

NOTE 4

HISTORY LESSON IN TRAVEL FOR EISENHOWER GRANDCHILDREN AND OTHERS

UNTIL the advent of the steam locomotive and the steamship, man's traveling speed was exactly the same as that of Ramses and Alexander. The waterways of the country—rivers, lakes, and canals—had been the most dependable and most used avenues of commerce and travel. To be sure, on the eastern seaboard, a primitive roadnet gradually developed because the rivers—except for the Hudson, the Delaware, and the tidal rivers of Virginia and Maryland—were shallow and short. By the Revolutionary War a horseman could travel at a fairly fast pace from Massachusetts and New Hampshire as far as Savannah, Georgia. Washington and Jefferson, for example, thought nothing of riding sixty miles or more in a day; most other travelers, of course, were more leisurely. But wheeled vehicles were doing well when they averaged twelve to fifteen miles a day on a long trip. And there were long trips undertaken. Two or so generations later, in the early days of western migration from the Mississippi to the Pacific coast, because few rivers flowed in an easterly or westerly direction, tens of thousands crossed the plains and mountains over trails first made by Indians, Spanish, French, or American explorers.

So far as I know, the only formal venture in developing a road route across a large area of the country was the old National Road or Cumberland Pike that approximately paralleled the 40th degree of latitude. Although national in name and in its purpose of tying the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi basin, the maintenance of this road after its blazing by Boone and other pioneers was a local responsibility. Where the citizens were alert and energetic, it was for its day an adequate thoroughfare; where they were few in number or careless about the good of others, this road could be more dangerous and hazardous in its deep ruts and wide washouts than the wilderness around it.

But the waterways, except in time of flood or drought, provided at least a smooth means of travel. The steamboat, dependent on neither current nor wind, enabled its passengers and freight to move at an extraordinary speed compared to all earlier standards. An Army unit in the Mexican War, for example, moving entirely by water, traveled from Fort Detroit to Mexico, a distance of more than 1200 miles, in ten days; until World War II this was not at all bad by the Army standards of any country.

The railroads, built at a feverish pace from the early 1850s onward, year by year reduced American reliance on its water routes until those routes were abandoned, some of them, late in the last century. At the same time, because rails reached practically every community of any size in the United States by the time I was born, only simple roads for local hauling were needed.

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Competition between the railroads for passengers and freight became so fierce and rates in consequence so low that no one of good sense would have thought of traveling or transporting freight by any other means. Had your great-great-grandparents moved from Pennsylvania to the frontier before the Civil War, almost certainly they would have moved themselves and their goods in wagons. When my grandparents actually did move, they would have been thought very odd indeed if they had not used rail transport. In consequence, the road system of the United States well into this century may have been less usable for transcontinental traffic than it had been fifty or sixty years earlier.

So far as passenger travel was concerned, the automobile and the airplane did to the railroads what the locomotive had done to the waterways. The process, of course, was far from instantaneous. Not until the eve of the First World War was there any organized attempt to develop for the automobile a modern equivalent of what the national road had been for the cart and wagon. The war years, naturally, blunted the efforts of enthusiasts for transcontinental road traffic; too many other things had far higher priority. With the end of war and the explosive expansion of automotive industry, national highways became both an evident need and an outlet for economic energies.

The beginnings of construction on the first modern transcontinental highway were marked by a faith in community initiative that is rare today. Its promoters, a group of private individuals calling themselves the Lincoln Highway Association, to demonstrate the desirability of permanent road surfaces, engaged in the building of what were known as “Seedling Miles.” Wherever it was thought that such short construction, to contrast with old-fashioned graded dirt roads that quickly rutted or became mud holes, would inspire local residents to tax themselves for its extension throughout their home area, they were built.

Of its proposal, the Lincoln Highway people said:

“The Association has particularly encouraged the building of Seedling Miles in those districts of the Middle West where no permanent improvement has existed on the route. Any such community along the Lincoln Highway desiring to construct a Seedling Mile can, by making proper application to the Lincoln Highway Association and securing its approval, secure sufficient cement for the construction of a standard sixteen-foot road. The only condition is that satisfactory sub-grade and drainage must be provided at the expense of the community, the labor cost of doing the work financed, and adequate provision made for the maintenance of the road for a reasonable period following its construction.”

Were any individual or organization to make such a proposal these days in connection with a national venture of any sort, I am afraid denunciations of both a pinch-penny attitude and the fatuity of faith in local initiative would be loud. Cartoonists could have a field day; columnists might exhaust themselves; and I am afraid millions would think the proposal a stupid and hopeless way of getting things accomplished. To such an extent have we changed in less than half a century; many people in 1919 thought the Seedling Mile rather a good idea and out of it did come a coast-to-coast thoroughfare. I hasten to add that I am making an observation this time, not a complaint.

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Within the Army, until 1916 pretty much tied to mule and horse as it had been a century earlier, the new vehicle, whose capacities had been well tested in training and in combat support, offered a speed of movement and a mobility not restricted by rail schedules or routes. In part prodded by the enthusiasts for a transcontinental highway and in part moved, as I have said, to search out the military capabilities of automobile and truck, the War Department committed itself to the venture of a coast-to-coast convoy that was, under the circumstances of the time, a genuine adventure.

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Most Important!