The search for "New Road"

Researched and written by Jim Schmidt

Several years ago the Solon Public Library obtained permission from the National Gallery in Washington DC to sell for fundraising a reproduction print of the Grant Wood painting "New Road". "New Road" is a landscape painted in 1939 of an area somewhere near Solon. The painting shows a road with steep embankments marked with a sign announcing Solon 5 miles, a bridge, a couple of buildings, rolling hills, fading, blue sky, a distant horizon and deep shadows from a sun low in the sky.



(1)

Library visitors often notice a sign in "New Road" announcing "Solon 5 Miles" and are curious where Grant Wood created the painting. I shared the curiosity, so I searched around Solon for a location that matched the features in the painting.

After scouting areas within five miles of Solon, I settled on a location along Mehaffey Road just south of the causeway at the intersection of Mehaffey and 200th street.



Several features suggested this could be the spot. Landscape elements at this site roughly match features painted in "New Road" including the road curving downhill toward the lake, a pine tree in the left foreground, the rising hills in the distance and a remnant of a triangular intersection on the north side of the causeway. The location of the picture is shown with a red arrow on the map below:



Is this location along Mehaffey Road the same one that inspired Grant Wood 66 years ago? The first problem is that the area has changed since 1939. These changes include new roads, missing roads, missing buildings, vegetation changes and the expansion of Lake Macbride in 1954. So, the challenge is confirming whether the features seen in "New Road" actually existed in one setting, or whether the painting is a composite of many features in many settings. I decided to try using elements in the painting to confirm the suspected location. These elements or "clues" included:

Clue 1: Title of the Painting, "New Road" implies possibility of old road nearby

Clue 2: Painted in 1939

Clue 3: Sign in "New Road" declaring Solon five miles distance.

Clue 4: Signature, triangle road intersection

Clue 5: Bare Road Cut, with high banks indicating road recent road construction

Clue 6: Distant red barn with a side shed

Clue 7: Road continuing past triangular intersection

Clue 8: Long sun shadows indicating either morning or evening.

Clue 9: Distant fair weather cumulus showing a cloud blowing from left to right

Clue 10: Fair blue skies grading to magenta purple left to right

Clue 11: Curved gully on far side of road

Clue 12: Small bridge at bottom of hill

Clue 13: House front on left side of road with pine tree beside it

Clue 14: Landscape(rolling hills, creek valley

Clue 15: Vantage(beside a road, on a hill, looking into a valley)

Clue 16: Report from Solon resident Joe Turkal that the farmhouse on the left side of the road belonged to his grandparents.

Putting all the clues together

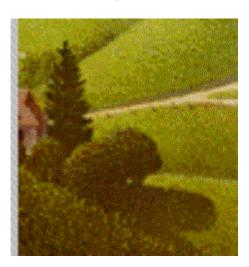
Distance: 5 Miles to Solon

The suspected vantage for the painting is west of Solon on Mehaffey Bridge road just past the causeway and up the hill at the intersection with 200th Street.



The Mehaffey Road and 200th street intersection is about now 3.5 miles from the intersection of Highway 1 and 180th street in Solon or about 4 miles from downtown Solon. Not quite the five miles (Clue 3) shown on the sign, but close considering possible changes in roads and routes since 1939.

Also, Solon resident Joe Turkal reports that his grandparents owned the farmhouse in the painting (clue 16). The farm site was located on the west side of Mehaffey Road about 3 to four miles out of town. The house is no longer there, but a foundation and well is still visible at the site, so the story matches the location selected.



What direction is the view in "New Road"?

My chosen location along Mehaffey Bridge Road is south of the causeway, facing north. Does the painting also show a view facing north? Clues to the direction in "New Road" are found in the shadows, the color of the sky and the presence and shape of the small cloud in the distance.

The painting shows long shadows flowing from left to right from bushes and trees (Clue 8). The shadows are cast by a sun low in the sky so the time is either morning or evening. These shadows are at right angles to the road, so the road is running either to the north if evening or south if morning.



Another clue to the time of day in the painting appears in color of the sky. The sky in the painting transitions from blue on the left to magenta on the right (clue 10). This transition is typical of the sky in either the early morning or late evening.



The final clue (Clue 9) for direction is the distant, lonely cloud



The cloud resembles a fair weather cumulus. Fair weather clouds typically float along on a westerly wind for a few days after a cold front passes by. This sweet little cloud is building up on the left (upwind) and trailing off to the right (downwind). Only a view to the north could show a cloud floating left to right, west to east.

The clues in the painting support a northern viewpoint so the direction of the painting and the chosen location match.

Then and Now

The big question is whether the features in the painting ever existed in one panorama since the current view is missing key elements.

A recent 2005 aerial view (obtained from the Iowa Map Server provided by Iowa State University and MIT ² (http://cairo.gis.iastate.edu) shows the area now. Missing features compared to the 1939 painting include roads, creeks, bridges and buildings. Features remaining include a remnant of the old triangle intersection at the north end of the causeway and the trees and driveway of the old Turkal home site visible south of the causeway on the west side of Mehaffey Road. However, most of the features painted in Grant Wood's 1939 "New Road" are now gone.

2005 Aerial Survey Photograph of the Macbride Lake Causeway

North



Back to the 90's

An older 1990 view (from the same map server) restores some elements such as a better view of the triangle intersection (clue 4), but not the road going north (clue 7), though remnant of what may be an abandoned road is visible north and slightly east of the intersection. Also, areas that may be old farm sites are visible just north of the triangle intersection and south of the causeway on the left side of the road (Clue 6 and Clue 13). These may have been the sites of the two building seen in the painting. Solon native Joe Turkal reports the house in the painting belonged to his grandparents (clue 16). The Turkal farmhouse existed on the south site where a lane goes west off Mehaffey road and ends in a circle. Notice the conical shape object and shadow indicating a big conifer tree (Clue 13) on the north side of the lane, similar to that shown in the painting.

A possible old roadbed is visible just west of Mehaffey Road. This may have been the "old road" inferred by the title. Still, the new lake and Cottage Reserve Road don't fit the painting and the development in Macbride State Park is new also. The causeway bridge may also be in the right position, but the old bridge, roads and creek bed are underwater making a match difficult. However, the existing Cottage Reserve Road shown on the left side of the photo is lined up with the triangle intersection, suggesting the previous existence of an east-west road shown in the painting, but now under water.



A Break

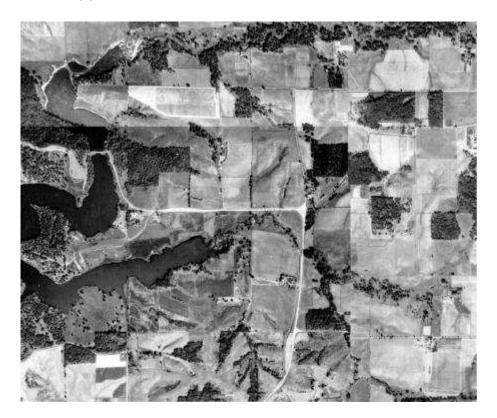
The Iowa State map service recently added a collection of aerial survey photos taken during the 1930s. As luck would have it, these photos include the Macbride area and show features no longer, presently visible.

These photos provide the final confirmation that the location selected on Mehaffey Bridge Road and the location shown in the "New Road" match in many details. Several of these 1930 photos are shown below at different scales to illustrate the match.

The first photo shows Mehaffey Bridge Road on the north (top) and 200th St on the south or bottom of the photo. The original Macbride Lake is visible as it existed sometime after 1933 and the location of Jordan Creek bed is visible before it was flooded by lake expansion in 1954. Farm sites are present both north and south of the creek. The triangle intersection is visible as well as the road extending north from the intersection. The photo is a composite and adjacent photos are not quite lined on the east side of Mehaffey Road, but the Mehaffey diagonal is visible as well as the extension of 180th street. A comma, shaped gully (clue 11) is plainly visible northwest of the triangle intersection. This gully is a good match for the one seen in "New Road".



North



More Detail: 1930s

A closer look at the same 1930s photos show more detail on the buildings and home sites on both sides the road.

First, notice the distinct triangle intersection that is so prominent in the painting. The intersection in this photo matches the one seen in "New Road". Also, note the barn with the side shed (top clue 6) just east and north of the intersection, all the missing roads, including the west road (old Cottage Reserve Road), the missing north road, the creek, bridge, and buildings at the Turkal home site. The landscape is free of woods north of the causeway, just like the painting. A remnant of an old road runs parallel to the "new" Mehaffey bridge road from 200th street on the bottom to the creek bed in the center of the picture. The dotted field on the north side of the old Cottage Reserve road is probably an orchard. Another orchard is barely visible just west of the 200th street intersection. Total distance top to bottom in the photo is about 3300 feet.



A series of closer views, starting on the north and moving south, shows more detail.

- Distinctive, triangular intersection with all roads matching the painting
- Barn with south side shed (matches shape of barn and shed in painting)





- Road running north from triangle intersection Road from the northeast (new Mehaffey road diagonal to 180^{th} st
- Road (now under water) running west from intersection
- Jordan Creek and the small bridge over the creek



South View

Moving south, the photo below shows the creek bed, bridge, the new road with high cut banks (see shadow along south edge of the 200th street intersection) and a distinct track of the old road that followed the hilltop parallel to Mehaffey road. The new Mehaffey Road followed deep road cuts excavated to reduce road grade or steepness. The road cuts are visible in the painting as vegetation bare steep banks. An orchard is also visible near the bottom of the photo

The Turkal home site is also visible right about where it is shown in the painting and a close inspection shows a conical shaped shadow cast by a large conifer just north of the house. This tree location matches the conifer shown in the painting and is still there today.





Conclusion:

Grant Wood in 1939, likely painted "New Road" from a location along Mehaffey Road where it intersected 200th street. My guess is he was positioned on top of the south bank facing north toward the old bridge crossing Jordan Creek. The present landscape of valleys and rolling hills match those depicted in the painting and the 1930 aerial photos show both landmarks and buildings present when he painted "New Road". Things have changed since 1939, eliminating many of the landmarks, but a visit to the site today still evokes the vista that Grant Wood painted in 1939.

- (1). "New Road" .gif obtained from "Going Back to Iowa: The World of Grant Wood" a website created and designed by Janet Haven for the <u>http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA98/haven/wood/home.html</u> and http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA98/haven/wood/gallery4.html
- (2). All aerial photos and mapped obtained from Iowa Geographic Map Server, a GIS service provided for non-commercial use by Iowa State University and MIT. http://cairo.gis.iastate.edu

"New Road" 1939



Same Area 2005

