

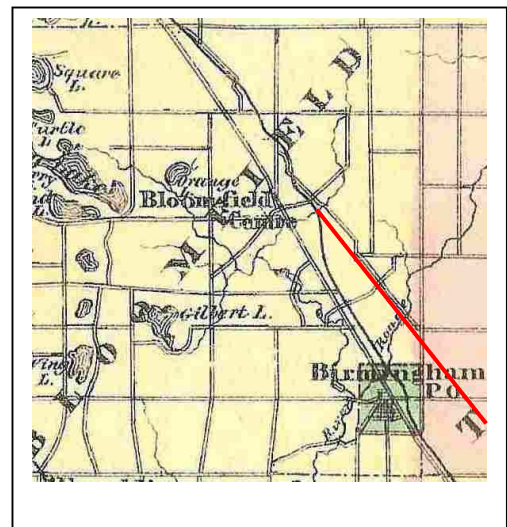
Relocation of the GTWRR Through Bloomfield Township

1925 – 1930

By John Marshall for the Bloomfield Historical Society

The Railroad - One of the first railroad lines built in Michigan was the *Pontiac & Detroit* line that connected Detroit to Birmingham by 1839 and then was extended to Pontiac by 1843. The right-of-way (R.O.W.) for the *Pontiac & Detroit* paralleled the Saginaw Trail (Woodward Ave.) usually less than a mile to the east. However, the section from Royal Oak through Birmingham was constructed tight along the east side of Woodward Avenue, until about Lone Pine Road at which point the railroad R.O.W. left Woodward and cut cross country a short distance to Ball Line (now Kensington) Road at E. Long Lake near the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club (BOHC). From there it continued to Pontiac. Constructing the R.O.W. along Woodward in the 1830s certainly made property acquisition easier. However this would prove to be a big problem 80 years later.

The Wider Woodward Organization - The automobile grew greatly in popularity in the early 1900s; so much so that the roadways became very congested. In 1921 local business leaders and property developers formed *The Wider Woodward Organization*. They began pressuring the State to invest in widening Woodward from a 60 ft. R.O.W. to something much wider. Finally, in 1923 the state legislature passed the Wider Woodward Bill calling for a 200 ft. roadway with four traffic lanes in each direction from the Detroit city limits to downtown Pontiac. Enlarging Woodward Ave. this much required demolishing some buildings and even relocating some graves in Machpelah Cemeteries south of Nine Mile Rd. The greatest impediment to the completion of the project, however, was the existence of the nine mile stretch of the GTWRR on the east side of Woodward from just north of Eleven Mile Rd. in Royal Oak to just north of Quarton Road in Bloomfield Township. Only a couple of miles of this lay within the boundaries of Bloomfield Township (Lincoln Rd. to Quarton Rd).



The state negotiated a settlement with the GTWRR in 1926 whereby the State would procure a new section of R.O.W. a little less than a mile east of Woodward and exchange it for the railroad R.O.W. along Woodward. The new route enters Bloomfield Township at Adams Road just South of Big Beaver and connects to the original R.O.W. at E. Long Lake and Kensington. It follows tight to the west side of Kensington Road.

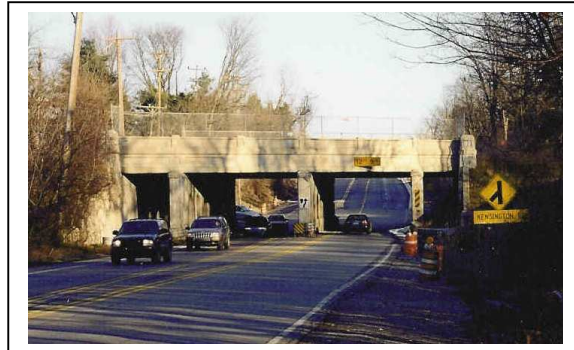
Land Acquisition - The state appointed two prominent local men to procure the land for the 100 foot R.O.W. – Thaddeus D. Seeley and Elias B. Howrath. The new R.O.W. cut through many platted subdivisions. In Bloomfield Township in particular it went through two major subdivisions. The *Bloomfield Estates Subdivision* north of Big Beaver Rd. yielded seven complete lots and parts of several more to the R.O.W. Avondale Rd. and Strathmore Rd. both dead-ended at the tracks, no longer connecting to Kensington Rd. The road originally named Beverly Rd. became Dryden Rd. on the west side of the R.O.W. and Dover on the east side. In essence Bloomfield Estates became two separate subdivisions. In addition, a portion of the east side of Springdale Park was taken making the Golf Course a bit tighter.

The *Trowbridge Farms Subdivision* experience similar disruption. Several lots were lost and roads were reconfigured. Breton Lane became a dead end at the tracks. Burnham Rd. had to be re-routed somewhat. Trowbridge Road was connected to Kensington over an elaborate new grade separation bridge with seven arches.

A number of individual and group land devaluation lawsuits resulted from the presumed impact of the railroad location and acquisition deals. These went on for many years. Most were not settled until 1932. Also, in 1932 charges of land fraud of \$2.5 million were lodged.

Features of the New R.O.W. - Many benefits came out of the relocation project in addition to Woodward being widened to its present size.

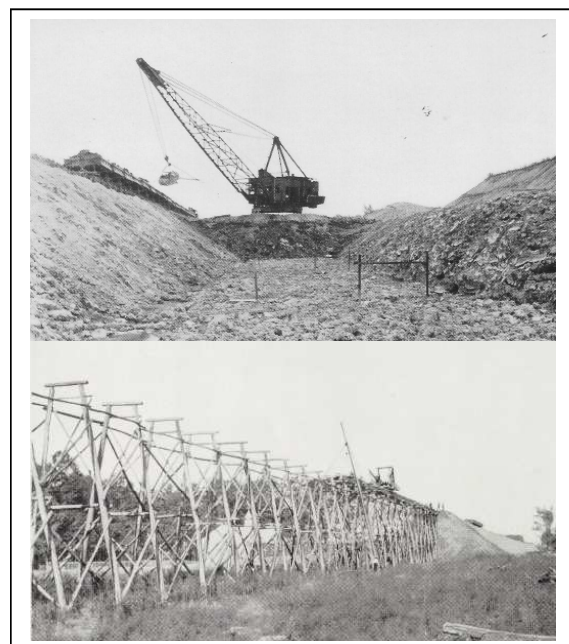
- Every road crossing in the 9.3 miles relocated was grade separated - that is, the trains and the motor vehicles never were on the same level when they crossed. There were 18 grade separated crossings in all. In all but two of the cases the cars and trucks went under the trains. There are five of these crossings in Bloomfield Township: Adams, Big Beaver, Charing Cross, Trowbridge and E. Long Lake Roads.



The date of construction (1930) can still be seen in the concrete on most of the bridges. Only one of the 18 bridges has been replaced in the 80+ years since they were built. It is the bridge on Adams Rd. just south of Big Beaver and was completely rebuilt in 2007.

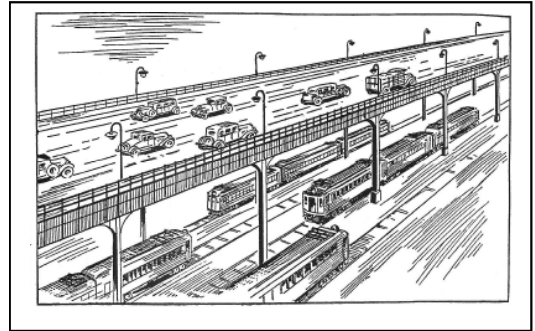
- An elegant new Train Depot was constructed on the relocated R.O.W. at Maple Rd. and Eton St. It is preserved today as a fine restaurant. This replaced the old Depot at Maple on the railway bypass. (See the November 14, 1929, issue of the *Birmingham Eccentric* for picture and detailed article which is available on the Library's website at www.btpl.org.)
- Commuter Service to and from Detroit was provided on the relocated GTWRR. It replaced the dying Detroit United Railway commuter service that had operated along Woodward Ave. since the 1890s.
- Several Commuter Platforms were constructed providing shelter and parking for the rail commuters. Two of these were in Bloomfield Township - one on the south side of Charing Cross Rd. (still visible today); the other on the west side of E. Long Lake Rd., across Kensington from the BOHC. These continued in use until October 1983 when commuter service to and from Detroit ceased.
- The old railroad R.O.W. that skirted downtown Birmingham was converted into an automobile bypass named Hunter Blvd., recently renamed to Woodward Ave.

Construction Process - In May 1930, at the height of the relocation work, there were about 400 workers engaged in the relocation project. They were housed in three campsites: Buckingham and Cambridge in Birmingham, Charing Cross and Kensington, and Opdyke at Kensington in Bloomfield Township. The major work involved "cutting and filling" to level the R.O.W. The deepest "cut" was where Trowbridge Rd. crossed the new R.O.W. (elev. 850 feet) and the greatest "fill" was where the Rouge River crosses the tracks and enters Springdale Golf Course (elev. 750 feet) just north of Big Beaver. One can easily view these two areas by driving along Kensington Road between Big Beaver and Long Lake Roads. See the Cut and the Fill construction process in the two pictures to the right taken from the 1930 issue of *Oakland Highways*, the annual report of the Road Commission of Oakland County (RCOC).



Grand Rapid Transit Plans - The *Birmingham Eccentric* published "Extra" editions on January 12 (G.T. TO START RAPID TRANSIT) and September 14, 1929 (G.T. TO SPEND \$100 MILLION) in which detailed plans were announced for a greatly expanded rapid transit commuter system to operate between Pontiac and Detroit over the relocated R.O.W.. Some of the features were:

- Four parallel tracks would be installed on the R.O.W.
 - two for freight and two for passenger service.
- The trains would be Electric.
- A four-lane Automobile Speedway would be constructed over the tracks. The two inner lanes would be for express traffic and the two outer lanes for local traffic. The roadway would be supported by the structures that carried the electric wires for the train engines. Travel time from Birmingham to Detroit by train was expected to be 30 minutes and 25 minutes by auto speedway.
- Completion was expected in 1931.



None of these capabilities were ever implemented. Only two parallel rail tracks were ever laid. These were shared by freight and passenger service. However, one can see that the railway and the grade separation were indeed constructed large enough to handle the announced four parallel tracks and elevated Auto Speedway. It is unclear whether there was a serious intent by the GTWRR to develop this system that fell victim to the Depression, or if it was just a legal ploy to influence the board reviewing the damage claims by home owners near the R.O.W.

Sources:

- 1 – *Oakland Highways*, the annual reports of the Road Commission of Oakland County (1925 – 1931)
- 2 – *Birmingham Eccentric*, (1923 – 1931)
- 3 - *Michigan History Magazine*, Jul-Aug 2003, LeRoy Barnett