

Tiling Farm Land in Sterling Township



As Sterling Township was being populated with Europeans, mostly Germans, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was a common thing to see the clearing of trees for the development of the fields. This was accomplished by logging and removal of stumps, filling the stump holes, and then plowing the fields to get them ready for farming.

The logs were used to build their cabins. The limb wood would be split and corded to be used for fuel for the cooking range in the kitchen and for the potbelly stove in the living room.

When the fields were being fitted and planted, it became quite obvious that the fields with excess water from the rain were not being drained. The water was not being absorbed by the ground as the ground was already full of water and had no where to go. To seek temporary drainage, the farmer would plow furrows toward ditches, creeks, or streams to help drain the fields.

Macomb County also saw this problem of water filled farming land. They established a Macomb County Drain Commission. It was their job to keep streams, creeks, and ditches clean and clear so the water could flow freely to the Clinton River.

This would help drain the fields for earlier planting and eliminate the possible drowning of the seeds or plants that the farmer had planted. It would make for a longer growing season which would be more profitable for the farmer.

The county realized the ditches, streams, and creeks had to be cleared of grass, weeds, and brush so the water would flow and not back up. The county would hire farmers in the fall and spring to clean out the county ditches. Bill Malow and my dad, Herb Doebler, were buddies and lived across from each other on Canal Road. These two young guys went into business cleaning ditches. Bill would get the jobs from the county and together they would clean the ditches and their banks.

They would use a team of horses and a board scraper, one driving the horses and the other using the scraper. After about an hour, they would trade off driving horses and using the scraper. A board scraper was about four feet wide and about three feet high with a heavy piece of steel on the bottom and two handles on the top to guide the board. The piece of steel was sharpened on the bottom so it would cut into the earth. The horses pulled the scraper and the holder would

force the scraper into the ditch bottom to scrape the debris, grass, weeds, sludge, etc. and pull it up onto the opposite bank. They would repeat this procedure along the ditch until it was finished. With the bottom of the ditch clean and clear of debris, the water would flow freely to the Clinton River.

With the development of motors and engines a new idea was formed to drain the fields - field tile. Field tiles were round clay-baked, usually reddish in color, cylinders about 4 ½" in diameter and about 8" long, and ¼" thick. A tile digger was invented to dig the trench about 3-4' deep. The tile would be laid end to end on the bottom of the trench. The trench would be about 18-24" wide and would be the length or width of the field and would empty into a ditch, creek, or stream. After laid, the trench would be filled and leveled with the farm land.

During the summer when the crops were growing, it would drain the fields after heavy rains to stop any cooking or drowning. In the fall it would help the harvest as they could get on the fields with machinery and would not get stuck in the mud.

The farmers saw the advantages of tiling their fields. Soon many of the farmers were tiling their fields as money became available. After the war, beginning in the 50s, the entrepreneurs came in with their housing developments. There went the farm land and also the need for tile as sewers were laid.

Now, most all of Sterling Township (Heights) has been developed with a sewer system covering all of the city. Only the north end of Macomb County is still using the tile system.