



The Lincoln Highway

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Originally spanning 13 states, the Lincoln Highway was a patchwork of connecting roads 3,389 miles long. It reduced coast-to-coast road trips from at least two months to 20-30 days, depending on weather.



Carl G. Fisher (right), an automotive entrepreneur, is widely credited with the idea of a transcontinental highway. With other automotive industrialists, he created the Lincoln Highway Association (LHA) in 1913, its mission being to establish "a continuous improved highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, open to lawful traffic of all description without toll charges." Wyomingite E.L. Emery, however, claimed to have originated the concept in about 1908 and presented it at a national Good Roads meeting in Cincinnati in the summer of 1912, which was attended by Carl Fisher.



Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection

Evanston native Payson W. Spaulding (left) was the first car owner in Evanston and one of the first people to cross the country by automobile in 1908, prior to the Lincoln Highway dream. In 1913 Spaulding became the LHA's State Consul for Wyoming, assisting early transcontinental motorists as they ventured across Wyoming.



Uinta County Museum



Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library

The abandoned fort filled their imaginations with encounters among trappers, emigrants, and American Indians and soon became a tourist destination as well as a state historic site.

The arrival of motorists to Fort Bridger triggered the development of tourist services, including new types of business establishments. Roadside diners, filling stations, mechanics' garages, curio shops, convenience stores, and motels soon materialized on Main Street, stimulating the local economy while reviving worn-out travelers and their sputtering automobiles.

In addition to roadside cafes, which proliferated along the new highway, curio shops also appeared, and the convenience store was born. This establishment provided one-stop shopping for tourists seeking automotive, camping, and other provisions recommended by A Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway. For example, Casto's Place (above) in Fort Bridger sold tins of food for motorists to take with them for camping or picnicking at their convenience.

While hotels existed in large cities and towns along the Lincoln Highway—even in Fort Bridger—long stretches of roadway and small towns were not equipped to lodge the influx of tourists that the road brought. Many towns set aside campsites for tourists, all of whom traveled with tents and camping gear. Soon "tourist camps" developed, which provided campsites or shelters for wayfarers. These led to the concept of a "motel," which originated in 1925 as a roadside inn, blending the words "motor" and "hotel." The Black and Orange Garage Camp Cabins (below) were Fort Bridger's first motel. A \$1 fee provided a cabin with bed, washstand, electric lights, carport, and communal outhouse.



Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library

Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library

Back on the Map

The Lincoln Highway brought tourists and new businesses to Fort Bridger.

Fort Bridger was born as a trading post for travelers. Though founded by fur trappers, it was built to serve the growing tide of emigrants moving west along the Emigrant Trail. When the fort closed in 1890, the surrounding town's importance waned until the arrival of the Lincoln Highway brought long-distance motorists hungry for food and stories of the frontier West.



Lincoln Highway Digital Image Collection, University of Michigan Library

Robinson's Garage (below) was Fort Bridger's first automotive repair shop. Automobile-related businesses, such as gas and service stations, auto parts stores, and towing, provided essential support for motorists in trouble. Descendants of these businesses still operate here.



Woming State Archives



In 1913 the Lincoln Highway enabled American motorists to drive coast-to-coast from New York City to San Francisco.



The route was mostly unpaved and frequently immobilized motorists with mud, broken axles, and flat tires.

As a supporter of the national Good Roads Movement, the LHA was instrumental in shifting responsibility of interstate road construction and maintenance from the private sector to the federal government. This influence is seen in the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act (1916) and the Federal Aid Highway Act (1921). By 1928, the federal government assumed control of highway construction and the national road system.

Following World War I in 1919, the LHA guided a U.S. Army convoy cross-country on the Lincoln Highway. Existing infrastructure proved inadequate to support the heavy truck traffic, thus demonstrating the need to invest in roads and bridges for the purpose of national defense. A young Lt. Colonel named Eisenhower (below) rode along and remembered the trip as "difficult, tiring, and fun." Thirty-seven years later, President Eisenhower enthusiastically signed the National Defense and Interstate Highway Act (1956), which provided the interstate road system we travel today.



Eisenhower Presidential Library

Following Precedents

Driving across Uinta County, you can experience the routes and views of travelers a century ago. Crossing Uinta County and southwestern Wyoming, the Lincoln Highway could be considered a realignment of the 19th-century Overland and Emigrant trails, whose paths it followed. Since its original development in 1913, the Lincoln Highway itself has been realigned many times to eliminate dangerous curves, shorten distances, allow higher speeds and increased truck traffic, and add lanes in places that could not accommodate road widening. Nevertheless, much of the original route and early realignments are still drivable, especially through Uinta County, and the landscape is little changed from its early 20th century prospect.



With the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, federal funds for the first time became available to states for road building and improvement. To receive federal funding, a state was required to create a highway commission and employ professional engineers to carry out federal aid projects. In 1917 the Wyoming State Highway Department (later becoming WYDOT) was established and focused efforts on improving the Lincoln Highway.



In the highway department's second year, State Engineer Z.E. Sevison remarked in his biennial report, "for many years, Wyoming's roads must largely be earth and gravel, or shale roads," since the same legislature that created the department failed to appropriate any funding, and federal funds would only be available on a matching basis. Acknowledging that the department was still young, Sevison concluded, "the experience gained by the department will be invaluable in pointing the way for legislation which will put all future work upon a workable business basis." Indeed, state bond issues passed in 1919 and 1921 provided the necessary matching funds, allowing significant road building to begin in Wyoming in 1922.

From 1917 through the 1920s, state road building in Wyoming consisted mostly of grading, experimenting with oil and gravel surfacing, and providing basic drainage. Though primitive by today's standards, this work greatly improved the one-lane "washboard" roads that had prevailed.

The onslaught of the Great Depression in 1929 coincided with the federal government's initiation of a national highway system and the institution of numbered highways. It may not be a coincidence, therefore, that road construction featured prominently among federally sponsored public works projects initiated at this time. Many of Wyoming's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps undertook road projects, including major realignments of U.S. 30 (formerly the Lincoln Highway) across southern Wyoming.

While Depression-era road construction stopped during World War II, the postwar years gave birth to fervent road building and modern highway standards, such as increased safety norms, improved construction materials and methods, and heavier earth-moving equipment able to build stronger roads. During the 1960s, Interstate 80 realigned and replaced much of U.S. 30 across southern Wyoming, which was often incorporated as an access road for the interstate or renamed Business 80 where it runs through towns, as seen throughout Uinta County.

