

First Road - Motorcycling The Lincoln Highway

The Lincoln Highway introduced Americans to the pleasures of transcontinental motoring, The adventure is still there for a motorcyclist with some time to ride and taste for nostalgia. From the December 1998 issue of *Motorcycle Cruiser*. By Jamie E
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You've probably never heard of the Lincoln Highway, but you should have. Better yet, get on your motorcycle and go ride it.

Say "Route 66" and Americans absolutely bristle with nostalgia. Like Pavlov's dogs responding to the dinner bell, the human adventure gland opens and you immediately picture an empty two-lane road stretching out before you. A tumbleweed rolls across your Temporal Lobe. You might smell sage and dust or even salivate for greasy diner food. It doesn't matter that you've never been on the famous road, you know exactly how it would feel. That's marketing for you. As if John Wayne were a real cowboy and Dennis Hopper the quintessential motorcyclist.

Route 66 isn't all it's cracked up to be. It probably would have crumbled into oblivion long ago if it weren't for the miracle of media. The road has been immortalized in song and story, and most memorably, it was the backdrop for a 1960's television series that spawned a cultish notion: The ultimate American adventure was just waiting down the road. If it weren't for this phenomenon, the road would have been forgotten long before it lost its official status back in 1985. And the trite roadside businesses -- from the dive motels to the wacky attractions -- would be boarded up if their owners didn't continue to milk the myth so lustily. Through circumstance we've been conditioned to think of "Route 66" (we've don't even pronounce it accurately) as our country's historic highway...our beloved "Mother Road." We all thought the Milli Vanilli guys were singing too.

There is a road that truly deserves glory though. It's the Lincoln Highway. It was America's first transcontinental road, "The Main Street Across America," made official in 1913. Heard of it? Most haven't. Sadly, it would be the household name if a historic highway's value were measured in history rather than hype. Instead, the old Lincoln lies virtually abandoned, quiet and without glamour, a tattered thread that once connected New York City to San Francisco.

We used the excuse of testing the new [Polaris Victory](#) and Harley's Dyna-Glide Convertible to search for this old road and the spirit of adventure that inspired it. Since the original plan was intended to open a pathway from east to west and the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, we started in Times Square, New York, just as most early travelers had. I would meet Editor Art Friedman at 46th and Broadway seven days before we were scheduled to be in San Francisco. About halfway into the trip, he would hand off a bike to Evans Brasfield, Associate Editor, who would complete the journey.

From Point A to Point B, via H, Z and C

Thanks to the internet and AAA, we had detailed maps of the Lincoln's route west. Road maps scarcely existed in the teens and twenties, and what was available was far from accurate. Travelers instead relied on directional markers. All 3389 miles of the Lincoln Highway were at one time negotiated by following uppercase letter Ls painted on the country's telegraph poles. An arrow on the red, white and blue emblem would tell you when to turn.

Even if those markers still existed, it would be impossible to follow them through modern-day Manhattan. Simply staying alive requires great concentration. In fact, it's prudent to ride looking in your mirrors and only occasionally check your forward trajectory so you don't run into the back of a garbage truck. The scene -- and the smell -- must have been quite different in 1913. Imagine a sea of Model Ts punctuated by Packards and LaSalles. The two wheelers of the day -- Hendersons, Harleys and Indians, didn't even have mirrors... and taxi cabs were still horse-drawn.

To leave Manhattan in 1913, one had to take a boat across the Hudson River. A Lincoln journey, in fact, began and ended with a ferry ride, the final one crossing the San Francisco Bay from Oakland. Today the trip begins and ends, less romantically, with tolls. We are herded through chutes that run below the river and above the bay. As Art and I inched our way toward the Lincoln Tunnel, our boot soles dripping grease and anti-freeze, I thought the ferry ride must have been a very pleasant way to begin the trip. We sweated through the carbon monoxide of the long tunnel, which was stopped up like an overtaxed toilet drain, and made it to New Jersey without asphyxiating completely.

Although our map was well marked, we repeatedly blew past key turns. Staring at your tank bag on the New Jersey Turnpike is not something I'd recommend. We finally got off the Pike in Yonkers and followed a busy city street that eventually began to relax and meander as it more faithfully followed the old King's Highway.

This stretch of the Lincoln between New York and Philadelphia was used as a coach route for almost a century before the combustion engine arrived. In those times, it took five to seven days to complete the 94-mile journey. Before it carried coaches, the old King's Highway was an ancient footpath laid by the Native Americans. It was on this wooded, residential back road that we found our first Lincoln Highway sign. And although it was green and swung from a stoplight, it brought enormous satisfaction. We reflected that many of the trees around us had shaded generations of travelers. The treasure hunt had begun.

As Art and I sat smirking at that stoplight we had no idea that we would shortly prove ourselves an astonishingly poor navigating team. Two people can indeed get lost more efficiently than one. We'd been told the Pennsylvania portion of the historic highway would be the hardest to chase. We didn't understand the weight of that warning until we crossed into Delaware, a state we didn't even have a map for. We were some 70-odd miles off our intended course.

The Lincoln touches an impressive 13 states: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada and California. For Carl Fisher, the man who dreamed up the highway in 1912, the only thing that would prove harder than choosing a route would be getting the funds to establish it.

Getting the Road on the Map

Our grandparents lived on a different planet, in a world driven by instinct and innovation, not information. Their turn-of-the-century stresses were very different from ours. For one thing, the fate of the country was as unstable as a summer crop. People had to stand together, feet firmly planted. They worked hard, they embraced change and didn't give a damn what political leaders did with their cigars. In 1913, when the Lincoln Highway was born, there were more important things to be concerned with -- like the threat of World War. Those with the means found escape on the open road. American had fully vested its passion in the motor vehicle and the personal freedom it provided.

There was fever to travel, and great desire to break free of the restrictions of the railroads. The hitch was, roads were few and those that existed outside city limits were scarcely more than horse trails. Carl Fisher, the man who built the Indianapolis Speedway and initiated the Indy 500 in 1911, wasn't the first to suggest building a fixed-route cross-country highway, but he was the most persistent. He called his visionary gravel road the Coast-to-Coast Rock Highway and anticipated it would be complete in time to deliver Easterners in grand fashion to the International exhibition scheduled for the following year in San Francisco.

Fisher figured it would cost ten million dollars for materials to gravel the highway. The rock would be delivered to the towns lucky enough to be chosen for the route, and they, in turn, would provide labor and maintenance. He took his simple plan to the automobile and accessory manufacturers for initial backing, reasoning they were investing in their future by providing and improving roads for their customers. Curiously, an improved road in 1913 meant it had at some point been graded. A "rural route" was simply the space between fencerows a farmer was not allowed to plow or plant.

Fisher's plans were thwarted when Henry Ford sent him packing. Ford agreed that new and better roads should be a national priority but that instead of businesses, the American people should shoulder the cost by paying appropriate taxes, otherwise they'd become spoiled and expect too much from private enterprise.

Without Ford, Carl Fisher's crusade wasn't worth its weight in gravel, although he had found an ally in Henry Joy, the president of the Packard Motor Car Company. In addition to pledging \$150,000, Joy offered a bit of guidance. The government was searching for a way to spend a big chunk of money in order to memorialize Abraham Lincoln. Cha-ching. Carl Fisher's highway had a new name.

Alas, Congress didn't agree with Joy and Fisher that a coast-to-coast highway was the best way to honor Lincoln and no grant was received. Instead Lincoln was permanently seated on The Mall in Washington D.C. where children of all generations could stare up his bronze nose.

Lincoln's name remained attached to the proposed highway because backers knew it would have great patriotic value as they continued their search for funding. Now a team, Fisher and Joy turned to the people for support and created the Lincoln Highway Association. It was a grass-roots effort to encourage and educate the public about the value of building good roads. Ironically, when the project took on this reform stance, dedicating it to Lincoln became remarkably appropriate. It followed that president's style. In both abolition and temperance, Lincoln preferred self improvement over steam rolling, so why shouldn't it apply to road building?

Paint By Numbers

Art and I finally completed the stretch from Philadelphia to York, Pennsylvania, although we were five hours late meeting photographer Tim McKinny at the Harley-Davidson manufacturing plant there. York's other historic leg-up is its claim to have been the national capital in 1777, when the Brits drove Congress out of Philadelphia.

Riding through Pennsylvania (and accidentally through Delaware and Maryland), you begin to realize the American roadside has layers, like coats of paint on an old barn. If you tune in, you can start to pick out the scenes and structures that were there before the Lincoln Highway, those established as it grew and also those structures relevant to its heyday. Motels, for example, didn't even exist until the 1930's.

Looking off to the right or left of U.S. 30 (which now runs the Lincoln's original course across about two-thirds of the country) you might see original sections of the old road snaking its way across the land in a much less aggressive course. The original highway doesn't move with the forthright, dynamite-driven attitude of later highways. It takes a more tentative path, like the first stroke of a painter's brush on an empty canvas. If highway building is art, the first roads were impressionistic. Those soft lines are now mostly lost in our efficiently abstract modernistic roadways. As the country's highway system grew more and more impersonal and began to bypass the quiet country lanes and slow-moving city streets, the intimate names given to the roads were replaced by a number system.

I'd ridden across the country three times this summer, almost entirely via Interstates. In my first day of exploring the Lincoln I felt more connected to the country I was traveling through than in all the other thousands of miles combined. When you're riding on the Interstate, you have this huge impression when you're leaving one state and entering another. Everything's an overstatement in Texas, right? And the damn sky really does seem bigger in Montana. On the state and secondary routes everything blends into one impression. From one state to the next styles overlap, making it impossible to tell when you've crossed a border.

Outside York, the Lincoln Highway fittingly cuts through Gettysburg, scene of the famous battle that became the turning point of the Civil War. It is a place where time stands still, immortalizing the men who lived and died fighting for freedom in "Mr. Lincoln's Army."

As we began our ascent into the Allegheny Mountains, it grew dark. Earlier roads didn't breach this range. Like the railroad, most driving routes had gone to great lengths (literally) to skirt them. The Lincoln plowed up and over the mountains in a fashion that must have daunted early motorists. The braking systems of that era were nominally functional, as the turnouts at each summit of the Alleghenies remind us. Wise businessmen set up shop on these peaks so that travelers could cool their heels along with their brakes.

The most famous of these rest stops was built at Grand Point, which held a view of seven counties. What started out as a roadside stand was eventually turned into a three-story ship called the S.S. Grand View Hotel. The project required 63.5 tons of steel to build at a cost of \$120,000, which in 1931 was a shipload.

In the darkness of the Alleghenies the tattered white houses and sun-bleached barns along the roadside materialized then vanished like pale ghosts, or sentrys, marking our way.

Having Your Ducks in a Row Is One Thing

The early Lincoln Highway traveler was still in the midst of civilization while in the Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. It's evident in the mature quality of the communities. There's a feeling of substance and community pride unique to this part of the country. And also, unlike The West, each home here has a personality all its own wears its owner's heart on its sleeve. Take cute decorations -- almost every house has some. It could be a family of plaster deer, a collection of caricature cutouts or simply a festive wreath hung on the door. But by far, the most popular adornment I saw was the classic ceramic duck. I wasn't surprised by the ducks so much, we like our ducks in California too, it was the fact that the Eastern ducks were being dressed up that concerned me. For the next two days I made note of the porch ducks and what they were wearing. They seem to prefer casual shirts or smock dresses. Some wore baseball hats. One pair of ducks was dressed like a bride and groom.

Riding the Lincoln Highway I not only got to ponder the country close-up, the slow-motion journey inspired mental wanderings about what it would have been like to travel this way 80 years ago. The Lincoln was mostly dirt until it was paved in 1931. I live on a dirt road, so I know that means. It was either a dusty road or a muddy road. There are perhaps a couple days a year when a dirt road is just plain dirt.

Ever hear of the Van Buren sisters -- Adeline and Augusta? On July 4, 1916, these two young women left New York City alone on two Indian Power Plus motorcycles bound for San Francisco via the new Lincoln Highway. They encountered all sorts of horrific weather and slogged their way through countless miles of slippery mud. In one section of Illinois, they rode through 40 continuous miles of deep sand. At the time, women weren't even allowed to vote. The Van Buren sisters arrived safely in San Francisco almost two months after leaving New York, smiling and seemingly none the worse for the wear. Less than a year later "The Illinois Plan" which eventually became the Women's Suffrage Act was passed by several states, all of which the Van Buren sisters had ridden through.

After three full days of riding, Art and I had mastered map reading and brushed up our communication skills just enough to reach Fort Wayne Indiana, home of the Lincoln Museum. We discovered an exhibit called "Coast to Coast on the Lincoln Highway" (which closed in 1999). It was quite a feast for two people famished for Lincoln Highway facts. That evening Art would reluctantly break off the transcontinental tour and head north to hand off the Victory like a relay baton to Evans. I'd spend the next day continuing to follow the Lincoln and meet up with Evans to the west.

The Parting Of The Corn

The stretch from Illinois into Iowa was once known as Lincoln's mud hole. Now it's an enormous sea of corn. When Carl Fisher and Henry Joy plotted the course for the highway, they mostly strung together existing roads, few of which were graveled, crowned or raised to shed water. The skinny tires of the day simply chopped up the mud and worsened the problem. With the

limited funds secured by the Lincoln Highway Association by 1914, it set about creating "seedling miles." These were to be actual concrete sections of road used to demonstrate to the public how pleasant it was to travel on a solid surface. With donated concrete they planted the first seedling section in Illinois. It was ten feet wide and only a mile long, but it was a beginning. In 1915 four more seedling miles were poured in the middle of the most treacherous stretches. Just east of the Iowa border, between the towns of Schererville and Dyer, Illinois, is another example of the Lincoln Highway Association's educational attack. In 1921, the same year the Federal Highway Act was passed and government assistance was assured, the Association spent nearly \$200,000 of private capital and built "The Ideal Section." It was over one mile long, four lanes wide with concrete laid ten inches deep. It had landscaping, lighting and a pedestrian footpath. I rode right over the "The Ideal Section" before I realized it. Today, it looks just like every other suburban street in America.

Over the next decade, the Lincoln Highway Association struggled to hold onto its highway. In 1926 the government had devised a numbered road system that intended to eliminate all the named highways and break them into more manageable State and U.S. Routes. Not until 1928 did The Association surrender its rights to the Lincoln Highway to the government, which promptly chopped it up into a non-sequential collection of numbered routes, just as it had been feared.

In a final effort to preserve the quality, integrity and intimacy of the nation's first semi-official coast-to-coast highway, the Association invested in 3000 concrete road markers, each adorned with a copper plaque bearing the likeness of the route's namesake. It read "This highway dedicated to Abraham Lincoln." The posts were set approximately one mile apart, all the way from New York City to San Francisco by the Boy Scouts of America. The familiar red, white and blue emblem and black arrows pointed the way to those left willing to follow. Today, the Association is back in business, dedicated to preserving what is left of the precious historic highway. Sadly, it reports there are less than a dozen of these concrete markers left in their original positions.

In Iowa, everything about following the Lincoln changed (except the corn). The terrain gave way to gentle swells and the densely populated East seemed all at once to become the essentially empty Midwest. The best part, and the reason I'd wished Art, who originally conceived of this ride, were still along for the ride, is that the Lincoln Highway is alive and well in Iowa. The new Lincoln Highway Association began its redemption campaign here. "Iowa" is the first volume in a collection of historical travel guides being published with Association funds.

The Association's donations also help supply towns with beautiful blue and white lamp post banners, declaring each street part of the original historic highway with the traditional boldface L. Volunteers in Iowa repainted the telephone poles with the red, white and blue insignias. Instead of educating the public about the benefits of good roads, the new Association seems bent on teaching the advantages of good marketing. A town that finds economic value in their historic positioning will be more inclined to preserve it.

In Mt. Vernon, Iowa, I found my first original concrete marker. I was so elated I almost kissed Lincoln's little copper face. When it got dark I was still two hours east of Des Moines and my meeting with Evans. I decided to jump off the Lincoln and onto Interstate 80 to make time. The feelings I had were unexpected. As I sped along undistracted by route numbers, cross traffic or roadside ambiance, I realized I missed it. I was lonely for the Lincoln. I knew it was running along just north of me, just as it had for almost a century. The Interstate felt so impersonal -- so cold and without character.

Escape From Iowa

Evans couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Following the Lincoln Highway here was a piece of cake, like a big game of Connect-The-Ls played in a giant cornfield. The road was open and empty, with nary a stop sign in sight. What were we whining about? I tried to explain that if Art and I had been measuring distance in seat time instead of stoplights we would have ridden all the way to Hawaii by now.

Much to our astonishment, Evans and I got almost nowhere our first day together. We became trapped on the Lincoln Highway. We were riding down an old gravel section of the road when we discovered we were mysteriously surrounded on all sides by road construction. It had a Twilight Zone feel. Perhaps we had witnessed some secret corn testing -- that's what they do in Iowa you know, test corn -- and we were being detained while our identities were filtered through the government's agricultural intelligence department. After several hours of fumbling around like kids in The House of Mirrors, we popped out on Route 30 pretty much where we had departed it. Riding the endless gravel roads -- though thoroughly groomed -- gave me renewed respect for all those who'd passed this way before the cement was poured.

The next day we managed to find our way across Nebraska and enter the true West. The Plains and the smell of pigs had given way to the prairie. The land stirred with subtle variation.

Nebraska rises toward the west with deceptive speed. Evans and I didn't realize how far into the high country we'd traveled until his bottle of sunscreen exploded. What a different world this must have seemed to early travelers new to the west. The emptiness must have been astonishing.

The Lincoln Highway through Nebraska runs within a stone's throw of I-80 for much of the way. At one gas stop we chatted with the girl behind the counter. When we mentioned that we were following the Lincoln Highway she had no idea what we were talking about, even though she'd grown up with it under her feet. Moments later an older gentleman walked in. She asked him if he knew about the highway. He said he personally laid tricycle tracks in the wet cement during the Highway's first paving. They'd long since been covered over in asphalt, and so it seems, has the memory of the Lincoln Highway.

When we were stuck on I-80 for long stints, I would occasionally get a feeling about how the old Lincoln had been laid and catch a glimpse of its scraggly remains cautiously flowing over and around what it couldn't blast through. Then the tiny single-lane serpent would head toward me and suddenly slip under the thick asphalt monster who ate it. Where the U.S. 30 had previously taken sips and swallows from the old road, I-80 simply devoured it.

Spin Cycle

At Laramie we escaped the slab to follow the original Lincoln briefly to the north before dropping back down into Rawlins, Wyoming. At the top of the loop near Medicine Bow, we stopped at the boarded up "Fossil House," a big attraction in the 1930s. It seems the entire building was built from Dinosaur bones pilfered from the nearby Como Bluffs.

That night, Evans and I were determined to find period lodging. The funky Art Deco Era "Rawlins Motel" was just the ticket. We spotted its flashing pink neon sign from miles away. I'd been on the road now for seven days wasn't riding another mile unless I did laundry that night. As I slung my bag of dirty duds over my shoulder and walked off, I told Evans that if I didn't find a laundromat, we'd be making a stop at one of the Western Wear stores that plague the Interstate.

I found the place, and in it I found Mammie Stroud. The place was empty when I walked in and the little lady seated in the back of the room informed me briskly that she'd be closing in a half hour.

As I dumped my load into a washer I could feel her eyes. I was wearing the black tights I use as long johns, motorcycle boots and a flimsy undershirt that exposed my navel. My hair was matted and my face grimy and sunburned. I felt extremely self-conscious as I walked across the room to the detergent vendor with this permanent-press woman watching me. She was sitting in a recliner in the corner. It was obvious she spent a lot of time in that chair. Someone had padded the swamp cooler above her head with Day-Glo orange foam. We were a contrast, to say the least.

But as you often find on the road -- probably because you take the time -- we were soon talking and trading information. With the first laughter all barriers melted away. Mammie had lived in

Rawlins since 1931 and remembered the Lincoln Highway well. She remembered when it was just a dusty trail and Rawlins was a town with more bars than bathrooms. She remembered touring cars bumping through downtown on their way to California. "Everyone wanted to go to California," she said, "Now it seems like they're all trying to get out." She even remembered when the motel Evans and I were staying at was "swank."

As my load rinsed, she filled me in on the details of the highway and the town in the days before the Interstate. Things were a lot different then, Mammie and I agreed. People kept their doors and hearts open. She remembered times her mother would get up in the middle of the night to prepare a meal for strangers. Now we "meet" for coffee -- if it fits into our schedules. People shared what they had back then, whether it was food, knowledge or physical strength, knowing they'd be shown the same in times of need.

The "Open" sign had long since been turned out by the time my laundry was dry. I left Mammie, who told me to call her Grandma, to retire to her living quarters. She left me with some pretty powerful thoughts as I walked away from her quiet haven and into the Saturday night cruising scene of this small, sequestered town.

The Wild Ride West

From Cheyenne, the Lincoln used the hand-me-down Platte River route left over from the Oregon- and California-bound pioneers. This was also the trail used by the Pony Express. Geographically it is the obvious and easiest route to California. It's an empty place. There is only the sound of the wind, and the harmonic howling of the Union-Pacific trains as they plow doggedly across the land.

What Lincoln Highway travelers could look forward to during the wearying drive west were the now extinct [Burma-Shave](#) signs. At one time they assaulted travelers with a virtual forest of ticklish jingles. Each Burma-Shave sign carried a fragment of verse and was spaced roughly 100 paces apart (just the right distance for a vehicle traveling the then-average highway speed of 35 mph).

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