



McHenry County Division of Transportation

Celebrating 100 Years, 1913-2013

Each month this year, a new article celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the McHenry County Division of Transportation will be featured in the Northwest Herald. The eleventh article, printed at the end of November, talked about how McHenry County Roadways got their name.

What's In a Road Name?

As one travels around McHenry County or gives directions, we make our way using the road names to help guide us; but have you ever stopped to think why a road has a particular name? Some of the names may seem rather obvious like Algonquin Road or Crystal Lake Road as they travel through those communities. But what about Flat Iron Road near Harvard; or, who is James R. Rakow Road named after? We'll take a look at how road naming was started in the County and why some are named the way they are.

The first County Engineer, Charles Tryon, in 1913 was tasked with giving the roads under the County's jurisdiction a unique name. Charles Tryon noticed that there were 27 County Routes so he decided to assign each one a letter of the alphabet with the one extra named BB since it was an off shoot of Highway B.

As the number of County Highways increased over time, it was decided that numbers instead of letters would work better. At its maximum, they were numbered 1 to 54.

With the State Highways also numbered, Illinois set up a different system in 1959 for all the counties to avoid confusion using a letter and a number combination which is the current system you see on the blue and yellow shields. At the north end of the state, where we are, all east-west routes begin with the letter A. North-south routes begin with A by the Mississippi River so by the time you get to McHenry County; we are on T and V. Then after each letter, a number is given sequentially as you move across the County.

So taking one road for example, Algonquin Road (believed to be a Native American trail) first started as County Highway P, then became 32 and now is A48. Today, there are 65 County Highways under the jurisdiction of the McHenry County Division of Transportation.

While letters and numbers are useful, names are what people most commonly use today for getting around on the County Highways. So where did these names come from? After the County was settled in 1837, townships soon became the primary form of government. Roads (or paths back then) were named based on what township and the urban center they came from. Examples are Alden, Algonquin, Coral, Dunham, Franklinville and Hartland Roads. Many of the urban centers still exist as unincorporated communities while Algonquin has become the Village it is today.

As cities and villages became more populated, the roads that took you to and from these destination towns continued to be named in this fashion. Names such as Cary-Algonquin (now Cary), Crystal Lake, Harmony, Lakewood, Spring Grove and Johnsburg Roads are examples of this naming convention.

Many routes are named after prominent families and farms that the road went by or through. Examples include Ackman, Fleming, Pyott, Walkup, Richardson and McGuire Roads. One prominent County Highway, Randall Road, was named after a farm in Kane County which is the present location of the Randall Oaks Park and Zoo in Dundee Township.

Several routes are named after natural features such as River Road, Kishwaukee Valley Road, and Oak Grove Road. Other road names date back to early settlement times and have stuck with us for well over 150 years. Keystone Road west of Richmond referred to the quarry that made keystone blocks for stone work. Deep Cut located between Harvard and Woodstock got its name from area quarries. Millstream Road near Marengo was named for a grain and lumber mill along the Kishwaukee River. Chapel Hill Road is believed to be named after the "little old chapel" in the area. However, it is disputed whether it was named after St. John's Church in Johnsburg or the little chapel located on the Chapel Hill Country Club.

What about Flat Iron Road southwest of Harvard you may wonder? There was a prominent blacksmith back in the day. Whether it was to fix a wagon wheel, make your horseshoes, or repair your tools, you took Flat Iron Road to get to the smithy.

There are two roads that were built relatively recently (in the last 25 years) which are named in honor of members of the transportation network of McHenry County. Charles J. Miller Road in the City of McHenry named after a long time Township Highway Commissioner is one such road. The second is that of James R. Rakow Road, named after James R. Rakow, the third County Engineer of the MCDOT who served from 1969 to 1993.

Lastly, we'll leave you with a few street names that aren't County Highways but have interesting stories nonetheless. Seminary Avenue, in Woodstock which is Illinois Route 47, and Queen Anne Road, northeast of Woodstock, are named after what? Come check out the MCDOT on facebook to find the answers. You can get to our facebook link by visiting the MCDOT website at www.McHenryCountyDOT.org. Also, to learn more about what the County Highways looked like and what their designations were over time, check out the MCDOT website under "100 Anniversary" where you can view maps dating back to 1914.

The McHenry County Division of Transportation is now on Facebook!

Visit McHenryCountyDOT.org for more information.

