

# A Guide to the The Road to Happiness Collection, 1924-2011

The The Road to Happiness Collection, 1924-2011  
1924-2011

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A Collection in The Fairfax County Public Library MSS 14-01

## Title Statement

A Guide to the The Road to Happiness Collection, 1924-2011

**Subtitle:** The Road to Happiness Collection

**Collection:** MSS 14-01

## Publication Statement

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## Profile Description

**Creation:** Machine-readable finding aid created by Ross Landis, March 17, 2024

**Language Usage:** Description is in English

## Descriptive Summary

### Record Group Number

MSS 14-01

### Language

English

### Abstract

The Road to Happiness Collection consists of .25 linear feet and spans the years 1924-2011 and consists of photocopies of news articles, oral history transcripts, a speech, and original documents of articles and video transcripts. Most of the collection consists of copies of news articles that document the release of The Road to Happiness, reactions to the film, and the search and re-acquirement of it. The speech, "Basic Principles of Highway Management and Finance" by Thomas H. MacDonald is a copy of the book that is given to Robert Preston in the movie. Oral history transcripts include memories from two Fairfax residents, Louise Harrison and Charles Bailey, who appeared in the movie. Also included is the original typed transcript of the narration of the film written by Stacy Sherwood. Subjects include the 1924 silent film The Road to Happiness; the Ford Motor Company; City of Fairfax, Virginia; and the history of roads in Fairfax County.

### Creator

Barbuschak, Chris

### Extent

.25 linear feet

### Repository

Fairfax County Public Library

## Administrative Information

### Access Restrictions

None

### Use Restrictions

Consult repository for information

## **Acquisition Information**

Collection assembled by Chris Barbuschak

## **Processing Information**

Chris Barbuschak, 2015

EAD generated by Ross Landis, 2024

## **Preferred Citation**

Virginia Room, Fairfax County Public Library. The Road to Happiness Collection. Box #, Folder #.

# **Adjunct Descriptive Data**

## **Separated Material**

None

# **Historical and Biographical Information**

In 1924, the Ford Motor Company released the silent film *The Road to Happiness* which showcased how poor roads contributed to losses suffered in daily life and the advantages that could be gained with good road improvements. The Bureau of Public Roads of the United States Department of Agriculture, the Highway Educational Board, and the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce assisted with the film's production and promotion. The film essentially acted as propaganda to promote good roads for automobiles.

Ford Motion Picture Laboratories chose to film the movie in the Fairfax, Virginia area which had extremely poor road conditions at the time. While on location, an Army truck "lighting plant" used for filming even got stuck in the muddy roads. The film makes no reference to Fairfax, presumably to avoid offending local residents. Instead the area is referred to as make-believe Clay County.

The movie follows a farm boy, Robert Preston, whose daily life is heavily affected by the poor road conditions. Inspired to instigate change for good roads, his teacher encourages him to write an entry for the Harvey S. Firestone University Scholarship National Essay Contest on Good Roads and Highway Transport. Preston wins first prize which entitles a visit with President Calvin Coolidge who awards him with a four-year college scholarship. He uses the scholarship to study highway engineering and goes on to work for the Bureau of Public Roads. At the end of the movie, his hometown passes good road bonds and chooses him as their county engineer. Preston returns home a hero and works hard to improve the area's roads.

The cast included President Calvin Coolidge, Harvey S. Firestone, Thomas H. MacDonald, Roy D. Chapin, members of the Highway Educational Board and other noted public officials. The unknown actor who portrayed Robert Preston was the only paid cast member. The remainder of the actors consisted of all local Fairfax residents. Those identified include Frank and Annie Matthews, Dr. Charles Fenton Russell, George F. Harrison, Sheriff Robert Allison, Milton Delaney Hall (Superintendent of Schools), Charles Bailey, and Louise Harrison (Navy Elementary School principal).

Local scenes that appeared in the film are the railroad depot at Fairfax Station, Old Town Hall, Fairfax Courthouse, the old Navy Elementary School, Frank and Annie Matthews' farm on Thompson Road, and one of the first paved roads in Fairfax County - Little River Turnpike.

Ford Motion Picture Laboratories distributed the film throughout the country free of charge. Each of the Ford Motor Company's branches in the United States received a copy which made the film available for use in schools and public meetings. Because the public had such a high demand for the movie, every Ford branch had to be resupplied with extra copies. Translated versions of the film also made it to Mexico, South America, and Europe.

The film instilled a positive reaction with the public. Ford received numerous letters thanking the company for making the movie. Many attributed it to inspiring many communities to realize the ultimate goal of the film: passing good roads bond issues.

After the movie's initial release, it vanished for many years, but many Fairfax residents fondly recalled playing a role in it. Robert "Eddie" Wagstaff remembered seeing the film in one of the local theaters and he wrote to the Ford Motor Company with hopes of acquiring a copy of it. Unfortunately, Ford informed him that their early films remained uncatalogued and in poor condition making it impossible to locate and reproduce.

In 1963, Stacy C. Sherwood noticed an article in the *Washington Evening Star* that the Ford Motor Company had transferred its film archives to the National Archives. Sherwood informed Wagstaff who then contacted the National Archives. Wagstaff received a similar answer Ford had given him; the film remained uncatalogued and it needed to be identified first.

About a year later, the National Archives did find The Road to Happiness and invited Wagstaff to come and view it. Wagstaff brought along Sherwood and a few other local citizens to verify that it was truly the film they had been searching for. When Ford released the movie in 1924, the original motion picture consisted of three-reels of film. By the time it reached the National Archives, only 23 minutes could be salvaged because of the deterioration of the fragile nitrate film stock.

In 1964 Sherwood bought a copy of The Road to Happiness for the National Bank of Fairfax which sponsored numerous viewings. The bank later gave the copy to the City of Fairfax Regional Library which offered viewings until it completely wore out.

In 1983 the George Mason Bank bought a replacement copy of the film and donated it to Historic Fairfax City Inc. which made it available for purchase on VHS in 1985. Historic Fairfax City Inc. included a narrated introduction by then Mayor George A. Hammill and a piano soundtrack provided by Mort Langstaff. The City of Fairfax digitally enhanced The Road to Happiness in 2012 and it continues to be a source of fascination to those interested in a glimpse of old Fairfax.

## Index Terms

Automobiles - History

City of Fairfax, Virginia

Fairfax County - Roads - History

Ford Motor Company

MacDonald, Thomas H.

The Road to Happiness (1924 silent film)

United States Bureau of Public Roads

## Container List

**Box 1 Folder 1: "Basic Principles of Highway Management and Finance" By Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads , 1924 February**

**Box 1 Folder 2: "Basic Principles of Highway Management and Finance" By Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads [typed transcript], 1924 February**

**Box 1 Folder 3: Ford News. "Latest Film Is Released", 1924 March 15**

**Box 1 Folder 4: Automotive Industries. "Ford Company Films 'Road To Happiness'", 1924 March 20**

**Box 1 Folder 5: Fairfax Herald. "Film Fairfax", 1924 March 21**

**Box 1 Folder 6: The Prescott Courier. "New Motion Picture Shows Value of Roads to Community", 1924 March 24**

**Box 1 Folder 7: The Official Record. "Public Roads Assists In New Films", 1924 March 26**

**Box 1 Folder 8: Good Roads. "'Road to Happiness,' New Motion Picture Showing Value of Highways to Community", 1924 April**

**Box 1 Folder 9: The Road to Happiness A Highway Motion Picture, 1924 April**

**Box 1 Folder 10: Utah Highways. "'The Road to Happiness,' a Highway Motion Picture", 1924 April**

**Box 1 Folder 11: Ford News. "A Way to Better Roads", 1924 April 15**

**Box 1 Folder 12: Ford News. "New Ford Film Meets Great Demand", 1924 May 15**

**Box 1 Folder 13: The Official Record. Portland USDA Club screening of "The Road to Happiness", 1924 May 21**

**Box 1 Folder 14: Colorado Highways. "Road To Happiness", 1924 June**

**Box 1 Folder 15: Supplement Community League News. "Highway Commission's Good Road Contest for 1925", 1925 March**

**Box 1 Folder 16: Ford News. "Film Helps Good Road Bond Issue", 1926 February 1**

**Box 1 Folder 17: The Evening Star. "Ford To Give Film Record To Archives", 1963 November 12**

**Box 1 Folder 18: Fairfax Herald. "Wagstaff Seeks Film", 1964 March 13**

**Box 1 Folder 19: Fairfax City Times. "Tea Leaves Tell Us...", 1967 January 12**

**Box 1 Folder 20: Interview with Holden and Ray Harrison and Louise Presgraves Harrison, 1979 February 5**

**Box 1 Folder 21: Interviews with Mrs. Louise Harrison and Mr. Charles Bailey, 1970 April 27 - May 6**

**Box 1 Folder 22: Interviews with Mrs. Louise Harrison and Mrs. Dorothy Hoge, 1970 May 10**

**Box 1 Folder 23: Springfield Connection. "The New Road To Happiness", 2011 January 20-26**

**Box 1 Folder 24: "Old Time Movie Shown At Fairfax Bank", Undated**

**Box 1 Folder 25: Fairfax Journal. "1924 film of Fairfax is plug for road money", Undated**

**Box 1 Folder 26: Road to Happiness, 1924. Transcript of narration for VHS edition [Written by Stacy Sherwood], Undated**

Virginia Room, Fairfax County Public Library