

Along the Interstates: Seeing the Roadside

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Along the Interstates: Seeing the Roadside

by **Richard F. Weingroff**

A highway may be confined to its right-of-way, but a highway network extends into the fabric of society. As the Nation's premiere highway network, the Interstate System is woven into our culture, daily lives, economy, leisure, and urban shape.

In "Song of the Open Road," the poet Walt Whitman said, "Oh public road . . . You express me better than I express myself." It was as true when he wrote those words in the 19th century, as it is in the 21st century. America's embrace of the Interstate System, laced with some post-honeymoon buyers' remorse, reflects a Nation shaped, through history and choice, by motion.

Along the Road

The Eisenhower Interstate System is the Nation's second interstate system. The first was the U.S. numbered highway system. It was conceived by State and Federal highway officials in 1925 as a numbering plan to mark to country's best interstate roads. Because those roads were owned by the States, the plan was submitted to the American Association of State Highway Officials, which approved the initial designations-U.S. 1, U.S. 40, U.S. 66, U.S. 101, and so on-on November 11, 1926.

By the late 1930s, the interstate system was a network of paved two-lane highways criss-crossing the Nation. Despite its importance, the network was recognized as out-of-date for the growing volumes of modern traffic. Its obsolescence prompted visions of American superhighways modeled on the autobahn that was under construction in Germany or the generation-after-next magic motorways embodied in the Futurama exhibit in the General Motors Building at the World's Fair of 1939/1940 in New York City.

The deficiencies also led to the Bureau of Public Roads' (BPR) 1939 report to Congress, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*. The report rejected the toll superhighway network Congress had asked the BPR to study. However, recognizing that "the report should be constructive rather than negative in character," the BPR added a section that provided the first official description of what became the Interstate System. The "Master Plan" was visionary, but practical-a careful measurement of need based on extensive data on traffic around the country and a prescription for a cure.

As the 1939 report made clear, one of the most troublesome characteristics of the first interstate system was the lack of access control, a feature seen mainly on parkways and the few urban expressways. Highway right-of-way rarely extended much beyond the shoulder, if a shoulder existed, and the abutting property could be used for any purpose since property owners along the road had access to it at any point they wished. The interstate roads ran through every city and town, often on "Main Street" or its equivalent, prompting supporters of some of the U.S. routes to call their road "The Main Street of America."

Beginning in the 1910s, but especially in the prosperous 1920s, the familiar roadside infrastructure that makes interstate travel practical-gas stations, diners and restaurants, and hotels and motels- developed to serve the motoring public, along with billboards placed wherever outdoor advertisers could rent space. Entrepreneurs opened roadside attractions with billboards to lure motorists to alligator farms, ancient caverns, monkey houses, snake farms, amusement areas, and hundreds of other curiosities they could explore while buying bumper stickers, knick knacks, post cards, refreshments, and memorabilia. In the September 1934 issue of *Fortune*, James Agee described the

American roadside as "the most hugely extensive market . . . ever set up to tease and tempt and take money from the human race."

The modern notion that the travel experience on the U.S. numbered highways in their heyday was authentic, or American, or a model of how driving should be—an idyll that has been lost to us in our "fast lane" society—reflects a nostalgic vision that was not shared by contemporary observers. Like travelers throughout history, motorists in the heyday of the U.S. numbered interstate system took their pleasures and pains on the road as the inevitable result of their times.

For example, U.S. 1, because of its location along the heavily populated East Coast, was a target of special scorn. Novelist Kenneth Roberts described Maine's U.S. 1 between Portland and Kittery, Maine, as lined with "doggeries and crab-meateries and doughnuteries and clammeries and booths that dispense home cooking oil cloth and inch-thick china in an aura of kerosene stoves, frying onions and stale grease." In 1940, *Life* magazine dubbed U.S. 1 the "ugliest road in America." In 1941, a writer for *Nature Magazine* went to the trouble of counting the billboards on U.S. 1 between Baltimore and Washington (2,500) and the number of businesses (618) to document her claim that this 30-mile stretch of road was "the motorist's nightmare."

The *Nature Magazine* survey prompted *The Nation* to comment that the nightmare was not limited to U.S. 1. "The crimes against U.S. 1," the magazine said, can be found throughout the country. Humorist S. J. Perelman agreed. After a cross-country drive in 1939, he commented that "the food and the hotels and the endlessness of it—sometimes we thought we must go mad, and mad we went."

In 1953, travel writer James Morris traveled around the country, mostly by car, for a series of articles that became his first book. Because he was writing a contemporary account of his travels, he was not subject to the nostalgic perspective of a later generation. Throughout the country, Morris found that, "The road is likely to be smooth and wide," tempting a motorist to speed ("everyone else on the road is speeding already"), but he reported that police had begun using a World-War II innovation, radar, to catch speeders. Referring to the "drive-in" businesses encountered on the trip, Morris said, "There is no more characteristic gesture of American life than the casual rolling-down of the car window and the emergence of a hand, to grasp a hot dog or a theater ticket, a pound of apples or an evening paper, a check book or a bottle of cider from a roadside stall." On the West Coast, Morris discovered that "so gentle is the civilization of the automobile" that "Californians need rarely walk; soon, if this is any kind of portent, they will have no opportunity." (Travelers Tales, Inc., reprinted the book in 2002 a gender change later as Jan Morris' *Coast to Coast*.)

Novelist John Steinbeck knew the old roads, and the life alongside them, as well as anyone. He traveled the roads as a journalist and observer gathering images for his articles and fiction. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Pulitzer Prize winning 1939 novel, Steinbeck described the harrowing tribulations of Dust Bowl migrants headed to California on what he called "the mother road, the road of flight." It was not a road of pleasure or happiness, or one that would inspire nostalgic feelings, but a road with a desired destination—a road to be endured, a road filled with tribulations to be overcome on the way to the Golden State that would offer only tarnished dreams.

In 1960, he and his dog Charley took a 10,000-mile road trip around the country in a makeshift camper to refresh his memory of America. He described the trip in one of his last books, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (The Viking Press, 1962). For the most part, Steinbeck stayed on the old roads because he wanted to avoid "the great high speed slashes of concrete and tar called 'thruways,' or 'super-highways.'" However, to make time on one leg of the journey, he took I-90 from Erie, Pennsylvania, to Chicago, Illinois. His reaction was that of someone who was accustomed to a way of life that was giving way to a new condition he would neither understand nor like:

These great roads are wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside. You are bound to the wheel and your eyes to the car ahead and to the rear-view mirror for the car behind and the side mirror for the car or truck about to pass, and at the same time you must read all the signs for fear you may miss some instructions or orders. No roadside stands selling squash juice, no antique stores,

no farm products or factory outlets. When we get these thruways across the whole country, as we will and must, it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing.

Access control was the reason he could not see the familiar roadside of his past travels. Based on experience with the original interstate system, highway builders of the Interstate era considered access control one of the most important safety and operational features of the "great roads." It had the intended effect of eliminating the roadside clutter. Full control of access meant that motorists could enter and leave the freeways only at interchanges. The right-of-way in rural areas extended far beyond the shoulder and was landscaped to the far reaches-blocking the view of whatever was beyond its limits and eliminating pressure from commercial interests for access that would interfere with traffic.

With traffic diverted to the Interstates, thousands of motorist-oriented businesses, including many "mom-and-pop" motels, "greasy spoons," and tourist attractions, along the U.S. routes lost their customers and succumbed or clung to life in a reduced state. While the hot-doggeries, squash stands, monkey farms, and mom-and-pop motels faded, a new generation of franchised gas stations, convenience stores, and motels sprouted around the interchanges to serve the Interstate motorist. Where motorists once followed truckers to the best diners, they could now be assured of consistency in the fast food restaurants they encountered at interchanges in Maine, Florida, Oregon, or Kansas. Road maps and atlases retained their value, but equally useful were interchange guides, such as *exitSource*, *The Next Exit*, and electronic guides based on global positioning satellites that let motorists know which franchises they would encounter at the interchanges up ahead.

Beyond the interchange ramps near urban areas, developers found cheap land for high-rise apartments and offices, enclosed shopping centers, and homes, creating "edge cities" that took on the density and activity of a city without a government to run it. Journalist Joel Garreau, who described the phenomenon in *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (Doubleday, 1991), explained that unlike the traditional city form, edge cities "are tied together not by locomotives and subways, but by jetways, freeways, and rooftop satellite dishes thirty feet across." The auto-oriented edge cities reshaped the urban landscape in ways that contradicted the hope of the Interstate System's originators that the new expressways would revitalize central business districts, restore city tax bases, revitalize blighted areas, and reverse suburbanization. The development was so unexpected that State and county officials struggled to keep up with the growth of traffic and changes in traffic flow, as suburb-to-suburb peak period drives often replaced the suburb-to-downtown trips that had been the focus of hub-and-spoke road planners for generations.

Today, the Interstates are so much a part of the geography of our daily life that their familiarity and heavy use inspire nostalgia for the pre-Interstate world that Steinbeck saw slipping away as he circled the country. And so, like Steinbeck, William Least Heat Moon wanted to avoid the Interstates when he took off on his travels around the country. In his wonderful evocation of the old roads, *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (Little Brown and Company, 1982), he said, "I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected." Traveling east from Missouri to begin his journey on the East Coast, he traveled I-64, which confirmed his decision to leave the Interstates behind. "If a world lay out there, it was far from me. On and on. Behind, only a red wash of taillights."

By contrast with Steinbeck and Least Heat Moon, writer Mike Bryan decided to stick to the Interstates when he went in search of America. In *Uneasy Rider: The Interstate Way of Knowledge* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), he explained, "I say we see a great deal more on and near the interstates: America as it is and as it is becoming; the real thing, like it or not." As for Steinbeck, Bryan asked, "How wrong can you be and still win the Nobel Prize?" He thought that in searching for America, *Blue Highways* and the many books it inspired were "actually running away from the carnivorous beast." In the wake of his travels, Bryan concluded, "the future does give every sign of being short on dignity but long on vitality; the interstates, not the back roads, will remain the asphalt and concrete wave of the future." He added, "There are worse destinies."

As Bryan discovered, roadside America is still out there. You can't see it from the Interstates or a brief stop at the franchises clustered like flies to a spider web around the interchanges. The surviving moms-and-pops are there, too, for better or worse, along with thousands of attractions, inspiring and tacky, beautiful and ugly, informative and dumb.

For travelers seeking roadside attractions, guides have been published for Interstate travelers. Some are geared to specific routes, such as Dave Hunter's *Along the I-75* (Mile Oak Publishing, 1996), Mary Lu Kost's *Milepost I-80* (Milepost Publications, 1993), John Cribbs' *A Field Guide to Interstate 95* (Madison Books, 1989), and *Drive I-95* by Stan Posner and Sandra Phillips-Posner (Travelsmart, 2003). Others cover the entire Interstate System, including *Crossing America: The National Geographic's Guide to The Interstates* (National Geographic Society, 1994) and the exit guides mentioned earlier. Whatever a motorist could desire can be found off the Interstates-the Mall of America, the Liberty Bell, Mount Rushmore, the World's Largest Bug, Lawrence Welk Village, the Grand Canyon, Graceland, art museums, fiberglass dinosaurs or actual dinosaur digs, even London Bridge. (The 1831 version of London Bridge was transported to Lake Havasu City, Arizona, where it was rebuilt and dedicated in 1971.) Name the food, the attraction, the frivolity, the fixation, the relic of our history-and the Interstate will get you there.

But if the heart cries out for the Blue Highways, they are still there beckoning those who shun the superficial fast lane, along with suitable guides such as Jamie Jensen's *Road Trip USA: Cross-Country Adventures on America's Two-Lane Highways* (Moon Publications, Inc., 3rd Edition, 2002) and George Cantor's series (*Where the Old Roads Go: Driving the First Federal Highways*, Harper and Row, 1990 (Northeast) and Southwest (1992), and *Old Roads of the Midwest*, The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

The Interstates have transformed our roadsides, as they did the rest of society. Fixed though they are in the center of their right-of-way, the Interstate are flexible enough to adjust to the inevitable changes in our society. Americans have adapted to the new roadside, as they have to the constant evolution of our society, but the roadside has adapted as well to the way Americans live, play, and work.
