

HARD-SURFACE ROAD WAS CUTTING EDGE

Bygone byway recalled

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By RUSS PULLEY
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Back when automobiles were new and roads became muddy sloughs in stormy weather, private groups built the first hard-surface roadways.

One of those, the Jefferson Highway, stretched from New Orleans to Winnipeg, Manitoba, and passed through the Kansas City area.

The roadway was a predecessor of U.S. 71 and the federal highway system.

Lee's Summit is commemorating those construction efforts with special signs that hark back to a time when Henry Ford's Model T made cars affordable and when Harrisonville residents squabbled over letting cars onto the town square. They'd scare horses, after all.

It was also a time when automobile promoters such as Carl Fisher,

See HIGHWAY, B-2

HIGHWAY: Lee's Summit marks route

Continued from B-1

who founded the Indianapolis Speedway, saw that the industry's future depended on hard-surface roads.

Because boosters hoped for commerce, towns in Missouri and Kansas argued over rights to build stretches of the highway. The result was that the roadway split in places. Different legs ran through Kansas and Missouri, intersecting in Kansas City.

"It was the Border Wars all over again. Both sides wanted it desperately," said Carol Bohl, who is director of the Cass County Historical Society and who has researched the highway.

The highway was marked with thousands of blue and white signs attached to utility poles or painted on barns.

But evidence of its existence has disappeared along much of the route, said Kathy Smith, a member of the Lee's Summit Historic Preservation Commission.

In Lee's Summit, the highway lingers as Jefferson Street. Smith came across references to it in newspaper clippings and approached city officials about producing signs to mark the route. They agreed it was a good idea.

"We're very lucky in Lee's Summit that we have so much of it left under its original name," Smith said.

Bohl said she'd like to see markers in Harrisonville, if the historical society can raise the money. The city named one of its thoroughfares Jefferson Parkway, where the old highway ran through town, she said.

Money to build the original highway came from individuals who would pay \$25 for a membership to the Jefferson Highway Association, as well as from assessments, road associations, counties, townships and donors. Towns vied to complete their sections first.

The association coordinated the building of the route. It was led by E.T. Meredith of Des Moines, Iowa,



SUSAN PFANNMULLER/Special to The Star

Kathy Smith, a member of the Lee's Summit Historic Preservation Commission, persuaded the city to put up signs marking the Jefferson Highway, a predecessor of the federal highway system.

publisher of *Successful Farming* and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Meredith, a former secretary of agriculture, saw the road as an economic opportunity on a par with the opening of the Panama Canal. He attended a 1915 meeting in New Orleans organized by businessmen to promote trade and highways.

By 1923, the association wasn't promising that the road could be traveled 365 days a year, but it did say about half the route could be traveled in about any weather. Highway associations organized "sociability runs," in which promoters would set out in auto caravans to encourage use of the road and tourism, Bohl said.

In 2003 the Cass County Historical Society re-enacted a run to Carthage, Mo., celebrating the route and the relocation of remnants of the highway.

"It took some investigation to find them, because only the really old guys remembered it before they passed away," Bohl said.

The Jefferson Highway and other good-roads associations shaped the federal highway system.

In 1916, W.B. Scruggs of Cass County, a Jefferson Highway direc-

tor, met with President Woodrow Wilson in Kansas City to lobby for federal support of rock roads, Bohl said.

At the time, most roads between towns were suitable for horses and wagons.

"There were no roads fit for automobile use," said Lyell Henry of Iowa City, Iowa, in a telephone interview.

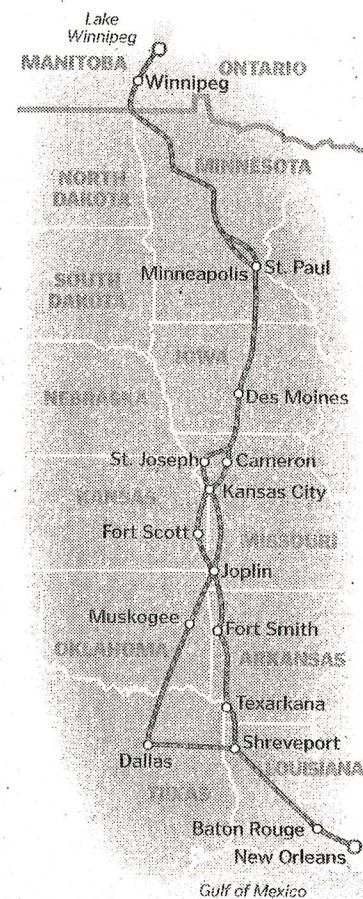
Henry is a consultant for a historic site being restored in Colo, Iowa, where the Jefferson Highway intersected with the more famous Lincoln Highway, an east-west route.

The north-south Jefferson route, nicknamed the Palm to Pine highway, went through the Louisiana Purchase in the Mississippi Valley, and so honored Thomas Jefferson — the president who negotiated the land purchase.

Its promoters also wanted a presidential name to rival that of Lincoln, Henry said.

By the 1920s, Henry said, there were hundreds of named highways. The result was a confusing jumble, and motorists got tired of hunting for painted poles to find their way.

And the old routes meandered.



GENTRY MULLEN/The Kansas City Star

"They'd go way out of the way from one town to another," Henry said.

Newer highways like U.S. 71 were planned to be more direct and skirt the center of towns.

In 1926, the federal government enacted the highway numbering system in use today, Henry said, and private efforts evolved into today's state-maintained, federally financed system.

"I can't think of anything that didn't have a major impact, good or bad, from the arrival of the automobile," Henry said. "It just transformed the look of the country."

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