



# The Interstate at 50

**Leon Cornelis**  
**Assistant Survey Party Chief**  
**Spring 1960**

I think it was in the spring of 1960 when I was the assistant party chief on Virgil Petersen's preliminary survey party, when suddenly the push was on to get Iowa on the interstate system. The general alignment for I-80 had been chosen, and the next step was to obtain survey data to begin the design process. The survey parties were large at that time, with as many as 9-10 men on a party. Under the direction of L.M. Jackson, the preliminary design engineer, all six of the preliminary survey parties were hastily relocated and many were divided so that half of each was assigned a particular section of the proposed route, which I believe extended from Polk County to Scott County. The route of the interstate was to be flown and photographed from the air so that much of the survey data could be obtained by the newly established photogrammetry section headed by C.L. Hutt.

After being instructed regarding the alignment, our job was to run out the centerline with transit and tape and to place pizza pie plates every 200 feet along the alignment, and further, to place large X's made from white plastic on the ground at the point of intersection of each curve. These objects would then be visible for the aerial photography. The fields were too wet to drive in with the carry-alls we had at the time, so the instrumentman had to carry the transit mile after mile between set-ups, and in the plowed fields the 100-foot steel tape quickly became so covered with mud that the head chainman had difficulty just pulling it. Mosquitoes were bad, too, but time was of the essence and we slogged onward being visited from time to time by Mr. Jackson who was overseeing the project from a helicopter.

I recall them landing in the field by our crew to check on our progress and encouraging us with "OK, good! Keep moving as fast as you can." Then they were off to visit the next group. The spring of the year is the ideal time for aerial photography before leaves get on the trees and before crops are planted to obstruct the view of the ground, so that was another reason for the rush. Needless to say, the days were long and tiring. This entire process was something new to us and we knew we were at the beginning of a new era in road building. I think pride made us determined to get the job done quickly and to the best of our abilities. The project was well orchestrated and it seems like we finished our assignments in about a week. A far cry from today's surveying capabilities, but that's the way it was back then.