawing destroyed the light pavement so completely that it was sometimes more economical to just repave entire stretches of road, using the mashed pavement as a base.¹¹³ In its search for a more durable, yet still affordable form of pavement, the Province conducted a wide range of experiments during the first half of the 1950s. It did these experiments in haste, sometimes simultaneously testing multiple hard-surfacing products in multiple locations, which suggests that it faced pressure from Islanders to get roads paved as soon as possible without bankrupting the province.¹¹⁴

The Province toyed with the idea of using Portland cement concrete pavement, and some of these experiments involved it. Perhaps the best option available in an ideal world, it was what the Province demanded from the federal government in its brief to the 1949 Royal Commission on Transportation, and it would withstand the spring freeze-thaw cycle ably. But concrete turned out to be too expensive for any widespread use. It cost about \$68,000 per mile, while standard asphalt pavement cost \$32,000 per mile. The Province thus paved only select areas with concrete

¹¹² R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1955, A.R.D.H., 1, *Assembly Journal*, 1956.

¹¹³ Clifford Sherren, "Pavement Maintenance Foreman's Report," 31 March 1954, A.R.D.H., 17, *Assembly Journal*, 1955.

¹¹⁴ Clifford Sherren, "Pavement Maintenance Foreman's Report," 31 March 1953, A.R.D.H., 21, *Assembly Journal*, 1954; R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1961, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1962.

pavement. The primary recipients were sections of the Trans-Canada Highway, as the Province could rely on the federal government to shoulder some of concrete's higher costs.¹¹⁵

In 1956, the Province made a dramatic shift away from light pavement and embraced standard asphalt for its provincial paving projects. That year, 55 percent of new pavement laid by the Province was standard pavement, 40 percent was light pavement, and four percent was concrete pavement.¹¹⁶ In 1957, the Province laid even less light pavement, which made up 25 percent of the new pavement laid that year. Standard asphalt comprised 73 percent, and concrete one percent.¹¹⁷ In 1958, R.G. White, the Deputy Minister of Highways, conceded that his department had “practically given up constructing light pavements” as “[e]xperiments over the past few seasons have shown conclusively that only a Hot Plant Mix Asphalt or Portland Cement Concrete will endure our variable Spring weather.”¹¹⁸ By this point, all the new standard pavement that the Province was laying was presumably either placed in areas that had no pavement or in areas where the light pavement was completely ruined. One such place was Lower Montague, where a constituent reported to Premier Matheson in 1958 that her community's road was “in bad shape [with] pavement all gone in places.”¹¹⁹

From the Province's efforts to streamline its allocations of resources, its supplications of the federal government for funds, and its chase for the best hard-surfacing product for the best price, it is clear that by the late 1950s the Province was facing building pressure to improve, pave, and plow roads so that they were usable in all seasons. This pressure was coming mainly

¹¹⁵ T.A. White and J.A. Reardon, “Construction Engineers' Report (Trans-Canada Highway),” 31 March 1953, A.R.D.H., 11, *Assembly Journal*, 1954.

¹¹⁶ R.G. White, “Deputy Minister's Report,” 31 March 1956, A.R.D.H., 1, *Assembly Journal*, 1957.

¹¹⁷ Gordon Moore, “Pavement Maintenance Engineer's Report, 31 March 1957, A.R.D.H., 22, *Assembly Journal*, 1958.

¹¹⁸ R.G. White, “Deputy Minister's Report,” 31 March 1958, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1959.

¹¹⁹ Mrs. Ray Aitken, Lower Montague, to Premier Alex Matheson, 24 July 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

from Islanders, who made their opinions known to the government through numerous letters sent to the Province.

While the exact moment when Islanders started to directly petition their government for road improvements remains ambiguous, it is clear that they were doing so in earnest by the late 1950s. If one judges from the high demand present in the late 1950s, it can be safely presumed that the building groundswell of support among Islanders for road improvements began in the preceding decades.

Among Premier Alex Matheson's papers at the provincial archives, there is a file dating from 1958 that contains correspondence between him or his ministers and Islanders concerning road improvement, paving, and plowing. Some of the letters are from individual Islanders, but many are from Islanders who grouped themselves together to write to the Province as a collective.

The letters help explain why Islanders were so frantic to get their roads improved, paved, and plowed. They had come to believe that they had a *right* to paved and plowed roads, and they thought that all Islanders should receive equal treatment from the government. As Marguerite Houston of Mayfield wrote to Premier Matheson on 19 February 1958, "Today, your snowplough driver opened the road up to Lloyd Houston's gate. Why will he not open our road? ... Other people's lanes are opened and we are left out.... We should have the same privilege in this democratic land."¹²⁰

In a comical twist, some Liberal supporters agreed that they ought to be treated just like other Islanders—just more so! In a letter dated 3 March 1958, Frank Richard and A. Gallant of Duvar complained to Premier Matheson that their road was not being plowed while those in the

¹²⁰ Marguerite Houston, Mayfield, to Premier Alex Matheson, 19 February 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

surrounding areas were. “One person is just as much as another and why not all get the same service,” they wrote, then played the electoral card: “We are mostly liberals and want to stay liberals but if this kind of service keeps up I’m afraid we will have to do different next election which is not to [*sic*] far away.”¹²¹ The letter is a blatant reminder that road improvement had a sharply political dimension.

Islanders’ requests for pavement were also couched in terms of equity—or perhaps envy. In the wake of a public meeting, a group of voters from St. Louis in West Prince conveyed the community’s demand for pavement in a letter to George McKay, Minister of Highways. The voters noted that they “were promised to be givin [*sic*] pavement into St. Louis in 1939 under the Campbell Government [also Liberal]” and that “practically all other villages on Prince Edward Island have pavement leading into them.” The voters in St. Louis also expounded on the economic benefits that would accompany the paving of their road. “St. Louis is a large shipping center,” they noted: “approximately four hundred and fifty cars of farm, fish and moss products are moved by rail or truck yearly.”¹²²

About forty voters in Tyne Valley, Port Hill, Lot 14, and Lot 16 also held a community meeting on 19 March 1958 to form a consensus about which roads they wanted the Province to pave in their area. Soon after, they had the Reverend M. Findley, the Rector of the Parish of Port Hill, communicate their demands in a letter to the Minister of Highways. The voters recognized that the Province had limited resources and could not pave all roads on the Island at once. Nevertheless, the road they chose to have paved would serve 250-300 residents and was “the shortest to serve the greatest number of people.”

¹²¹ Frank Richard and A. Gallant, Duvar, to Premier Alex Matheson, 3 March 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

¹²² Residents of St. Louis, Prince Edward Island, to J. George McKay, Minister of Public Works and Highways, 6 March 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

The voters couched their demands in terms of economic development. They claimed, for example, that pavement would service the various farms in the area. As Prince Edward Island was still an agricultural province at this time, this argument would have likely carried weight. The residents also recognized that the Province was keen on attracting more tourists to the Island. With pavement, “[s]ome of the more scenic and prosperous farming country would be opened up to more of the tourists.” But their appeal also contained an element of consumer convenience. Pavement, they noted, would allow them to travel more easily to shop in Tyne Valley and Summerside, where, presumably, they might find more choice and lower prices.

Besides economic development, petitioners argued that pavement would offer various social benefits to the community. With pavement, they could travel more easily to medical centres in Tyne Valley and Summerside and would have easier access to the various community halls and churches in the area.

Although the social effects of pavement and the automobile are outside the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that Islanders thought that they would be a boost to community institutions like halls and churches.¹²³ Subsequent history would prove that pavement and the automobile would have the opposite effect, hollowing out many communities. It was so easy to travel between communities that each individual community no longer needed to have its own unique set of social institutions.¹²⁴ In either case, however, cars and pavement became enablers. For good or ill, they brought change.

At the other end of the province, in the Kings County community of Forest Hills, the Women’s Institute employed similar arguments when they “urgently” requested pavement in

¹²³ M. Findley, Port Hill, to J. George McKay, Minister of Public Works and Highways, March 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

¹²⁴ MacDonald, 241-242; Holloway, 7.

their area. In a letter dated 8 October 1958, the women expressed that they understood that the government was focused on paving roads to attract tourists. However, they reminded the Premier that roads were just as important to agriculture as to tourism. “We discussed this matter thoroughly at our meeting and came to the conclusion that pavement was probably needed to tourists’ resorts but it is definitely needed to our local farm roads.”¹²⁵ In other words, they told him not to forget that Prince Edward Island was still an agricultural province and that Islanders’ needs mattered as much—or more—than those of tourists.

If one judges from the files available in the provincial archives, Premier Matheson made succinct replies that neatly sidestepped demands for snowplowing services and pavement. To those requesting that their road be plowed, the Premier conveyed that he had spoken with the snowplow dispatcher for the area. He urged the voter to reach out if their concern was not resolved.¹²⁶ To requests for pavement, Matheson maintained that he was not directly responsible for these matters. He often advised that he was forwarding the request to the Minister of Highways for consideration.¹²⁷ The Premier’s evasions were telling. The Province’s ability to supply pavement clearly could not keep pace with the demand for it.

At the end of the 1950s, the harried Island government received some welcome news from Ottawa. The new Progressive Conservative government of John Diefenbaker had unveiled a cost-sharing program called “Roads to Resources.” The new program reflected the federal government’s continued faith that improved transportation was one key to economic development. Ottawa agreed to cover half the cost of road construction to areas that the

¹²⁵ Mrs. Wendall MacLeod, Secretary of the Women’s Institute of Forest Hill, to Premier Alex Matheson, 8 October 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

¹²⁶ Premier Alex Matheson to Marguerite Houston, Mayfield, 21 February 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51; Premier Alex Matheson to Frank Richard and A. Gallant, Duvar, 10 March 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

¹²⁷ For example, see Premier Alex Matheson to Residents of Bloomfield Station, 8 March 1958, P.A.R.O., R.G. 25, Series 34: Box 3, 51.

provinces deemed to contain economic resources. While Ottawa's original intention was to help fund road construction to areas in Canada's undeveloped North that contained natural resources, the cash-strapped Island government convinced Ottawa that its resource was tourism. It needed to build better roads to places that tourists liked to visit, like beaches and golf courses and scenic landscapes—that is, the entire province. Ottawa consented to this interpretation of the program, under which the Province was slated to receive \$15 million from the federal government.¹²⁸ To put this in perspective, the Province spent less than half that amount, \$7 million, on its own on road construction in 1959.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ MacDonald, 240.

¹²⁹ R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1959, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1960.

VIII

The winter of 1960-61 was the most severe experienced in many years.... The Province was plunged into a state of emergency when two helicopters and one snowmobile were employed to transport doctors to the sick in isolated communities and to service the stranded snowploughs in various locations throughout the Island.

Graham Thompson, Chief Snow Plough Despatcher, 31 March 1961¹³⁰

With parts of the Island receiving as much as 191 inches of snow during the winter of 1960—1961, the Department of Highways was fighting Mother Nature’s wintry outbursts but at a steep price. The amount it paid on snow removal tripled between 1960 and 1961. Snowplowing was costly but required because Prince Edward Island’s “whole economy” depended on winter traffic. Instead of spending farm winters mostly within a sleigh ride of home, more and more Islanders now lived in rural areas but drove to their jobs, of which many were in urban areas with the provincial government.¹³¹ There is evidence of another upward spiral effect here. The more the Province expanded its services, the more its bureaucracy expanded, creating more government jobs in urban areas. The more government jobs in urban areas, the more the Island population needed good roads to get from their rural dwellings to town, including in the winter.¹³² Thus, the growth of a wage economy and the service sector increased the demand for

¹³⁰ Graham Thompson, “Chief Snow Plough Despatcher’s Report,” 31 March 1961, A.R.D.H., 24, *Assembly Journal*, 1962.

¹³¹ Clifford Sherren, “Pavement Maintenance Supervisor Report,” 5 October 1964, A.R.D.H., 36, *Assembly Journal*, 1965; R.G. White, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” 31 March 1967, *A.R.D.H.*, 1967, 9.

¹³² As more jobs became available in urban areas, rural Islanders also began to settle in the areas just outside Summerside and Charlottetown. Thus was born suburbia.

better, all-weather roads. It is a reminder that the transportation revolution was closely bound up with other changes, each reinforcing the other.

The Province was fighting Mother Nature in spring and summer, too. During the summers, the Province continued to focus on road improvement, namely paving. By now, it had adopted standard, three-inch asphalt as its primary way of hard-surfacing roads. Although standard asphalt was a notable improvement over light pavement, it remained vulnerable to the Island's springtime freeze-and-thaw cycles.

The problem really came down to the Island's climate. As Islanders well knew, in spring, melting snow created water that turned the thawing clay roads into mud roads. These mud roads were impassable. Paved roads solved the mud problem, but they too suffered from the thawing and freezing cycles that the warm days and cold nights of spring brought. During a spring day, the melting snow on the road surface became water that seeped into the pavement. During a spring night, this water turned into ice. The ice had a bigger volume than the water, so it pushed outward against the pavement within which it was embedded. As the pavement cracked, more water could seep in and then freeze and expand. Once the cracks interconnected, sections of pavement became dislodged from the rest, which caused potholes. The water also seeped into the clay or sandy subgrade and then froze and expanded, buckling the pavement from below.¹³³ This springtime buckling spelled the demise of light pavement on Prince Edward Island.

Standard pavement fared better. The aggregate and liquid asphalt were likely bonded together more strongly since they were mixed in an asphalt plant while the liquid asphalt was hot. It was also laid in thicker layers compared to light asphalt. Before laying out the standard

¹³³ "Why does spring bring potholes? An engineering researcher fills us in," University of New Brunswick Research, accessed 15 May 2022, <https://blogs.unb.ca/research/2021/05/why-potholes.php#:~:text=This%20happens%20when%20the%20water,cracks%20in%20the%20road%20surface>.

asphalt, the roadbed was prepared with a foundation of granular material, usually sandstone and gravel. But underneath this foundation lay the same sandy Island soil subgrade that was susceptible to water penetration, freezing, and expansion.¹³⁴ To keep the pavement in good condition, the Province still had to impose weight restrictions on many of the Island's roads each spring, just as it had when the roads were covered in light pavement.¹³⁵ As the yearly weight restrictions indicated, Prince Edward Island still lacked truly "all-season" highways. And so, while the Province had taken a step up from the close-to-impassable mud roads of spring, standard pavement had not solved the transportation problem.

Just as the Province had conducted experiments in the mid-1950s to find a replacement for light pavement, it experimented with various potential replacements for standard pavement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The government's goal was to find a way to create "all-weather roads" that could be used in all seasons with no concerns about weight restrictions or the disintegration of road surfaces. Again, concrete was a possible solution, but its cost was prohibitive. To find a cost-effective replacement for standard pavement, the Province relied on its Highway Laboratory, which had been established in 1958. Among other things, its task was to conduct tests to find the best hard surface product for the Island's roads at the best price.¹³⁶ The Province first started to experiment with soil cement stabilization in 1961, and it proved to be a consequential achievement.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ T.A. White, "Construction Engineer's Report (Trans-Canada Highway)," 31 March 1959, A.R.D.H., 23-24, *Assembly Journal*, 1960.

¹³⁵ R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1963, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1964.

¹³⁶ L.V. Windsor, "Report of the Materials Engineer," 31 March 1962, A.R.D.H., 24-25, *Assembly Journal*, 1963.

¹³⁷ R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," 31 March 1961, A.R.D.H., 7, *Assembly Journal*, 1962. There are various types of soil-cement stabilization today, and it remains unclear exactly which type the Province used in the 1960s. However, "soil-cement" is an umbrella term for all methods of soil stabilization using Portland cement and water. See Wayne Adaska and Jerod Gross, *Guide to Cement-Stabilized Subgrade Soils* (Washington, D.C.: Portland Cement Association, and Ames, Iowa: National Concrete Pavement Technology Centre at Iowa State University, 2020), 1-3. https://www.cement.org/docs/default-source/geotechnical-pdfs/guide-to-css.pdf?sfvrsn=b328fdbf_2.

Soil-cement stabilization involved fortifying the Island's natural sandy soil subgrade by mixing it with Portland cement powder. Road crews tilled the subgrade's native soil, which was then formed into a windrow. Another machine—what appears to have been a modified motor grader—then straddled the windrow. As it proceeded forward, it picked up the soil in the windrow, mixed it with Portland cement powder in what appears to have been a drum, and then deposited the mixed material, which was then spread and rolled. Water was likely then added to bind the cement powder and the soil and then sometimes reapplied to keep the soil-cement from drying out.¹³⁸ The inclusion of cement created stronger bonds among the native soil's particles, which made the subgrade more resistant to water penetration, freezing, and expansion.¹³⁹

Soil-cement stabilization was a coup for the Province. It worked so well that road crews did not have to add fills of gravel and sandstone granular material on top of the soil-cement subgrade. The subgrade itself became strong enough and resembled granular material enough that pavement could be laid directly on top of it.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, the cost of soil-cement stabilized subgrade was about the same as adding sandstone or gravel granular material to act as a foundation for paving, yet the soil-cement stabilized subgrade performed at such a better level that springtime weight restrictions were no longer required.¹⁴¹ The Province had achieved all-weather roads, and it had found a way to do it affordably.

From 1964 onwards, road crews began to use soil-cement stabilization almost exclusively. The Deputy Minister of the Department of Highways, R.G. White, stated that “[p]ractically all pavement is now being laid over cement stabilized base which continues to give

¹³⁸ T.A. White, “Report of the Construction Engineer,” 31 March 1961, A.R.D.H., 20-21, *Assembly Journal*, 1962. Although White provides a brief description, the exact process that road crews followed remains slightly ambiguous. An attempt has been made to flesh it out by interpreting photographs present in A.R.D.H., 44, 46, 48, *Assembly Journal*, 1963.

¹³⁹ Adaska and Gross, 1-3.

¹⁴⁰ T.A. White, “Construction Engineer’s Report,” 31 March 1962, A.R.D.H., 19, *Assembly Journal*, 1963.

¹⁴¹ R.G. White, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” 31 March 1963, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1964.

better supporting strength than the granular base formerly used.”¹⁴² At the same time, road crews revisited older pavement to upgrade those roads where necessary to this new standard. The Department’s Chief Highway Construction Engineer relayed his workers’ process. Where the existing subgrade was deemed substandard, road crews overlaid “the three inches of old pavement with six inches of soil cement stabilization” and then covered this “with three inches of asphalt base and with one inch of asphalt seal.” On stretches where the Province deemed the subgrade to be adequate for all-weather use, “no soil cement was used, and four inches of asphalt was superimposed on the existing pavement.”¹⁴³

One of the first projects to receive the soil-cement stabilization treatment was the postwar Trans-Canada Highway. As soon as this project was finished in 1962, the Province essentially restarted it with the goal of upgrading the route to an all-weather highway. Where the roadbed did not require stabilization, road crews merely added another three-inch layer of standard asphalt. As a result, the Department of Highways noted that the paved surface on the Trans-Canada Highway “varie[d] in thickness from four inches to thirteen inches.”¹⁴⁴ Upgrading the principal transportation corridor in the province took time and money (a significant amount of it federal), and the Trans-Canada Highway was not complete until the end of the 1960s. When finished, it represented the state of the art in Island roadbuilding.

The redoing of the Trans-Canada Highway stands in as an example of the widespread backtracking that the Province had to do between the 1920s and 1960s. As soon as the Province improved a sizable portion of its roads to an existing standard, a new one came along. The Province then had to redo all of its work but to the new standards. The standard in the 1920s was

¹⁴² R.G. White, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” 31 March 1964, A.R.D.H., 9, *Assembly Journal*, 1965.

¹⁴³ T.A. White, “Chief Highway Construction Engineer’s Report,” 31 March 1966, *A.R.D.H.*, 1966, 21-22.

¹⁴⁴ “Pavement in Miles, 1963,” P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 199, 2.

raised and cambered clay roads. The standard in the 1930s was experimental and then light pavement. The standard in the 1940s was roads raised even higher and widened even further. The standard in the 1950s was standard asphalt. The standard in the 1960s was the all-weather road. And so, an “improved road” was not the same thing in the 1920s as it was in the 1940s, and a “paved road” was not the same thing in the 1930s as it was in the 1960s.

This difference is something that the existing narrative around Prince Edward Island’s mid-century transportation revolution fails to appreciate. Instead, accounts such as the one given in *If You’re Stronghearted* seem to suggest a linear process of road improvement. In it, Edward MacDonald states that less than six percent or 206 miles of Island roads had pavement in 1943 but that, by 1959, “656 miles had been blacktopped with no end in sight.”¹⁴⁵

The language used in this account seems to suggest that the 1940s and 1950s were the opening stages of a linear progression from no blacktop to a fully paved province. The problem is that there was no linear progression. The Province was constantly returning to areas that it had paved to repave them to a higher standard. The Island’s roads were paved primarily with light pavement in the 1940s and early 1950s. The Province then switched to standard pavement in the mid-1950s. So, the 206 miles paved by 1943 were light pavement, and the 656 miles done by

¹⁴⁵ MacDonald, 241. Some of the confusion likely stemmed from the sources that MacDonald consulted, the *Canada Year Books* from 1945 (provided statistics for 1943) and 1961 (provided statistics for 1959). Unlike the records of the provincial department responsible for highways consulted for this essay, the *Canada Year Books* did a poor job differentiating between types of pavement. In the 1951 edition, it stated that P.E.I. had no miles of “Bituminous surface” but 222 miles of “Bituminous pavements” in 1949 (see page 742). There is no 1952 edition of the *Canada Year Book* available on publications.gc.ca. The 1953 edition almost inexplicably shows the opposite statistics as the 1951 edition. P.E.I. had 271 miles of “Bituminous surface” and no miles of “Bituminous pavements” in 1951 (see page 766). All subsequent editions of the *Canada Year Book* until 1959 report P.E.I.’s statistics under “Bituminous surface.” No explanation of the reasons for the change in classification was provided. A potential explanation is that the federal government lumped all the different types of pavement laid on P.E.I. into one category or the other. P.E.I. began to rely more on standard asphalt by the early 1950s, so it is possible that the federal government witnessed this and thought that it would be better to lump all of P.E.I.’s pavement under “Bituminous surface” and not “Bituminous pavements.” It seems to have done the same thing for the rest of the country in 1959, when it lumped together “Bituminous pavement” and “Bituminous surface” statistics for the whole country also under the single heading of “Bituminous surface” (see page 793).

1959 were standard pavement. To reach 656 miles paved with standard pavement in 1959, the Province would have had to have repaved almost all of the 206 miles that had been paved with light pavement up to 1943. In 1959, there were only 4.5 miles of light pavement left in the province.¹⁴⁶

MacDonald also states that, by the end of the 1960s, “Prince Edward Island could boast that it had more paved roads per capita than any province in Canada.” This may have been accurate, but, again, the type of pavement mattered. It is doubtful that all these paved roads were paved with the highest standards of the time. By 1966, the Province had laid 1185 miles of pavement, but only 45 of those miles were all-weather roads.¹⁴⁷ The Province could have boasted that it had the most pavement per capita in Canada, but most of that pavement was almost certainly substandard. It would take more backtracking by the Province in the coming years to upgrade all its roads to all-weather standards.

And so, to simply talk about “pavement” is to miss the widely varying quality of the hard-surfacing available and the laborious process by which the same roads had to be surfaced and re-surfaced. The story of road improvement and paving on Prince Edward Island between the 1920s and 1960s was not linear. The Province could not improve or pave a road, forget about it, and focus on getting pavement to other communities. Road crews were constantly returning to areas they had already improved or paved to improve or pave it to a new standard. The repetitious nature of the road improvement program thus partly explains why the Province was under such financial strain to carry it out.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ “Road Classification – Prince Edward Island, December 1959,” P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 203.

¹⁴⁷ R.G. White, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” *A.R.D.H.*, 1966, 9.

¹⁴⁸ It remains unclear whether the Province viewed the financial strain of constantly revisiting paved roads as having been less burdensome than the increased maintenance necessitated by improved but unpaved roads, a burden that the Province identified soon after beginning its road improvement programs in the 1920s.

This strain is evident in Premier Walter Shaw's responses to Islanders' requests for road improvement and snowplowing services. Shaw's Progressive Conservatives ended twenty-five years of Liberal rule in 1959, but the new administration faced the same old challenges when it came to satisfying the demand for all-season roads. Like his predecessor, Premier Shaw received many letters from Islanders requesting paved and plowed roads. Shaw's papers at the provincial archives include a file of correspondence with Islanders in 1965—66 concerning roadwork.¹⁴⁹ Whereas Premier Matheson had redirected most paving or plowing demands, Shaw wrote lengthier and more colourful responses, so it is possible to get more of a sense of the back-and-forth discussion between Islanders and their Premier.

As with the letters to Matheson, some of the letters to Shaw were from individual Islanders, while others were from groups, including boards of trade. Many of the same arguments were made as well. As in the 1950s, Islanders wanted better road services for reasons of economics, equity, or patronage. Shaw appreciated the first two and bowed to the third. But Islanders were impatient, and Shaw's tone grew frustrated as he repeatedly stressed that the Province was doing the best it could with its limited resources.

An exchange in 1966 between Premier Shaw and a group of voters in the western regions of Norway, Sea Cow Pond, and Anglo Tignish reveals the wretched status in both winter and summer of roads that the Province had not yet improved. The residents noted that the road in question was "about four feet lower than the fields, with the result that the men operating the snow ploughs have a very difficult time to open it when there is a heavy fall of snow." In a scene harkening back to the days when communities used to break winter roads through fields, the residents describe how during "[t]he past two winters farmers have had to remove their fences

¹⁴⁹ There are only about ten letters in Matheson's files, but there are about twice as many in Shaw's files. Presumably, there were other letters in other years, but these have not survived.

and let the snowploughs come through their fields.” The road is so poor in the spring that not mud but water was the principal concern. “[W]hen the snow melts in the spring, and there are no dykes to allow the water to run off the road a person would need a canoe to get to town.”¹⁵⁰ Like the other petitioners, the residents noted that the road’s poor condition was hindering its economic potential. The road was “a necessity to our mailman, Regional High School bus, cream truck, moss gatherers, fishermen, farmers, and thousands of tourists.”¹⁵¹

As was his custom, Premier Shaw replied that he appreciated the petition, but that “in all parts of Prince Edward Island we are getting similar requests and it is just not possible all at once to accede to these requests and establish highways. We have not the revenues that will permit us to do that and at the same time provide services for other departments of government.”¹⁵² In a passage that reads more like an election speech, Shaw claimed that he and his government had “put in more pavement and more improved roads on Prince Edward Island in the five years [they had] been in power than in the twenty five years before that.”¹⁵³

Shaw’s comparison is another reminder that paving was political. In the internal documents that Shaw’s administration kept, the statistics on the number of miles paved were divided by political districts.¹⁵⁴ Shaw was then able to quote these district figures when he was fending off requests for pavement. In his response to the residents of Norway, Sea Cow Pond, and Anglo Tignish, he observed that 1st Prince, in particular, had received only 17.5 miles of pavement in the years before Shaw’s administration took over, and 62.5 since.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Mary McHugh, Tignish, to Premier Walter Shaw, 21 January 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵¹ Wilma McHugh, Gregory McInnis, Wilbert Ellsworth, John McGrath, and Leo Dorgan, Tignish, to Premier Walter Shaw, 17 January 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵² Premier Walter Shaw to Wilma McHugh, Tignish, 15 February 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵³ Premier Walter Shaw to Mary McHugh, Tignish, 15 February 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, “Road Classification – Prince Edward Island, December 31, 1965,” P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 203.

¹⁵⁵ Premier Walter Shaw to Mary McHugh.

Shaw took a similar tack when answering another letter from 1st Prince in February 1966. Mrs. Walter Gavin had written to him expressing her irritation that she and her neighbours had to “crawl through” the muddy roads in spring even though they paid “the same amount of taxes as anyone else.” She describes the road’s dreadful condition during the previous spring, when “the trucks and cars were dragging through the mud to their axles, and I watched people having to jack their trucks up and lay rocks under the tires in order to get out of the mud.”¹⁵⁶

Premier Shaw showed little sympathy in his reply to Mrs. Gavin, who was writing from a traditionally Liberal stronghold in 1st Prince. He implied that his party had treated the area better than the Liberals who had governed the province for the past two and a half decades. He pointed out that 1st Prince had “received a greater measure of attention in road building ... than [it had] ever received.” In reference to the muddy conditions, Shaw poses the barbed question, “Now I am wondering whether the mud just came in the last few years, since this Government came into power, or did you have any mud in the previous twenty five or fifty years[?]”¹⁵⁷

As the foregoing exchanges demonstrate, Shaw often cited his administration’s achievements in road improvement to assure complainants that his government was working hard. Shaw recognized the upward spiral effect whereby Islanders’ expectations had progressively mounted the more that the Province had improved the roads—in light of his administration’s achievements in road paving, “people are all of the opinion that they should have paved roads or something better.”¹⁵⁸ To buy his government some breathing room, Shaw reminded Islanders that they had always had to live with poor road conditions. In a response to Mrs. Merritt Ramsay of Bloomfield, dated 18 April 1966, Shaw pointed out that “these spring

¹⁵⁶ Mrs. Walter Gavin, North Cape, to Premier Walter Shaw, 27 January 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵⁷ Premier Walter Shaw to Mrs. Walter Gavin, 16 February 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁵⁸ Premier Walter Shaw to Mary McHugh.

roads have been with us since the time of the pioneer.” He went on to say that his Province was working to improve roads as quickly as its finances would allow, but “it is not possible to meet all the demands that are made for paved and improved roads. If we did that we would not have enough money in Eastern Canada to pay for it.”¹⁵⁹

This same upward spiral was pressuring Shaw’s government to provide better snow-removal services in wintertime, too. When Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Morrison of Hampton wrote to ask for better snow-removal services, Shaw conceded that times had changed. He could “quite understand that, while most endured muddy roads and snow storms and disabilities in the years gone by and didn’t mind them, we are now under a new dispensation and look for the very latest in both winter and summer traffic.”¹⁶⁰ Responding to a letter from Alfred Handrahan in December 1965, Shaw admitted that there was “a rather alarming demand from all parts of the province and all communities to have snow removed promptly after every storm,” but that this was “impossible.”¹⁶¹

While Shaw could bristle at the letters from most Islanders, he replied with extra care to requests for road improvements from his home district of 1st Queens. Residents of this district sent a letter to the Premier in April 1965 requesting that more of the Graham’s Road be paved than the Province had planned. “We feel that you, being our representative in first Queens, have a special interest in solving this problem, and will use your influence.”¹⁶² Shaw bowed to this appeal to patronage. He met with the Minister of Highways and “arranged” that the Province pave the requested amount of road that year. Shaw admitted his unease about the move: “How we are to adjust our program in other parts of the district is something that causes me some

¹⁵⁹ Premier Walter Shaw to Mrs. Merritt Ramsay, Bloomfield, 18 April 1966, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 213.

¹⁶⁰ Premier Walter Shaw to Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Morrison, Hampton, 18 May 1965, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 212.

¹⁶¹ Premier Walter Shaw to Alfred Handrahan, Tignish, 20 December 1965, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 212.

¹⁶² Mrs. Ray MacLeod, Graham’s Road, to Premier Walter Shaw, 20 April 1965, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 212.

anxiety.” But he quickly abandoned this half-hearted pushback at the Island’s entrenched patronage system. “However, I suppose that is what representatives are for, so we will have to await the reaction in these other areas as it develops.”¹⁶³

Amid the demands from Islanders for increased snowplowing services, the Province was learning that it had to cut back and contract out. In his response to the letter from Alfred Handrahan in December 1965, Shaw observed that “within recent years, communities have not only asked that the by-roads be opened promptly, but also the lanes leading to homes. I think any person will realize that these services are not always possible.”¹⁶⁴ In an internal document from March of the same year, the Department of Highways marvelled at the immense cost of wintertime snow removal. It was “staggering” that “108,000 people spent \$1,644,000 last Winter,” with \$400,000 alone spent on opening farm lanes. This was an expense that, as far as the Department of Highways knew, was “not borne by any other province in Canada.” In their snow-fighting efforts, Islanders had come a long way from manually digging out trains. Whereas the Department of Public Works had only seven snowplows in its inventory in 1939, there were 174 snowplows “in action” during the winter of 1966—1967.¹⁶⁵

Some of these plows likely belonged to private contractors. In an internal report, a Department of Highways official noted the recent importance assumed by contract plowing. The contractors’ prices, it reported, were “fair and reasonable.” The Province was able to outsource a lot of its burden of snow removal to them, and it also learned from their example. The contractors did not “plough lanes free of charge except in an emergency, and this is where they are in a position to beat our departmental costs.” The Province went on to say that, “in all

¹⁶³ Premier Walter Shaw to Mrs. Ray MacLeod, New London, 24 June 1965, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 212.

¹⁶⁴ Premier Walter Shaw to Alfred Handrahan.

¹⁶⁵ R.G. White, “Deputy Minister’s Report,” 31 March 1967, *A.R.D.H.*, 1967, 9.

fairness,” the Province should stop plowing farmers’ lanes. It was too much of a burden for the Province, and it would ensure that “all our citizens would be treated alike whether their roads are ploughed by contractors or by the Department of Highways.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ “Department of Highways, Prince Edward Island: Progress Report, March 31, 1961 to March 31, 1965,” 26 November 1964, P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 199, 2.

Conclusion

The provincial election of 1966 resulted in a 15-seat-to-15-seat tie between the septuagenarian but energetic Walter Shaw's Progressive Conservatives and thirty-something Alex B. Campbell's Liberals. Victory would be decided by the results of a deferred election in the district of 1st Kings, and both parties pulled out all the stops to achieve it. The incumbent Conservatives appointed one of their two candidates in the riding, Keith MacKenzie, as Minister of Highways—before he was even elected! As historian Wade MacLauchlan details, “[p]aving and construction equipment appeared throughout the riding. Even private driveways and municipal streets were paved by the government.” Shaw's government also pulled on other levers of potential influence. It announced a \$25 pension supplement. Observers at the time noted that the Conservatives seemed to have been following the motto, as retold by MacLauchlan: “If it moves, give it a pension. If it doesn't move, pave it.”¹⁶⁷

On election day, 11 July 1966, Liberal leader Alex Campbell sat on Main Street in Souris and gave a radio interview. MacLauchlan describes what happened next. As he was speaking, “Walter Shaw drove by, at the wheel of his full-size sedan.” Campbell quipped to him, “Are you as confident as we are, Sir?,” to which Shaw replied, “I am at the apex of my confidence.”¹⁶⁸ The automobile and paved roads had become such fixtures of Island life that the two party leaders in the 1966 election had a roadside debate with one party leader behind the wheel.

Despite the efforts of Shaw and company, the two Liberal candidates in the district won the election, and Alex Campbell began his twelve-year tenure as premier. But the strategy employed by the Conservatives to win votes was telling. They were trying to give the electors of

¹⁶⁷ MacLauchlan, 53-54.

¹⁶⁸ MacLauchlan, 56.

1st Kings paved roads, which, along with snowplowing, comprised the two most sought-after government services at the time. The Conservatives knew the significance of naming one of their candidates in the district the minister of highways, which Wayne MacKinnon has called “a highly visible and crucial post in any rural district.”¹⁶⁹ Such an appointment hinted that the district would be treated with even more paved roads and snowplowing services in the future so long as the Conservatives won. The Conservative Party did not lose the election because they resorted to the wrong forms of patronage; the tide simply turned against them. And on the Island, as MacLauchlan observes, “when the tide turns, there’s no stopping it.”¹⁷⁰

Within three years of taking office, Premier Alex Campbell’s administration signed the \$725-million, 15-year Comprehensive Development Plan (C.D.P.) with the federal government.¹⁷¹ In Premier Campbell’s words, the initial goal of this effort was to comprehensively reshape the Island “so that Prince Edward Islanders could begin to climb up the economic ladder to a standard of living and a quality of life the equal of any Canadian liver anywhere.”¹⁷² That is, the C.D.P. would complete the modernization of Prince Edward Island started in previous decades. Although there was an eventual backlash against the Plan’s harsh rationalization efforts, it continued to be a funding vehicle for the Island’s modernization. Among many other things, there was more money to continue the revolutionary road improvement program that the Province had been undertaking from the 1920s onward.

Since the 1920s, the Province had developed the Island’s roads from the narrow and wooded pathways of the early twentieth century to wide, high, and hard-topped thoroughfares. This road improvement program had been primarily fuelled by rural Islanders’ demands for

¹⁶⁹ MacKinnon, 146.

¹⁷⁰ MacLauchlan, 57.

¹⁷¹ MacDonald, 310.

¹⁷² MacKinnon, 142.

better road services in summer and winter. Since the 1910s, they had embraced the automobile, which provided fast, direct service to rural Islanders' homes, thus offering a convenience level unmatched by the Prince Edward Island Railway, horse-drawn vehicles, or inland ferries. But to make full use of automobiles, rural Islanders needed quality roads on which to drive them. The Island government had first taken direct responsibility over the province's roads in the 1870s, and, starting in the 1920s, it expanded in size in order to meet rural Island automobilists' demands for road improvement. The Province began by improving its clay roads with federal financial assistance in the 1920s, but they remained muddy and impassable in spring and late fall, snowblocked in winter, and dangerously dusty in the summer.

In the hopes of finding a more permanent solution to road quality issues, the Province hard-surfaced its first roads in the 1930s. The "light pavement" that the Province laid was more affordable compared to other types, but it had a discouragingly short lifespan of no more than fifteen years. With federal funding assistance, the Province employed light pavement in the first iteration of the Trans-Canada Highway, which linked Summerside, Borden, and Charlottetown during the 1930s. Many of the other road improvement efforts of the decade were "make-work" projects to employ Islanders during the Great Depression. As Prince Edward Island plunged into war in 1939, the Province paused its road improvement efforts, and Islanders deferred their transportation expectations.

As the postwar period began, the Jones administration adopted a new standard of even wider and higher roads, which were designed to allow for easier snow removal and constituted the Province's response to Islanders' increasing demands to be able to use their automobiles year-round. By this point, there was evidence of an upward spiral effect when it came to road transportation: the more improved roads the Province provided, the more Islanders became

accustomed to them and demanded them. Those demands focused on two primary elements: durable hard surfacing and efficient snow clearing. Despite the government's efforts, many roads remained unplowed, and, in the late 1940s, the Prince Edward Island Railway's passenger service could still claim winter travel as its tiny corner of the transportation market, while freight trains remained crucial to the Island's economy. In summer, the Province struggled to grade and keep down the dust on the roads that it had brought to an enhanced standard but had not yet paved.

In the 1950s, the Province's enhanced efforts in road improvement warranted the creation of a separate Department of Highways. Throughout the decade, its efforts strained the Province's finances. The government's snowplowing equipment was breaking down, its snowplow operators were over-taxed, and road construction budgets were no match for rising public expectations. The Province could not pave roads fast enough, and those that were left unpaved could not bear the increased weight and volume of traffic. To respond to these issues, the Island government found ways to reallocate its resources. For example, it began using its dozers to clear bush from the sides of the roads in the fall so that the machines were free to start road construction right away in the early summer. The Province also secured more money for road improvement from the federal government in the early 1950s as part of the postwar Trans-Canada Highway and in the late 1950s as part of the Roads to Resources program. To receive the latter, the Island convinced Ottawa that the resources to which it needed to build roads were tourist destinations.

Federal financial assistance extended to quality as well as quantity. For instance, it allowed the Province to pave the postwar Trans-Canada Highway with the more expensive but more durable standard pavement. Starting in the mid-1950s, the Province began using standard

pavement instead of light pavement in its own paving projects after experiments—and experience—had shown that light pavement simply could not handle the Province’s spring heaves. The Province repaved stretches of pulverized light pavement with standard pavement.

Letters to the premiers clarify the nature of Islanders’ demands for improved and plowed roads. In general, they couched their demands in principles of equity, economics, and patronage. Islanders wanted the Province to treat them equally with respect to the provision of road improvement and plowing. They pointed out the economic advantages that improved road services would bring to their district, but they were willing to use their electoral power to press the issue. Pavement had been a vote-getter; now not getting the pavement was seen as a vote-loser. But the pace of road-paving was as dependent on finances as it was on public demand, and getting pavement was inevitably a piecemeal process that was governed in part by political considerations.

The changing social dynamics in the province also factored into road improvement planning. As the 1960s began, the Province noted that more and more Islanders lived in rural areas but commuted to work in urban areas, making the provision of adequate roads in summer and winter even more important. Although the Province had paved its roads solely with standard pavement since the late 1950s, these roads could still not handle the Island’s spring heaves. To avoid having to impose weight restrictions on roads each spring, the Province conducted experiments to develop a type of hard-surface that could withstand all seasons on Prince Edward Island. The result was soil-cement stabilization, a process of mixing cement powder with the road’s subgrade that allowed for the all-season road. Even so, “all-season” remained something of a euphemism. Potholes and disintegrating pavement would remain a fact of Island life.

By the time Premier Shaw handed over the keys to the provincial government to Premier Campbell, the Province had figured out its blueprint for carrying the Island through the transportation revolution. To meet Islanders' demands for better road services, the provincial bureaucracy had expanded greatly in size, including the establishment of its Department of Highways in 1955. It had taken over full responsibility for the care of roads from the people and had raised the standards of road quality to unprecedented levels. In soil-cement stabilized all-weather roads, the Province had finally found a relatively affordable hard-surface product that offered unprecedented—albeit still flawed—performance against all the Island's seasons, especially spring. It had invested heavily in snowplowing services. It had figured out the degree to which it could be directly involved and how much it had to contract out. It had already paved over a third of the Island's roads with standard pavement, and it was working to bring all-weather roads to the entire province.¹⁷³ The Island government's endeavours had been costly in terms of both money and resources, and, despite efforts to stay within its means, it was nearly bankrupt by the time Premier Campbell took office in 1966.¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, enormous progress had been made in transforming the Island's highway infrastructure. Well before the Comprehensive Development Plan came along, the transportation blueprint had been created, and the provincial administrations that followed would use it—along with some necessary financial adjustments—to guide them through the subsequent stages of the transportation revolution.

¹⁷³ "Road Classification – Prince Edward Island, December 31, 1965," P.A.R.O., Acc. 3688, File 203. Less than one percent of the Island's roads had been paved with concrete. This same source shows that over a third of the Island's unpaved roads were "improved," but it is unclear to which standard they were improved.; R.G. White, "Deputy Minister's Report," *A.R.D.H.*, 1966, 9. Slightly over one percent of roads had been upgraded to all-weather roads.

¹⁷⁴ MacLauchlan, 5-6.

Epilogue

The end of the 1960s saw the automobile and pavement consolidate their grip on both summer and winter passenger travel on Prince Edward Island at the expense of train traffic. Horse travel was long gone, and the last inland ferry—the one that had plied the route between Queen’s Wharf and Rocky Point since 1840—was removed from service in 1970.¹⁷⁵ The Canadian National Railway Company (C.N.) had already ditched the outmoded and unsafe line across the original Hillsborough Bridge in 1955, and, in 1967, it began to discontinue passenger travel on its trains, first in eastern parts of the Island. The Province, which had once lobbied so heavily in favour of rail transport, agreed: “Inasmuch as the passenger revenues for the previous year amounted to \$5.00 for Georgetown, \$9.25 for Murray Harbour and \$30.00 for Souris-Elmira, it is not reasonable to expect this service to continue.”¹⁷⁶

The end came quickly for the rest of C.N.’s passenger line on the Island—it was completely abandoned by 1969.¹⁷⁷ The horse having long been left in the rear-view mirror, the end of the inland ferry system and the passenger service on the Prince Edward Island Railway signalled the unparalleled supremacy of the automobile for passenger travel on the Island. In terms of summer travel, this really had not been in question since the late 1940s. However, by the late 1960s, the Province had successfully built enough roads to a standard that could allow snow removal and had furnished or contracted for enough snowplowing operations that the automobile could become the unparalleled vehicle of choice for Islanders in the winter, too. The end of passenger train service on Prince Edward Island was thus a crowning moment in the Province’s decades-long efforts to improve roads and provide snowplowing services.

¹⁷⁵ Roberts, 10.

¹⁷⁶ K.A. MacKenzie, “Report of the Supervisor of Transportation,” 31 March 1967, *A.R.D.H.*, 1967, 47.

¹⁷⁷ MacDonald, 276.

In 1967, the Province was only open to the discontinuation of passenger service “provided that a guarantee is furnished that there will be no curtailment of freight service.”¹⁷⁸ But the Province would continue to improve its summer and winter road services to the point that bulk freight could be shipped more economically by truck than by train. By 1989, the last freight train had rolled off the Island, bringing to an end the railway era in the province. It disappeared into the night on a car ferry that itself would be replaced eight years later by a bridge spanning the Northumberland Strait. The bridge was perhaps the culmination of the transportation revolution for which the Jones, Matheson, and Shaw governments had established the blueprint in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.¹⁷⁹ On the road to Car Country, there was no turning back now.

¹⁷⁸ K.A. MacKenzie.

¹⁷⁹ In the heat of the transportation revolution, it was also something that they had coveted for the benefits that it would bring to a province increasingly dependent on the automobile. See Edward MacDonald’s *If You’re Stronghearted*, 293-295.

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