

A Historical Note

In Lake County the only interstate route is I-94, the Tri State Tollway, which was actually constructed in the pre-Interstate era pursuant to 1953 state legislation which created the Illinois State Toll Highway Commission.

Driving took a major turn with Interstate Highways

This year marks the 50th anniversary of America's Interstate Highway System begun in 1956 when then President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. An ambitious undertaking, the interstate highway system transformed how America commuted and migrated. Nowhere in the world is there a transportation system like it.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 launched the construction of highways with wide 12-foot lanes designed to better accommodate a larger number of faster vehicles. Inherent in the interstate highway system was the fact that there would be no intersections, no traffic signals and no railroad crossings. Also designed into the interstate system was the ability to avoid clogged two- and four-lane thoroughfares.

Created at the same time was the Highway Trust Fund which would fund the highway system. Revenues would be collected from taxes on automotive fuel and other vehicle fees and held in trust to be returned to the states to build highway projects.

At the forefront supporting the legislation of the new highway system was, of course, the American Automobile Association (AAA). The AAA was very much in favor of bringing America's "outmoded" highway system up-to-date, and created the "Program for Better Highways," calling for a 15-year, three-phase pay-as-you-go building program. The program AAA proposed was to be financed by moderate, graduated increases in federal automotive taxes. Ninety percent of construction and maintenance of the project

would be paid for by the federal government, and the states would provide a 50-50 split with the government to fund other projects.

Named one of the Seven Wonders of the U.S. in 1994, the Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways was honored by the American Society of Civil Engineers. Thirty-four billion dollars was dedicated to the making of the highway in 1956, yet in 2006 terms, it's merely a year's worth of improvements.

Some of the most infamous drives in and around the U.S. interstate system include the following, offering scenic drives, interesting tourist sights and good eating:

- Route 66 in New Mexico
- I-93 through New Hampshire
- Alaska 1 out of Anchorage
- Interstate 90 in South Dakota
- Interstate 10 in Louisiana

An endless source of trivia, the interstate highway system has a lot worth knowing about, for instance: Texas has the most interstate mileage (3,233.45 miles); New York is the only state that has not claimed to have the first section of the interstate highway system; the highest elevation on an interstate route is on I-70 at the Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel, Clear Creek/Summit counties, Colorado. It is 11,012 feet on the east side and 11,158 on the west side. And, the lowest elevation is El Centro, California, 52 feet below sea level.

North and south routes are assigned odd numbers and east-west routes are given even numbers. Lowest numbered north-south routes

begin in the west and lowest numbered east-west routes are in the south.

Juneau, Alaska, Dover, Del., Jefferson City, Mo., Carson City, Nev., and Pierre, S.D. are the only five capitals not directly served by the interstate system. New York has the most interstate routes (29 routes totaling 1,674.73 miles).

The ability to drive across the United States has been a boon to tourism. Many a traveler has enjoyed all that each state in our country has to offer, from amusement parks to the national parks. However, because of today's congestion and increased traffic the highway's infrastructure is in need of major repairs. It's estimated that by 2020 port-to-highway travel will increase by 20 percent.

As seen here in Illinois, such ideas as electronic tolling or I-Pass are beginning to take shape in an effort to fund the aging highway system.

The I-Pass concept helps reduce congestion at toll booths and adds extra lanes to accommodate more vehicles. Most recently, other countries have put in bids to buy the tollroads (re: Indiana) making it possible to complete large projects.

So this summer when you're driving across various interstate roads, covering some of the more than 46,000 miles of highway, try and imagine what it must have been like before 1956.

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