

Sioux City's Historical Roads

By Jim Jung

In its zeal to be in the league of larger cities of the 1880's and 1890's, Sioux City opted to use many new technologies of the day and be first in the region to have an innovation. The town, known as a "gateway city," was booming and could seemingly do no wrong. However, they made a mistake! It was composed of many pieces of wood, they were round and they would float away in floods. Sioux City had many large floods in those days. Give up? The answer is pavement made of wood. Using blocks of wood to surface a city street is a concept that does not readily come to mind.

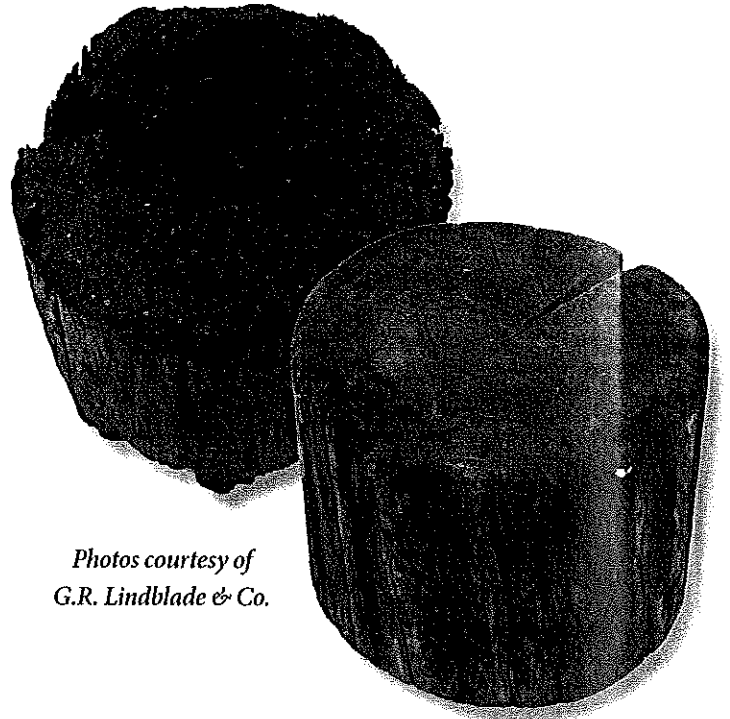
Wooden blocks were first used in paving as early as the fourteenth century in Russia and were usually composed of whole logs laid side by side. Wood block pavements were laid in New York and Philadelphia beginning about 1835, in England about 1830 and in Paris about 1880. The first blocks were round or hexagonal, but many other types were patented between 1840 and 1913. Several types of wood were utilized with soft pine and cedar being the most prevalent. Creosote was applied to the wood to prevent rot and the blocks were placed on a well prepared bed and finally, sand was paced in the gaps.

One of the greatest problems of these streets was due to the bleeding out of the creosote which made them sticky and slippery. Otherwise, they were expected to last ten years and some were in use after twenty years. In addition, they were quiet as horses and vehicles passed over them.

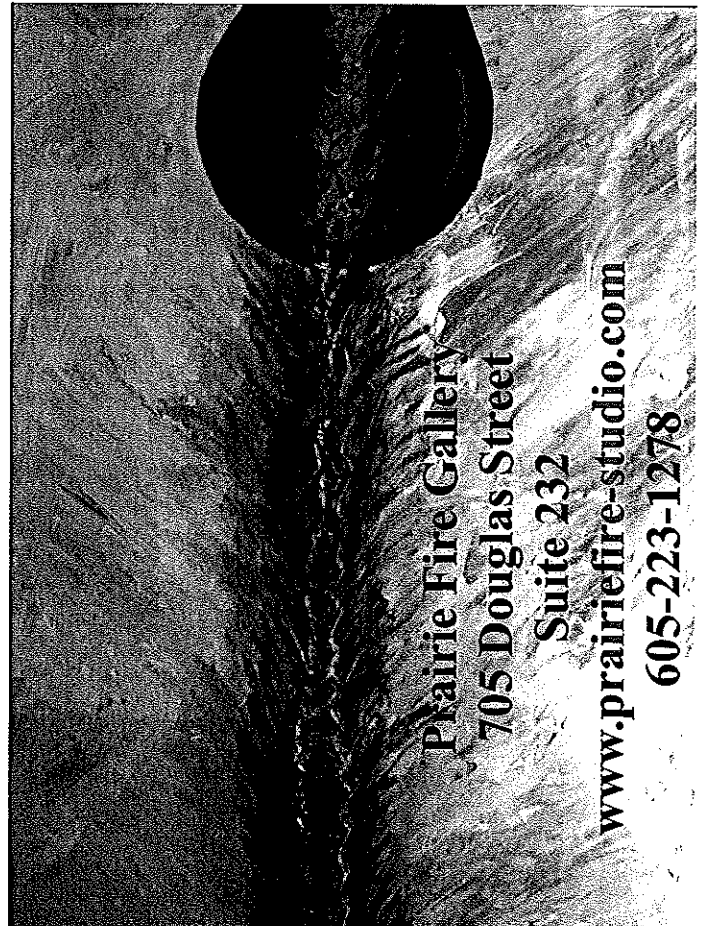
By 1904 Chicago had 750 miles of road paved with wooden blocks. An entrepreneur from England shipped 75,000 tons of red gum lumber from Louisiana to pave the streets of London. With such wide usage of wood, abundant forests soon were becoming depleted. Furthermore, automobiles were rapidly replacing horses which required other means of paving. Brick, asphalt and cement began to appear.

Sioux City history books have a few brief mentions of wood block streets. Fourth Street was paved with wood as late as 1884 but the blocks floated away in a flood. When high water came, cedar blocks could be seen floating in the Floyd River and Perry Creek because they became dislodged. Some wooden block streets were replaced as many as three times and by 1892 the wooden blocks were replaced by brick. There is no record available of how many miles of wood streets there were in the city.

I suppose there still may be some of these wooden blocks buried around Sioux City. Who knows what else we could learn from what is buried underground. It does not always pay to be the first in a region to use a new technology, but hats off to our forefathers for trying.



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