

Missouri Road Overseer's Certificate

by BOB SCHMIDT

PRESENT-DAY Missourians might be surprised to learn that their 19th century ancestors might have been required to help in the maintenance of the country roads, as these road overseer's certificates show. Individual counties were responsible for road maintenance and initially this was funded by 3 percent of the proceeds from the sale of public lands. However, the roads remained neglected and many thought of them as nuisances. Travelers frequently lost their way, and streams could not be easily forded owing to the lack of bridges. The answer to this dilemma came from the state legislature.

Each county would divide itself into road districts with an overseer appointed for each. The overseers would then contact men age 21 to 50 in their district to do work on the roads.

The overseer was allowed \$2 per day of work that he performed while \$1.50 was credited for each man's labor per day. A road overseer's certificate was given to the person following the day's work. Some residents just elected to pay the amount

due rather than do the work and at least one overseer preferred this latter method.

T.P. Russell was a road overseer for Road District No. 8 in Iron County, Missouri in 1876. He thought it would be much better to have all the road tax paid in money as he could then hire his own men and get more from them than from the inexperienced citizens.

The illustrated certificates are an excellent reminder of how roads were maintained in a bygone era, but more importantly, they provide a fascinating bit of Americana for today's collector.

Sources

Iron County Register, Vol. XI, No. 22, December 20, 1877.

Primm, J.N. (1954). *Economic policy in the development of a western state, Missouri 1820-1860*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

A special thanks to Jack Clay at the St. Francois County Missouri Historical Society, Farmington, Missouri.

St. Francois County, Missouri
Received of Elizabeth Aberson, Administrator of
the Estate of John W. Aberson, Five Dollars and Twenty
Five Cents being in full of the Road Tax of the
Said John W. Aberson assessed for the year 1862
William Simpson
Overseer of public Roads of Liberty Township, said County
this the 4th day of April 1863

The Civil War did not deter the road overseer from collecting the road tax from Mr. Mason's estate in 1863, as this certificate from St. Francois County, Missouri demonstrates.

Road Overseer's Certificate.	
Section 41, page 156. Session Acts 1868.	
THE STATE OF MISSOURI, } ss.	Office of Road Overseer, District No. 2
COUNTY OF LINN,	
This Certifies that <u>W. Wyett</u>	
is entitled to a credit of <u>Two</u>	DOLLARS, and <u>00</u>
CENTS, for services performed by <u>him</u> upon roads in said County, according to law, on the <u>22</u> day	
of <u>September</u> A. D. 1870; the items of such service being as follows:	
<u> </u> hands; <u> </u> days, at \$1.50 each per day, \$.....	
<u> </u> teams, with plow, scraper, or wagon and driver, <u> </u> days, at \$3.50 each per day, \$.....	
Total, \$.....	
WITNES my hand, as Road Overseer of said District, this <u>22</u> day of <u>September</u> A. D. 1870.	
<u>Q. B. Gardner</u> Road Overseer.	

The Linn County, Missouri certificate credits Mr. Wyett with \$2 toward his obligation in 1870.