

Men Who Manicure Dirt Roads Frustrated By Moist Topsoil

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The Shortgrass County has been wet for 40 days. What is holding us drylanders together is a medical phenomena that would mystify the manufacturers of patent medicines. The sun has been behind the cloud banks for so long the oldtimers are the only ones who can remember which is the shady sides of the hills.

County road maintenance men are suffering the worst setbacks during this unusually wet winter. Our grader operators are as out of place on a wet track as one of those whiskered hippies would be at a barber's convention.

But it's a different story when it comes to dry-weather road scratching. No other land can lay claim to as many road builders skilled in the art of working dusty trails. Camel herders are few and far between who know dry soil like these men do. Experts in classifying sand dunes can't start to reach their instinctive knowledge of blowing dirt.

They also develop an uncanny skill at uprooting stones deeply imbedded in the road bed. The father of modern road machinery himself would be at a loss to explain how one of these tractor jockeys can upend a rock, oil-pan-high to any model vehicle, without ever changing the angle of his blade.

Cutting perfectly patterned crisscross ripples is an equally potent talent in their makeup. Once these invisible ditchlets are formed, the Indianapolis Speedway has few thrills to compare with charging up one of our freshly graded roads. At 20 miles an hour, the motorist can find bounces and spins that would make a figure skater seasick. At half that pace, he can expedience jolts that would cause a 16-year-old to let up on the throttle.

Another characteristic of our road system is the attraction all unpaved passageways hold for the oil companies. Any degree of moisture in the atmosphere gives the oilman an urge to stake a new location.

Once the huge diesel trucks are on the move, they are drawn to black soggy soil. The result is a network of dual ruts garnished with potholes capable of discouraging a four-wheeled swamp buggy.

As to the records, a neighboring county holds the prize of having the longest period of near-impassable country roads. The citizens over there claim that one generation of children graduated from high school and went out into the world without knowing that a bus ride wasn't supposed to be as bumpy as descending the roughest slope of the Sierra Madre Mountains. A volume of suggestions has been compiled on how to improve the situation. One of the most sensible calls for us to send our roadmen off to a damper climate to study wet weather conditions. A few old grouches have suggested that they just be sent off and forgotten about. Perhaps the most logical solution would be to abandon labeling the network County Road No. Such-and-Such or Star Route So-and-So, and simple designate them as "trails."

As it stands today, bond issues followed by super bond issues wait their turn for tax raises to end the old fashioned dirt roads. As the taxpayers are conditioned for higher hurdles, asphalt surfaces are taking over. Ranchers then will be able to speed to town. That is, unless the woes of the livestock industry force us back to the horse and buggy.