

The Great River Road Celebrates 60 Years

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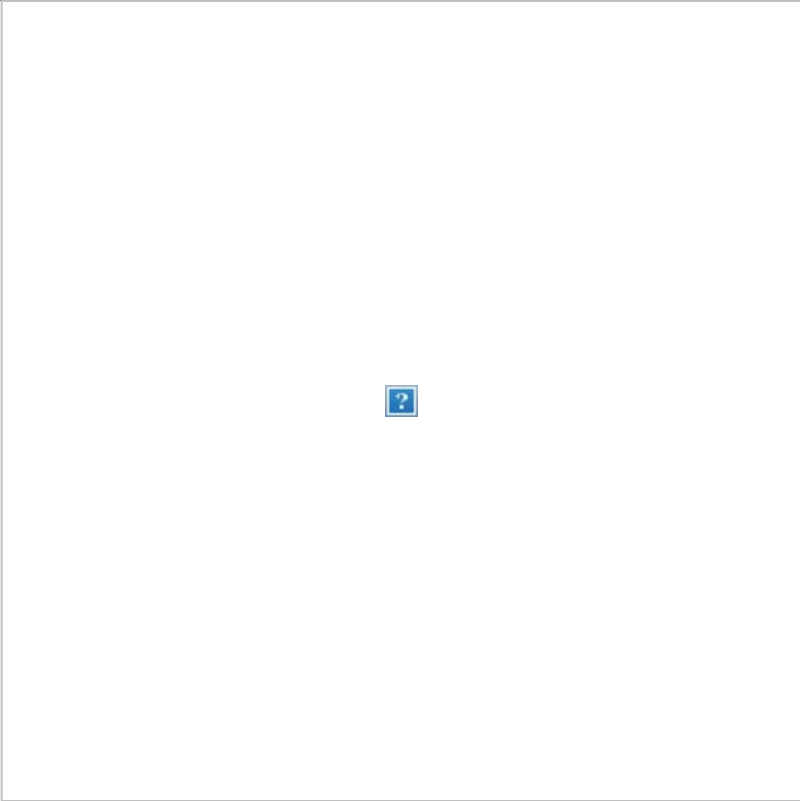
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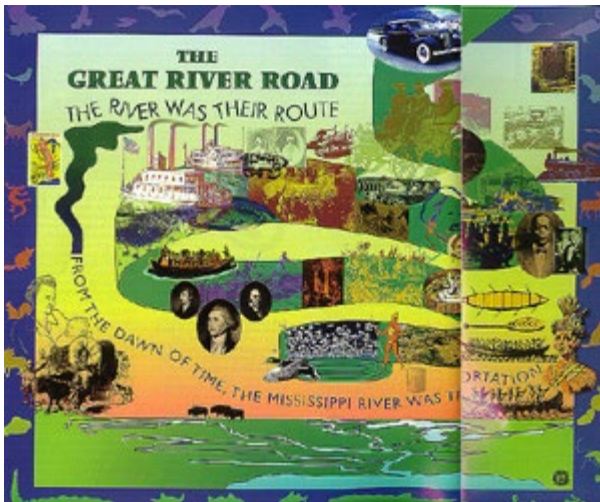
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The Great River Road Celebrates 60 Years

by Karen Haas Smith

For most Americans, a leisurely scenic drive is a classic way to relax. Yet as our nation continuously develops, there are fewer routes that offer escape. The National Scenic and Historic Highway, known as the Great River Road, is one of the oldest, longest, and most unique scenic byways in North America. The 4,800-kilometer road stretches continuously from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico - from near the headwaters of the mighty Mississippi River in Minnesota and crisscrossing the river through 10 states. Celebrating its 60th birthday this year, the Great River Road still offers respite to millions each year for a day's drive or for an extended vacation.



Travelers enjoying the scenery, history, and culture along the Great River Road can thank previous generations for their forethought in preserving and developing the river route for our enjoyment. The story of the continuing evolution of the Great River Road demonstrates what can be accomplished when state and federal officials work cooperatively with local communities to bring the best transportation, historical, and cultural facilities to the American people.

When the Mississippi River Parkway Planning Commission was formed in 1938 to develop plans for

what was to become the Great River Road, Franklin Roosevelt was president, and the automatic transmission was the cutting edge of automotive technology. Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes urged the governors of the 10 states along the Mississippi River to form the commission. State planning officials had been developing the concept of a Mississippi River Parkway as an extension of an idea for a recreational river road that had been first put forward by the Missouri Planning Board in 1936.

The commission was instrumental not only in the early planning and development of the parkway but also in its construction, promotion, marketing, and development. Now known as the Mississippi River Parkway Commission and headquartered in Minneapolis, the commission continues to promote, preserve, and enhance the resources of the Mississippi River Valley and the Great River Road. Representatives of the 10 states and two Canadian provinces serve on the commission's board of directors, and they serve as chairpersons of their state Mississippi River Parkway commissions. But the road from the commission's beginning in 1938 to the success of the Great River Road today has been a long one - full of fits and starts. A late bloomer, the Great River Road was more than 30 years old before it really began to mature.

1939-1951: Feasibility Studies

The U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Public Lands held hearings in 1939 and 1940 to discuss a bill that would have authorized a feasibility study of the Mississippi River Parkway concept. While popular, the parkway idea was soon overshadowed by World War II.

It wasn't until 1949 that Congress approved funding for a feasibility study. The study, "Parkway for the Mississippi River," was completed by the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) (predecessor agency to the Federal Highway Administration) in 1951.



Scenic Route, Not a Parkway

The study concluded that a parkway for the Mississippi River would benefit the nation as a whole. However, the report made an important distinction. Because it would be too expensive to build an entirely new parkway, BPR recommended instead that the project be designated a scenic route.

The scenic route would consist of existing riverside roads, and new construction would be limited to connecting the existing roads so that a continuous route could be developed. The existing roads would be upgraded to parkway quality. The modified approach would save a great deal of land acquisition and new construction costs. Another consideration was that some of the most scenic locations along the river had already been preempted by existing highways, railroads, and towns and cities.

The concept of a scenic route rather than a national parkway was adopted. As a result, the Great River Road is not owned by the National Park Service, as is the case with true national parkways, such as the Blue Ridge and Natchez Trace parkways. Instead, the states have developed the Great River Road through a nationally coordinated program. BPR recommended "that the selected route shall be improved in a superior manner and that it should be dedicated to recreational purposes as well as to moving traffic." The needed construction and improvements "can be done with regular apportionments under the federal highway act or by the states on their own ... "

1954-1970: Planning Studies and Initial Route Markings

With the Federal Highway Act of 1954, Congress responded to the recommendations of BPR by appropriating planning funds. BPR was authorized to work with each of the states to develop specific criteria for the parkway and to determine one specific route within each state for the Mississippi River Parkway. By the late 1950s, the familiar green-and-white pilot's wheel marker began to spring up on various sections of the designated route. Planning continued through the 1960s.

1974-1983: Development of the Great River Road

With the completion of all the planning reports in early 1970, actual development of the Great River Road was ready to begin. Although a number of states put up Great River Road highway signs and used available state funds for scenic bluff protection and road improvements, full-scale development funds were not yet available. Legislation to fund the development of the Great River Road was included for the first time as part of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973. From 1973 to 1982, Congress authorized a total of \$314 million for the Great River Road. Most of those funds (\$251 million) were allocated directly to the states.

1976: Federal Guidelines

With funds available, development could begin in earnest. In 1976, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) issued program guidelines setting criteria for the Great River Road. The states then set up their own procedures for selecting the route of the Great River Road within their state boundaries.

"The Great River Road should be located within designated segments to take advantage of scenic views and provide the traveler with the opportunity to enjoy the unique features of the Mississippi River and its recreational opportunities," the guidelines said. The criteria also specified that the Great River Road should provide for a variety of experiences or themes, including history, geology, and culture, and that the road should provide convenient access to larger population centers. Protection of the Mississippi River

corridor was required by "appropriate route selection, effective control and development, and scenic easement acquisition."

State and Federal Routes

The route of the federal Great River Road consists of sections that conform to the FHWA guidelines and that were eligible for the Great River Road funds in the 1970s and early 1980s. The states have designated alternative routes that include sections with significant scenic, historic, and recreational interest. While the federal Great River Road crisscrosses the river within each state, the alternative routes provide Great River Road routes on both sides of the river from the headwaters to the gulf. The Mississippi River Parkway Commission makes no distinction between the federal and state routes in its promotional efforts. However, some states do use highway signs that distinguish between a federal and state route.

1990s: National Scenic Byways Program

State-designated scenic byways are now eligible to receive federal grants under the federal National Scenic Byways Program. Three sections of the Great River Road received National Scenic Byway designation in 1998. The grants will be used to improve roadways and to add amenities, such as scenic viewing areas, lighting, parking lots, rest rooms, and interpretive signs.

This year's designees include the Minneapolis Grand Rounds, Crowley's Ridge Parkway in Arkansas, and a portion of the Great River Road in Illinois from Alton to Pere Marquette State Park. The Illinois section also received a new title: the Meeting of the Great Rivers Scenic Byway.

A total of 40 roadways have received the national scenic byway designation - 20 in 1996 and 20 in 1998. States must apply for the designation.

"President Clinton and Vice President Gore have asked us to do all we can to protect and enhance communities and our environment," said U.S.

Secretary of Transportation Rodney E. Slater. "The National Scenic Byways program enables Americans to fully enjoy the roads that are important to us culturally, historically, and esthetically."

"The timing of these National Scenic Byways designations is very exciting, coinciding as they do with our 60th anniversary," said Mississippi River Parkway Commission chairman Greg Pruitt. "We are proud of what we have been able to accomplish in the last 60 years, and we look forward to preserving and enhancing the Mississippi's heritage for generations to come."

It is the continuation of a long tradition of partnership among the local communities, the states, and the federal government.

For more information about the Great River Road exhibit, contact the FHWA Marketing Team at (202) 366-8032. Youth activities may be found on the Internet at www.hend.com/grr.

For a free map of the entire Great River Road route from Canada to the gulf, contact the Mississippi River Parkway Commission, P.O. Box 59151, Minneapolis, MN. A \$1 donation is requested to cover postage and handling.

Karen Haas Smith is a communications consultant in Rockville, Md. She provides ongoing support to FHWA's Superpave Technology Delivery Team.

FHWA Develops Exhibit and Educational Materials Celebrating History of Mississippi River Transportation

The Federal Highway Administration developed a new educational exhibit and related youth activities celebrating the transportation history of the Mississippi Valley in honor of the Great River Road's 60th anniversary.

The 8-foot by 10-foot (2.44-meter by 3.05-meter) pop-up exhibit traces the history of transportation along the Mississippi from prehistoric to modern times. The exhibit was unveiled during this summer's Great River

Road Ramble from Canada to St. Louis, a vintage vehicle tour held July 18 to 25, which included events in towns along the ramble route. The No-Zone Truck, which educates the public about motor carrier safety issues, also traveled with the ramble. FHWA participated in the ramble in partnership with the Mississippi River Parkway Commission and the vintage tour organizers, MotorMemories Inc. of Des Moines, Iowa. A second ramble will be held April 17 to 24, 1999, from St. Louis to New Orleans, and the exhibit will be used then, as well as at other events in the 10 states bordering the Mississippi River.

The youth activities provide guidance for discussing the history of transportation along the Mississippi River with students of all ages. The activities include modules for four grade levels (K-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12). Each module includes a background essay and suggested questions or activities based on the essay. The youth activities are appropriate for use in community outreach activities, including the FHWA's Garrett A. Morgan Technology and Transportation Futures Program initiatives.

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