

Merle Hay – The Man

On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917, a 20 year old man from Glidden, Iowa had departed to Des Moines to join the Army along with 4 other men from Glidden. He went from Des Moines to Ft. Logan, Colorado to be uniformed and then to Fort Bliss in Texas to become a member of Company F, 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry. He went on to the Atlantic seaboard to transport to France to be trained by veteran French soldiers for four months. This meant that Hay was on foreign soil 49 days after he enlisted.

In early October, it was arranged that one battalion from each Division regiment would go into line for ten days with the French, for the sake of experience. The chosen spot was the Toul sector, about 15 miles northeast of that city in the rolling hills of Lorraine. The first battalion finished the tour, none the worse for wear. The second battalion came in, including Hay. On Nov. 2nd, near midnight, the Germans came over in a well-staged trench raid.

The Germans cut through the wire without being detected, slipped into the trench without being challenged, did their bloody work, and got away, all in a great hurry. They took 11 prisoners and left three Americans dead – Corporal James B. Gresham, Evansville, Indiana; Private Thomas F. Enright, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Private Merle D. Hay, Glidden, Iowa. The three became national heroes.



Hay was buried at Bathelemont-les-Banzemont, France. General Bordeaux conducted the service. He said that “we will inscribe on their tombs – here lie the first soldiers of the United States to fall on the fields of France.

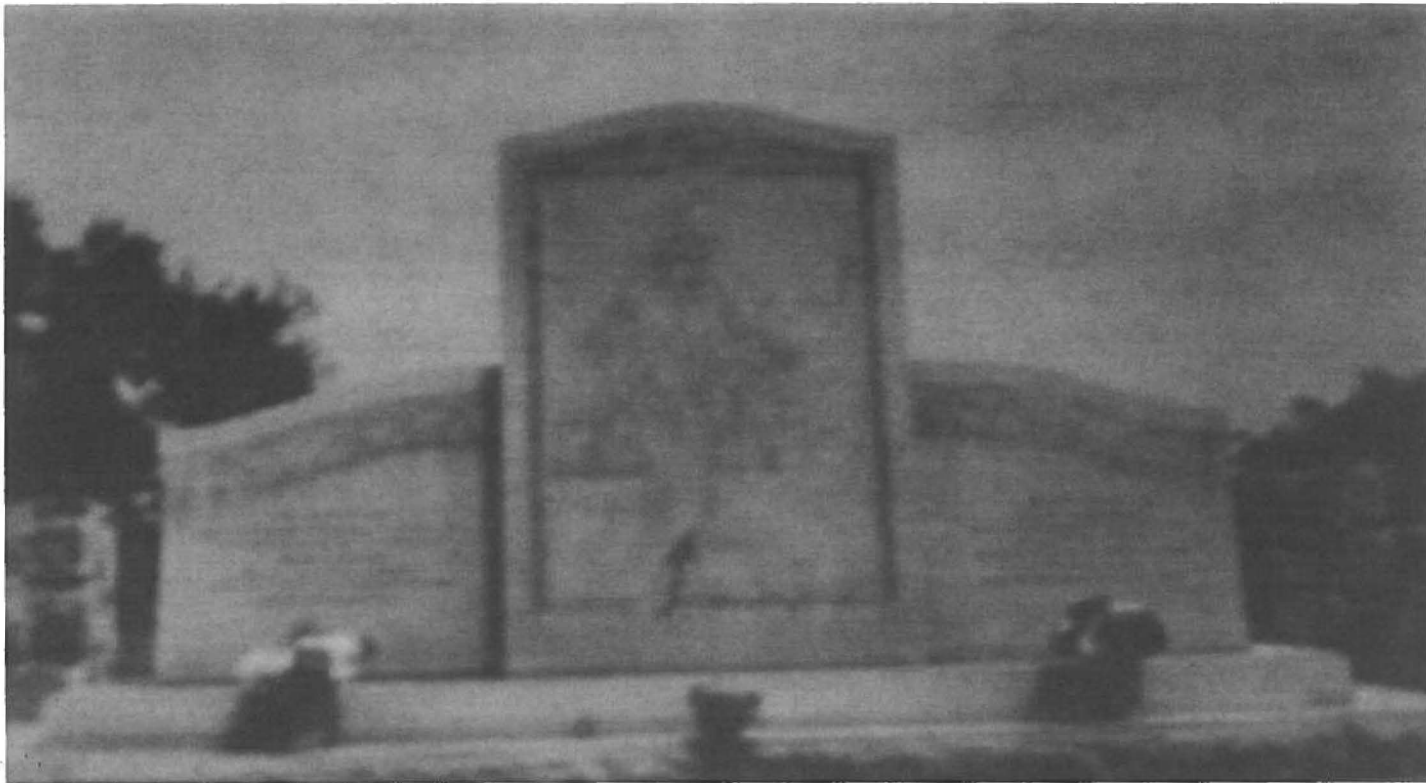
By November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917, word of Hay's death as a first casualty brought action by the Des Moines City Council. They voted to adopt a resolution to rename 58<sup>th</sup> Street to Merle Hay Road and asked the Polk County Supervisors to concur on that portion of road outside of the city limits.

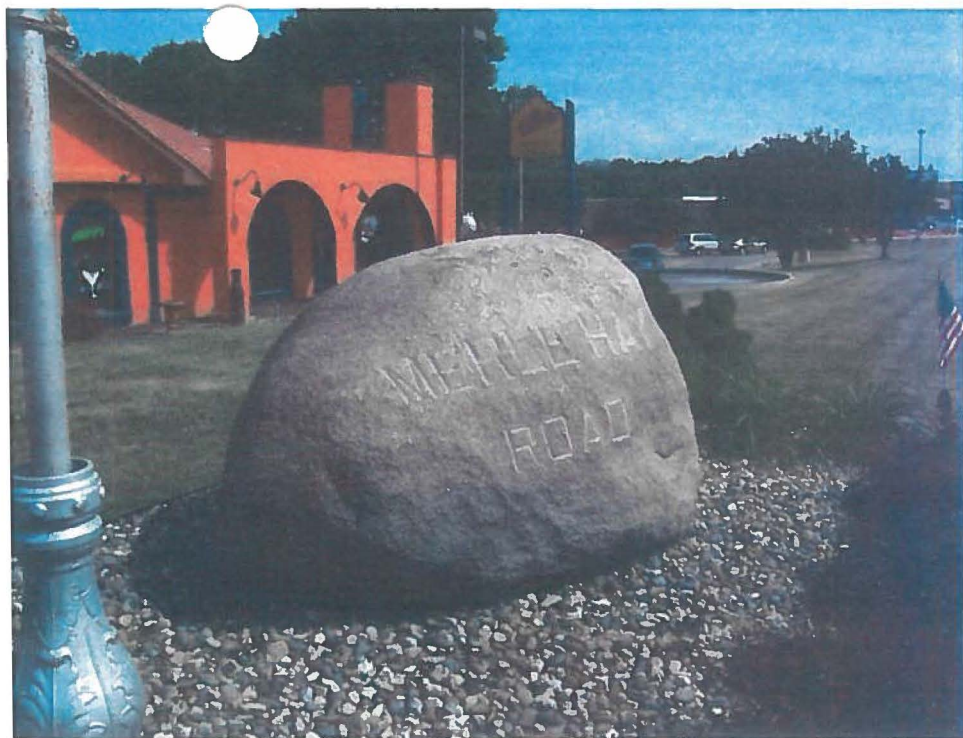
Immediately after the dedication of Merle Hay Road on July 22, 1918, the Club Women of Des Moines took action to ban advertising signs on the road. They also recommended the planting of native shrubs and trees along the roadside.



In 1921, the body of Merle Hay was returned to the U.S. General Pershing met the ship at New York and on May 21<sup>st</sup>, Hay was buried in the cemetery at Glidden.

Legislation had been passed authorizing construction of a monument in the Glidden cemetery.

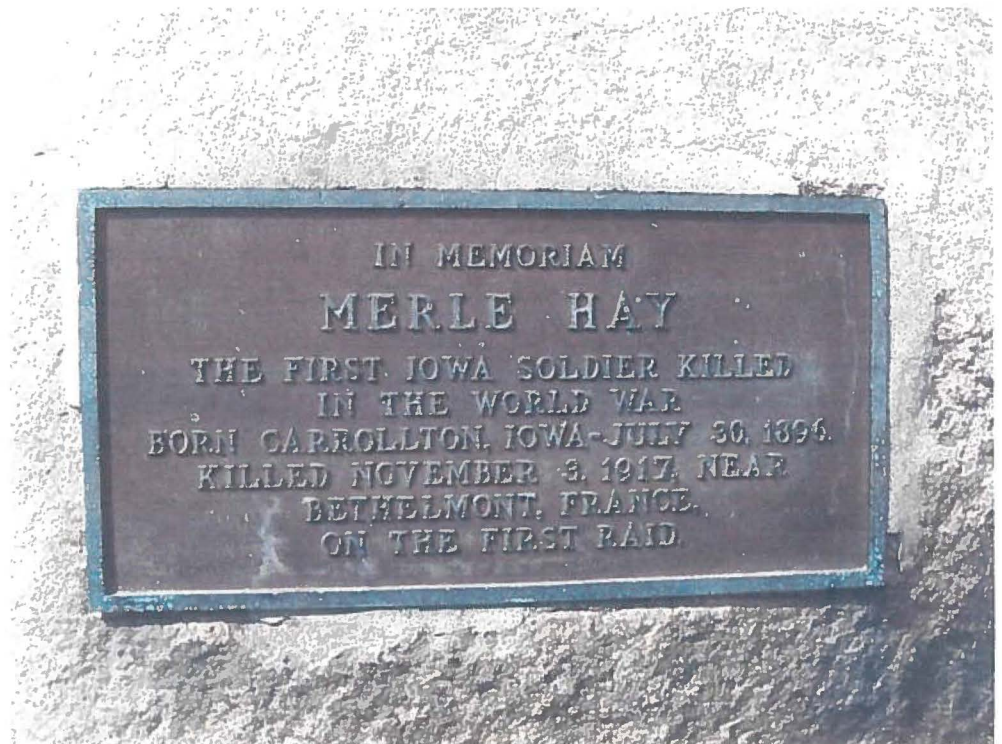




A 16 ton boulder was moved from the J. N. Pressley farm (86<sup>th</sup> St & 62<sup>nd</sup> Ave) located in Johnston to its present site on Merle Hay Road east of the Merle Hay Chapel Hill cemetery.

A dedication ceremony to rename the road was held on Memorial Day, May 30, 1921.

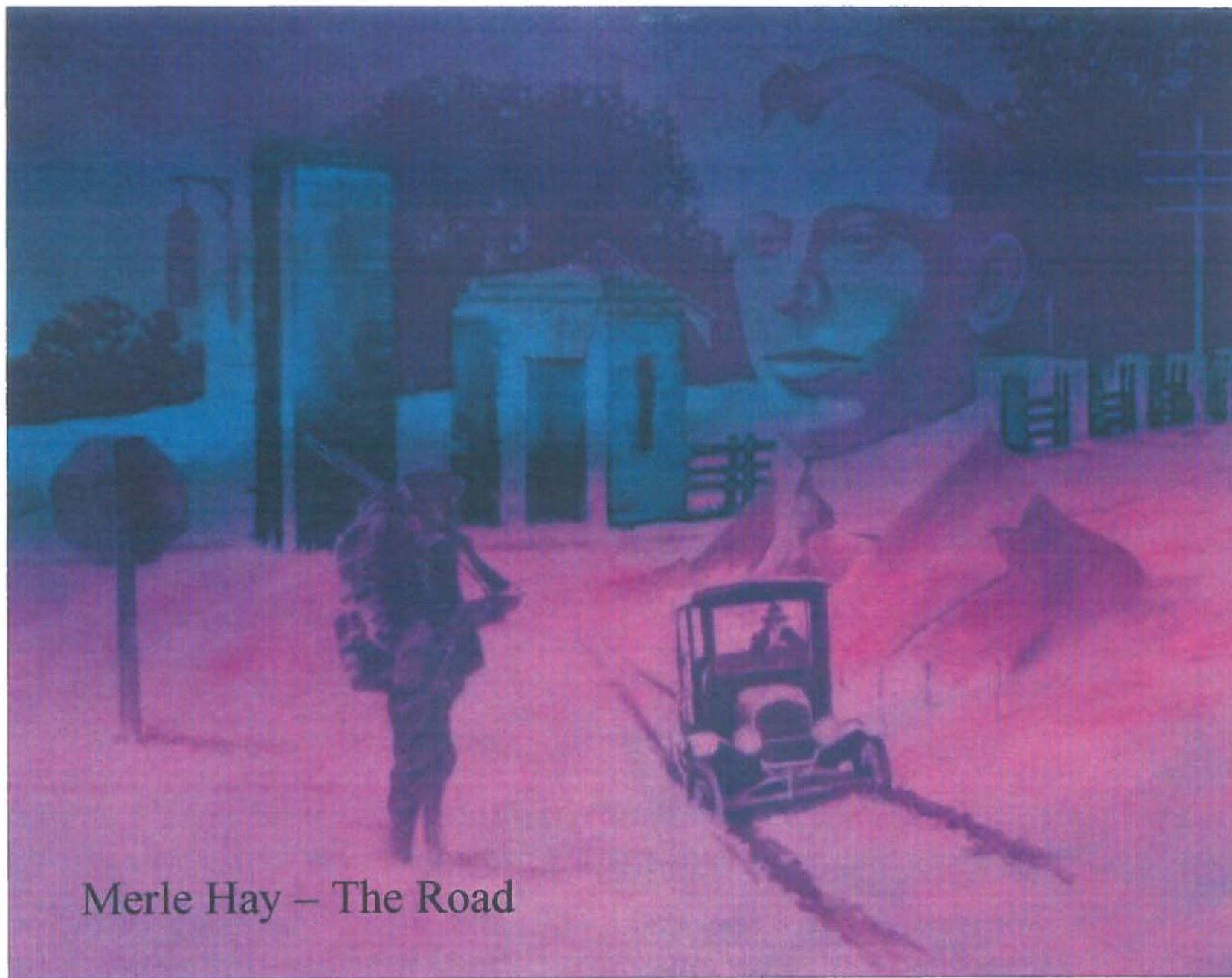
The site is maintained by the V.F.W.



The dedication ceremony was attended by about 200 people. After music, prayer and an address by Col. Casper Shunk, the flag draped boulder was unveiled by Mrs. H. D. Hay, Merle Hay's mother. A floral tribute was dropped from a Curtiss biplane piloted by George Thorne, former Navy aviator from the White Field







Merle Hay – The Road

The story of Merle Hay Road really starts in 1914 when war broke out in Europe. Americans attempted to remain neutral. With the sinking of the Lucitania, May 7, 1915, America was finally brought into the war. Sudden mobilization was required.

Camp Dodge, although owned by the the federal government, had been used by the Iowa National Guard.

Camp Dodge was chosen as the military training center for the upper Midwest, because of its similarity of climate and topography to France.

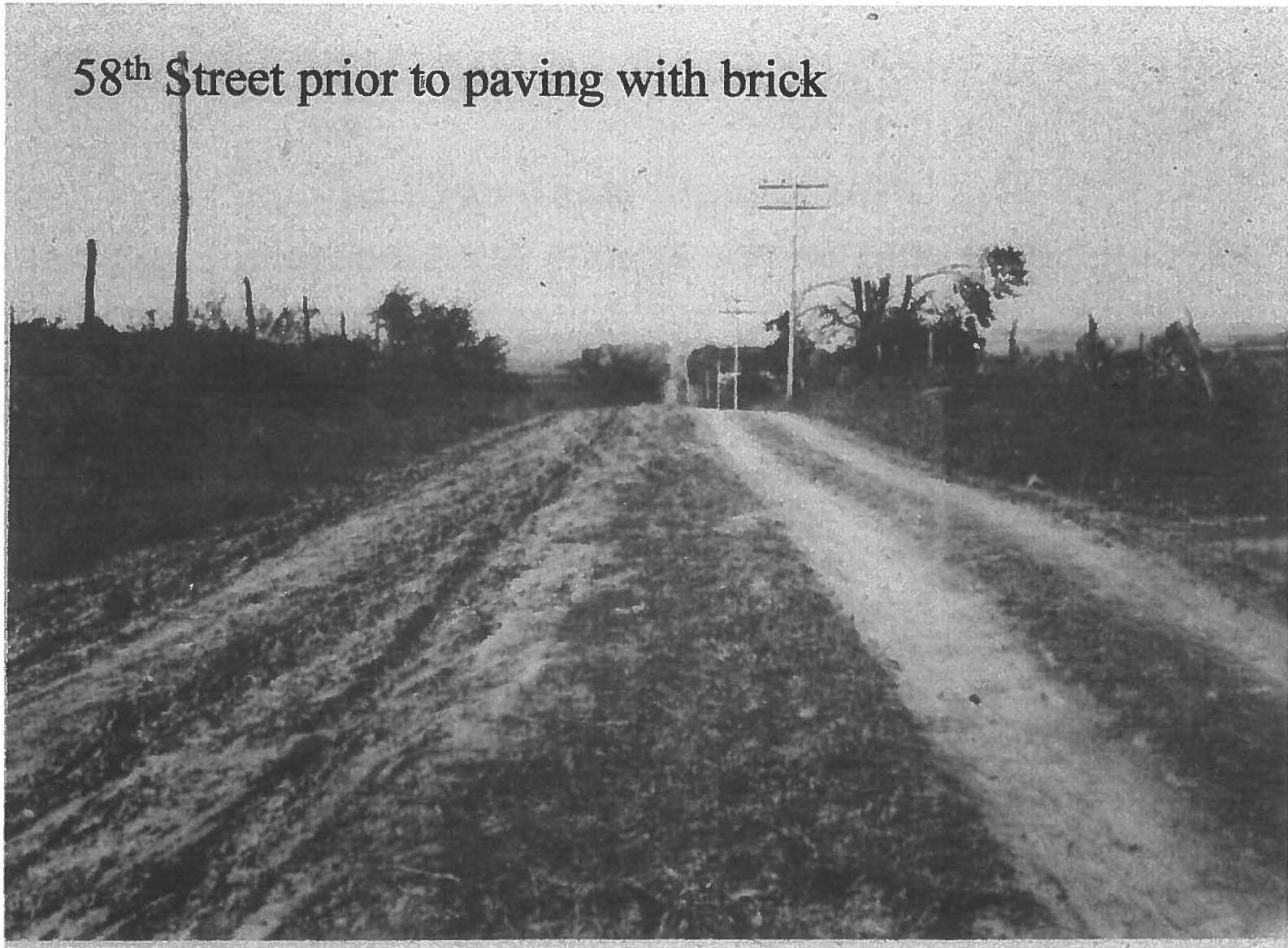
By the summer of 1917, it became apparent that better access was needed at Camp Dodge to move troops and equipment.

The choice between routes had to be made.

It was either Beaver Avenue or 58<sup>th</sup> Street. The 58<sup>th</sup> Street route was in reality, a combination of the 58<sup>th</sup> Street and Beaver Avenue routes. 58<sup>th</sup> Street was a dirt road. Beaver Ave. was graveled to accommodate access to the Hyperion Field and Auto Club. The Club has been instrumental in accomplishing the graveling.

The 58<sup>th</sup> Street route was shorter and was the final choice to be Iowa's first military road.

58<sup>th</sup> Street prior to paving with brick





The construction contract was let on Saturday, September 15, to a combination of contractors headed by Aiken and Flutter of Red Oak, Iowa.

The road was to be paved with Monolithic brick twenty feet wide with 6 feet of double course gravel on each side making a 32 foot surface for a total cost of \$201,131.85.

Building of the road started at Camp Dodge on Beaver Ave., then south on 58<sup>th</sup> Street.



Placing monolithic brick pavement for the Des Moines to Camp Dodge road, 1917-1918.  
(Courtesy: Iowa State Highway Commission)

Once grading and underlayment was done, brick laying commenced.



A strenuous effort was made to complete the Beaver Ave. segment before winter set in. One of the speediest paving brick layers in the country, Ralph Clover, was brought in. His best record in one day on the job was to lay 500 feet of 20-foot paving. This figured to be 10,000 square feet or 1,111 square yards. With 39 bricks to a square yard, he handled 43,300 brick during the day. Each brick weighs 9.75 pounds, making a total of 422,000 pounds or 211 tons handled by Clover that day. It took 8 men carrying brick to keep him supplied.

The work continued until December 3<sup>rd</sup> when weather shut down construction.



Rolling the Des Moines to Camp Dodge brick pavement with a 700 pound roller, 1917-1918  
(Courtesy: Iowa State Highway Commission)

Rolling was considered one of the most important operations in securing a smooth riding surface.

A hollow steel cylinder, filled with sand, weighing 700 pounds, was passed over the brick transversely, longitudinally, and obliquely.











Completed road, looking north into Johnston

## History of Merle Hay Road

Data from:

<http://iowahighways.home.mchsi.com/highways/iowa400-475.html>

### ***Iowa 401***

**Designated:** November 9, 1958 (number assigned March 5, 1957) **Decommissioned:** July 1, 1990

**Original northern terminus:** Camp Dodge

**Original southern terminus:** I-35/80 in Des Moines; it was extended to US 6 (the junction of Merle Hay Road and Douglas Avenue) along a former segment of IA 64 on November 17, 1960.

**Paving history:** The entire road was paved at the time of designation.

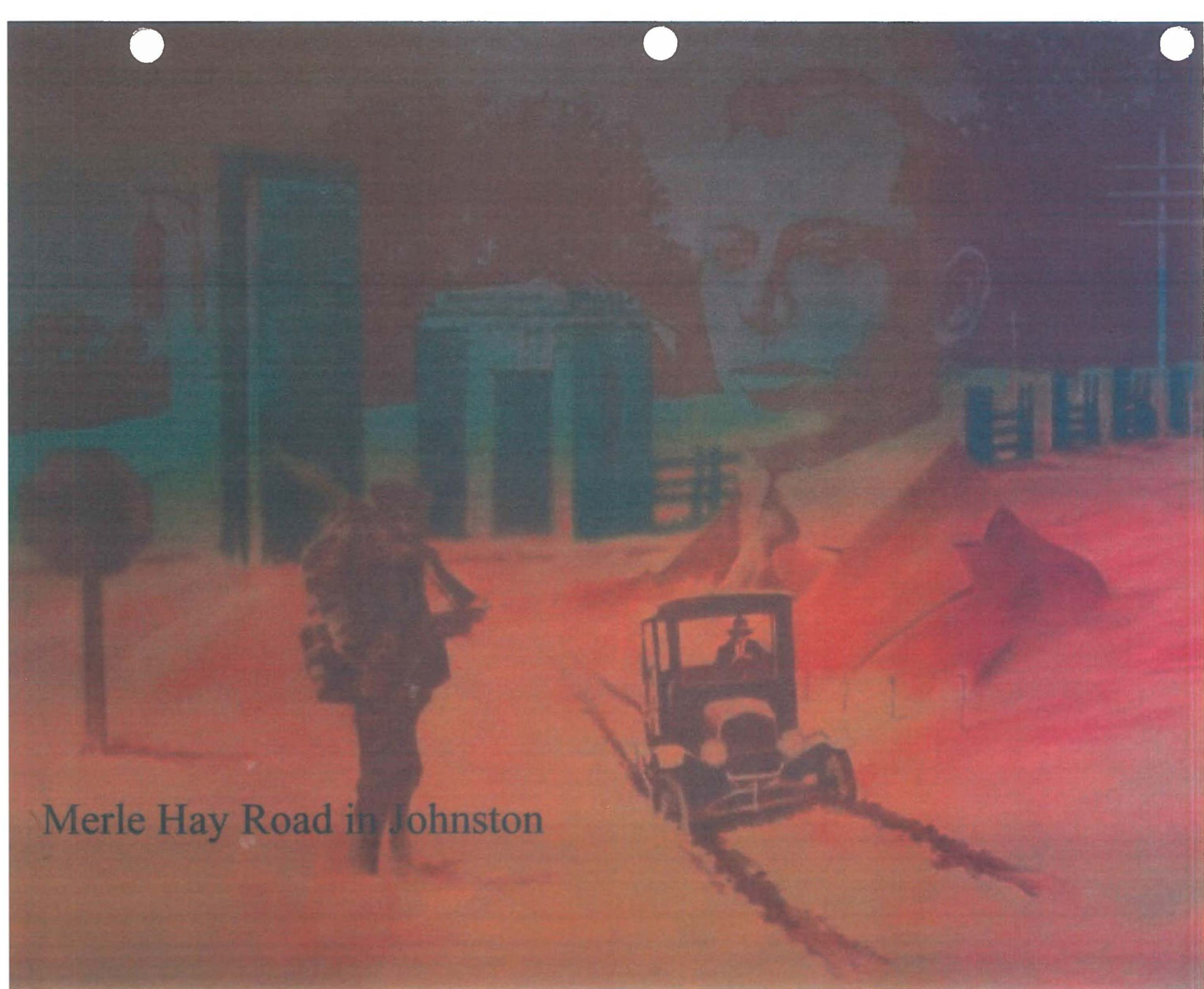
**Replaced by:** City streets (NW Beaver Drive and Merle Hay Road) north of I-35/80; IA 28 south of there.

This route followed IA 89 (I)'s original route; it was superseded by IA 141 in 1940 and designated as IA 401 when IA 141 was routed along a new road stemming from I-35/80 that opened on the day that this Interstate segment opened.

On July 1, 1990, the city of Johnston took over Merle Hay Road north of I-35/80, marking the end of IA 401.

The following additional details were provided by Bob Thomas, Johnston Historical Society, in consultation with city documents:

In 1957, 2 ½ inches of asphalt was placed over the top of the brick road starting at the ice cream store (now Van Dee's) and running North to Camp Dodge.



Merle Hay Road in Johnston

Merle Hay Road has been the location of a number of “firsts” in Johnston.

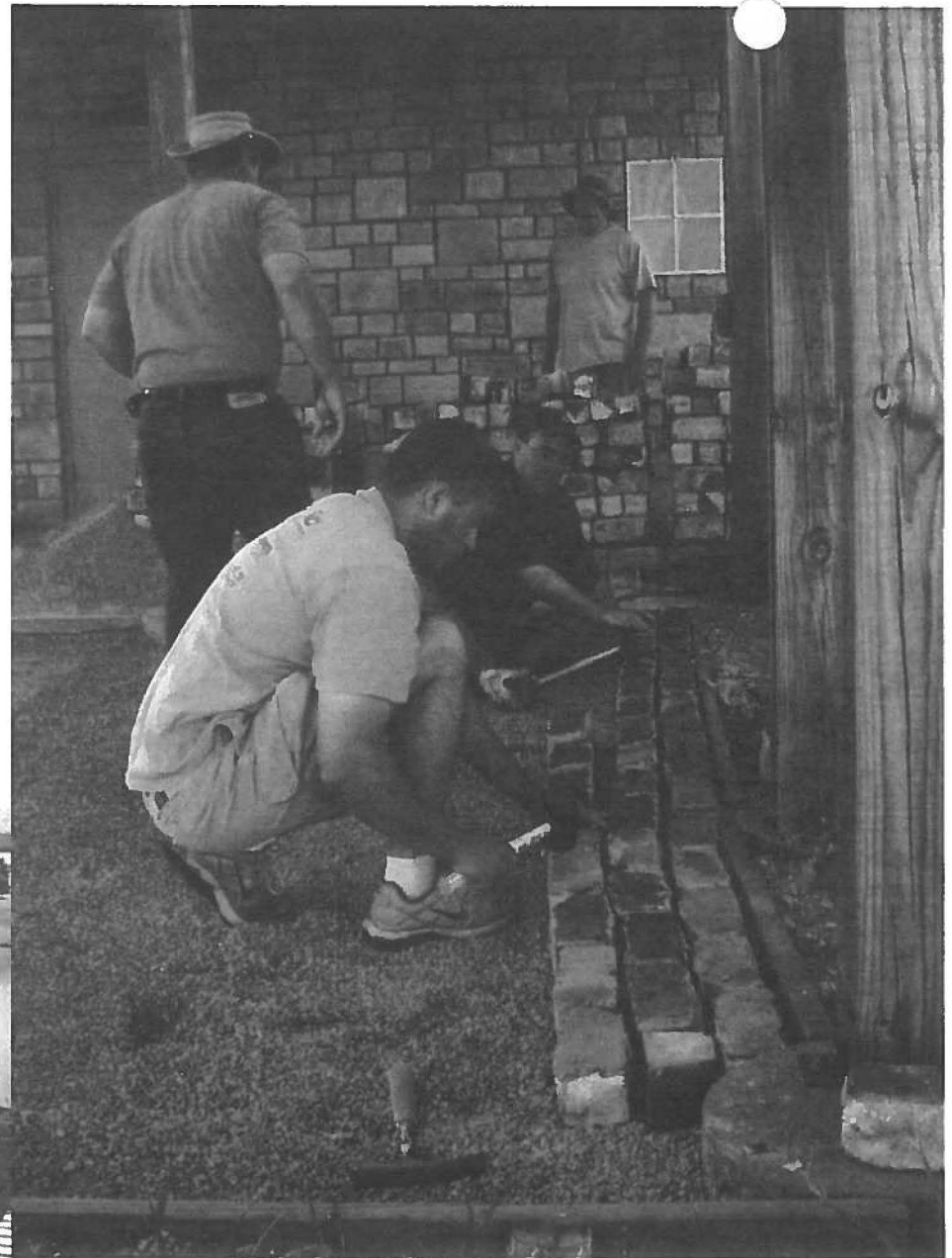
- Birthplace of the City of Johnston – the incorporation started 3 miles from an existing city – at the north end of Merle Hay Road.
- The first HyVee in the metro area was located at Merle Hay Road and NW 62<sup>nd</sup> Ave.
- The national headquarters of the Men’s Garden Clubs of America is located on Merle Hay Road.

## Merle Hay Road almost lost its name in Johnston

In 1959, the Polk County Supervisors undertook to rezone the county. In the process it was decided to standardize the street names and house numbers. An out-of-state consultant made recommendations to change all “named” streets to “numbered” streets. Merle Hay Road would go back to NW 58<sup>th</sup> Street. When Esther Peitzman, a Johnston citizen, heard about the renaming, she recruited Melba Sorenson (both lived on Merle Hay Road) and they circulated petitions. The Supervisors wanted to compromise and put 58<sup>th</sup> in big letters and Merle Hay Road in smaller letters on street signs. Eventually the County gave in. The other streets in Johnston lost their names and went to numbers.



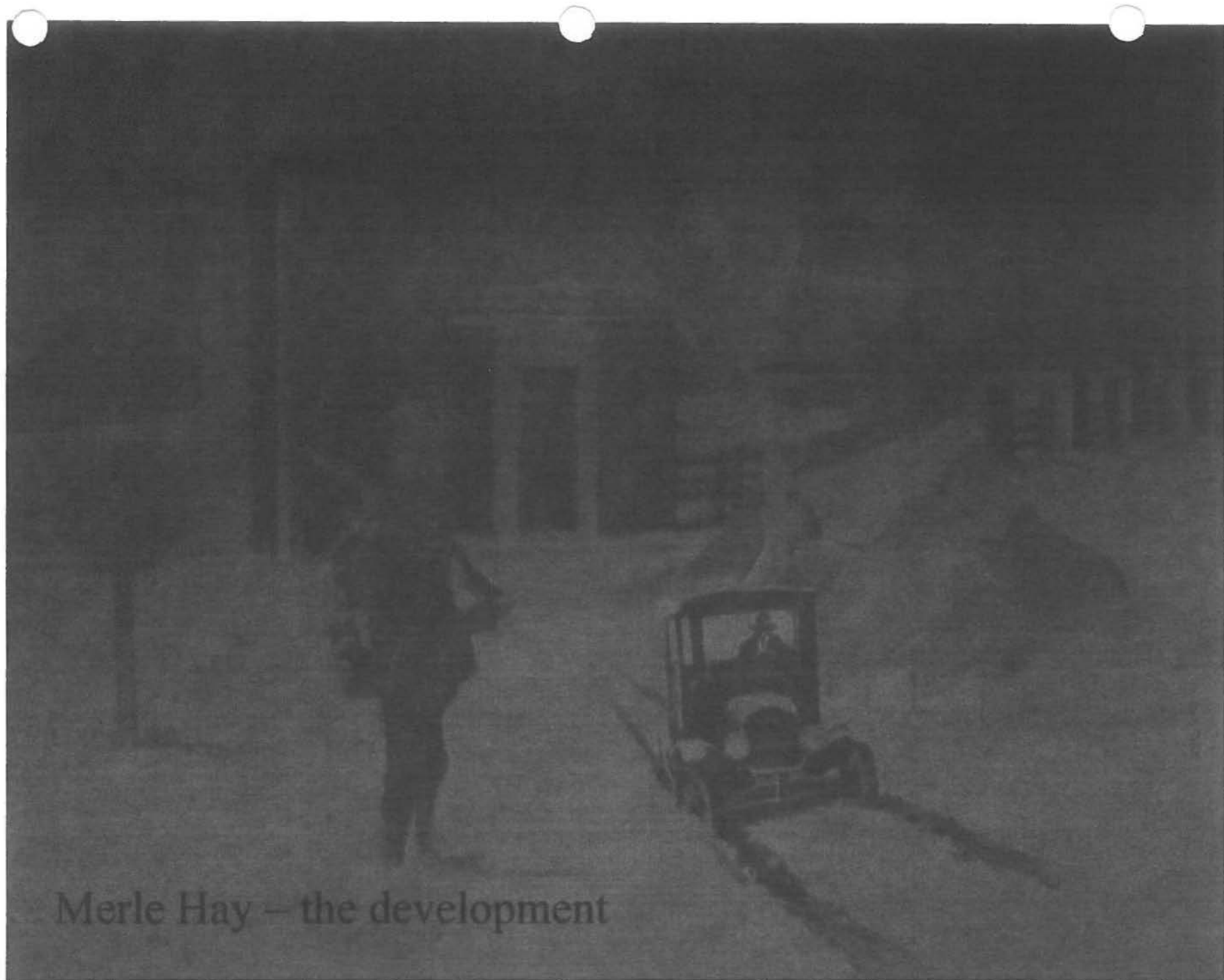
Nearly 90 years after Merle Hay bricks were first installed, they are recycled to create a patio at the Johnston Historical Society Simpson Barn.



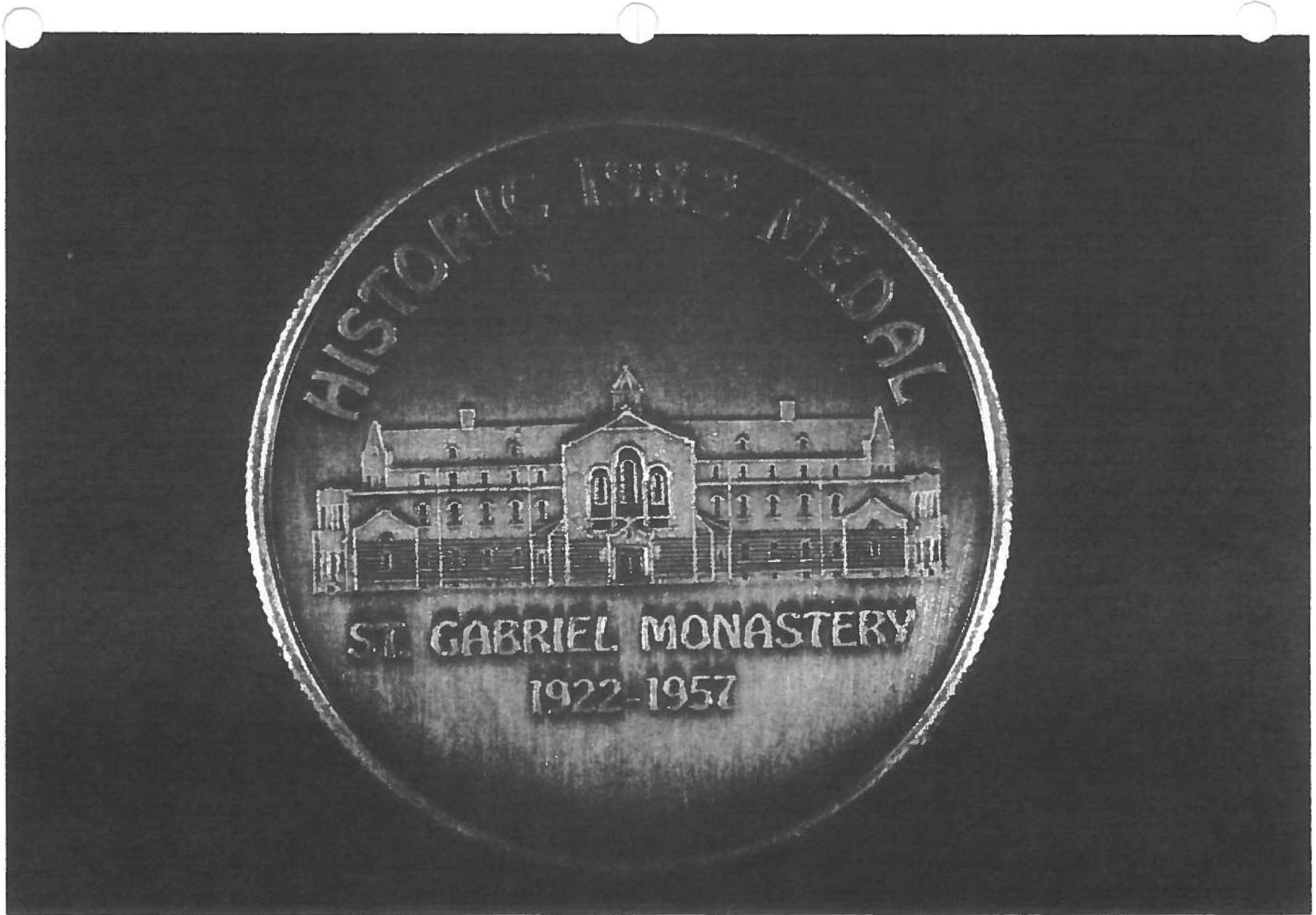
Merle Hay  
bricks are put  
to good use at  
the Simpson  
Barn.







Merle Hay – the development



In 1922, the Passionist Monks erected St. Gabriel Monastery on the NW corner of Merle Hay and Douglas Ave. It was razed in 1957 for the creation of Merle Hay Plaza, an open air mall.



Merle Hay Plaza opened as an outdoor mall on August 17, 1959, on the site of the former monastery. At the time of its opening, it had 31 stores. In 1972, Merle Hay Plaza was enclosed, becoming Merle Hay Mall.



Merle Hay is more than a mall, or a road, or a hero. It is an important name in the history of Des Moines, Urbandale, Johnston, Camp Dodge and Polk County.

## Same Iowa Road in Winter and Summer



MERLE HAY ROAD, BETWEEN DES MOINES AND CAMP DODGE, WAS LINED with stalled motor cars after the big storm of Feb. 8, 1936. Motorists made their way on foot to farmhouses or to the city during the raging storm.





# Urbandale, Johnston area could benefit from IDOT proposal

by STEVE DAVIS  
News editor

At 5 p.m., the westbound traffic on Interstate 85/80 comes to a standstill at the Merle Hay Road exit as cars are stacked two deep down to the stoplight. The congestion is bad, but the alternatives are expensive and could displace Beaver Creek and the Holiday Inn.

The Iowa Department of Transportation Long-Range Planning and Alternative Development Report presented recently offers four possible modifications to the Merle Hay Road interchange as well as a proposal for an interchange at 86th Street.

To handle the 62 percent increase in traffic anticipated by the year 2010, two entrance loops will be added, one to the southwest and the other to the northeast, in a half-clover leaf design. The existing diamond configuration will then be relocated outside of the loops.

The expanded interchange would require the relocation of Beaver Creek to the north, and the purchase of the Urbandale Holiday Inn to the south.

An alternative that would avoid both the encroachment onto private land and the relocation of Beaver Creek shows Merle Hay Road widened to ten lanes under the Interstate. In order to widen the road, however, the two interstate bridges would need to be rebuilt.

"If we went with the loops we would obviously be into the Holiday Inn and would have to buy them out," IDOT Project Engineer Marty Sankey said. "The diamond with the widened Merle Hay Road would have a very minor right-of-way impact.

No decision has been made yet, but we are probably leaning towards the diamond configuration because of the high environmental impact of the other alternatives," he added.

Sankey said that the diamond alternative would handle the anticipated traffic volume with an additional exit lane added for the westbound traffic, and two left turn lanes onto the interstate heading west. He said the project is the highest priority in the area and that construction should begin in 5 to 10 years.

The proposed 86th Street interchange has been discussed for more than a year and is the only new interchange in the Greater Des Moines loop that IDOT proposes. Both the Urbandale and Johnston Development Commissions have written letters of support to IDOT, and have joined forces to raise more than \$20,000 for preliminary plans and cost estimates for the proposal. The Johnston City Council has also thrown its support behind the proposal with unanimous vote during its April 3 meeting. The council vote was in support of both the Merle Hay Road and 86th Street interchange modifications, but not to support any specific design scheme.

There are three alternatives for the 86th Street interchange. All three would require the acquisition of land and a home to the southwest. The traditional diamond design would require 22 acres of right-of-way for construction. The other two alternatives include entrance loops and would need up to 30 acres to construct.

"Funding wise, the DOT is not in a position to build the 86th Street interchange," Sankey said. "This would be a local development funded by local resources. It is not something we would initiate."

Johnston and Urbandale are now in the process of negotiating a 28-E agreement to share the cost of the interchange.

IDOT will recommend a diamond configuration built large enough that loops could eventually be phased in when the traffic volume increases.

The two alternatives for Iowa

Highway 141 interchange were designed to retain the Milwaukee Road railroad right-of-way and to offer easy access into Urbandale. There is currently no access into Urbandale from Iowa Highway 141, however, the Urbandale Comprehensive Plan calls for a diagonal road to branch from 100th Street north of Meredith Drive, and to run parallel to the railroad tracks to the Highway 141 interchange.

Only one of the two modification proposals will offer access to and from the interstate along the 100th Street diagonal. The comprehensive plan calls for the area surrounding the interchange to be zoned industrial and business park.

"I know Urbandale favors the alternative that offers access to the city

quite a bit," Sankey said. "We would have no trouble with alternative two, but again there would need to be some local funding in that, too. Construction will depend on local initiative. We can do alternate one with minimal cost."

Both the Douglas Avenue and Hickman Road interchange modifications are low on IDOT's priority list, and Sankey does not expect either to be changed for 25 to 30 years. If the Hickman Road interchange modifications does get the go ahead, however, one of the alternatives would cut directly through the Holmes Honda-Hyundai car lot in Clive.

"I would guess that we would take a part of the lot and not the building," Sankey said. "Unfortunately, we do not have enough information to make

an exact determination."

"We would try everything we could not to take the building," he added.

The Long-Range Planning and Alternative Development report was the second phase of a three-phase study to evaluate the existing interstate transportation system in the Metropolitan Des Moines area and to anticipate future needs. Sankey said that the final phase would set priorities for improvements.

"This is a consultant's recommendation and has given us a long-range plan to work for," Sankey said. "But, I doubt that everything in this report will happen. If growth in this area doesn't occur like we expect, then some of these recommendations won't be necessary."



June 24, 1998 - Johnston Press Citizen

## Reviewing the evolution of Merle Hay Road

There have been many changes to Merle Hay Road over the years, with more still to come. One of the founders of the Johnston Historical Society, the late Chuck Roberts, found an old etching that features the Robinson Ranch. The etching shows a part of the 1,200-acre ranch with the house shown about where the Gardeners of America headquarters is found today.

A horse and buggy can be seen heading north on the dirt road that eventually became known as Merle Hay Road. The line drawing shows the area as it was in the 1870s. The drawing shows a line of trees in the background that would be eventually 62nd Avenue.

When World War I was declared on April 6, 1917, Camp Dodge

became activated for training soldiers. The Army wanted to move troops from railheads to the Camp. Barracks were built and the road was bricked by July, 1917.

According to Ray Schleih, the Army originally wanted the road to follow Beaver Drive. Landowners weren't willing to give up their property for this purpose. The road was named in 1923 for Merle Hay, the first Iowan to lose his life in the war. His body was returned to Glidden, Iowa for burial and a large boulder was placed in his honor to dedicate the road. The rock can be seen at the highest elevation of Merle Hay Road on the east side of the road in front of Haymarket Mall. Two Johnston Historical Society members, Bessie Carlson and the late Virginia Betz, were present at the dedication.

In 1993 to 1994, Merle Hay Road was widened from Winwood Drive north to the south entrance of Northglenn. The city is studying the possibilities of widening Merle Hay Road from Winwood Drive south to the Interstate in the future.

Ray Schleih has a copy of a photo of the laying of brick to pave the road in 1917. He can be reached at 276 0309.