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Feeling the Drive: The International Meridian Highway, Regional Boosters, and the Redefinition of Space, 1911-1930

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FEELING THE DRIVE:
THE INTERNATIONAL MERIDIAN HIGHWAY, REGIONAL BOOSTERS,
AND THE REDEFINITION OF SPACE, 1911–1930

by

Amanda N. Johnson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

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ABSTRACT

Feeling the Drive:
The International Meridian Highway, Regional Boosters,
and the Redefinition of Space, 1911–1930

by

Amanda N. Johnson, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2014

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Department: History

This thesis explores the origins of the International Meridian Highway, now U.S. Highway 81, from its naissance in 1911 until the late 1920s. In these two decades, regional boosters in the middle of the United States joined a national movement, the Good Roads Movement, to promote new, democratic understandings of space and geography. The boosters of the International Meridian Highway promoted their road as a “Main Street of North America,” centering the focus of both movement and activity through the middle of the United States. While these boosters were successful in developing and promoting their highway, ultimately they became victims of their own success. As the fervor for highways spread, the United States government took control of road development and the International Meridian Highway Association faded into
obscurity. However, their actions as boosters still mark a significant movement in self-promotion of middle America.

(101 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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Dedicated to Erika Doss,

who said, “Have you thought about roads?”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Amanda N. Johnson
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

You have heard of the road that was made by a calf,
So twisted that one mile made three and a half;
And those that traversed it felt unrighteous wrath,
But kept right along in that same crooked path...

Now that road would do for the wagon and cart,
But 'twas not good enough for the surrey so smart.
But the years dragged along ere there was a start
To make this a highway of beauty and art.1

In the early 1910s, road construction boomed in the United States. Automobile ownership increased and advances in construction techniques made roads more cost effective and long lasting. As a result, people throughout the United States clamored for good roads. In 1913, one road especially rose to prominence as “[t]he greatest highway now being laid out”—the Meridian Highway.2 Initially stretching from Winnipeg, Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, with plans to extend to Mexico City, the Meridian Highway was the first international north-south transcontinental highway in the United States.

The International Meridian Highway Association arose from a larger, national movement for good roads. The Good Roads Movement began in the late 1870s, originally led by bicycle enthusiasts appalled at the poor state of roads outside of U.S.

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1 “The Meridian Road,” folder 4, series 1, Dr. Francis A. Long Papers, RG2171, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter Long Papers).
2 “Meridian Road Will Be a Big Feeder for the Lincoln Highway,” Omaha Bee, 16 December 1913. The Meridian Highway has gone through several name iterations—The Meridian Road, the Winnipeg to Gulf Road, the International Meridian Highway, and US 81. For simplicity, I will refer to it as the Meridian Highway throughout this thesis.
cities. These early bicyclists formed the Good Roads Association and the League of American Wheelmen, the two most significant organizations that would encourage other groups to spread the good roads gospel. Despite the bicycle-oriented development of these groups, soon their message of road improvement spread to automobile enthusiasts and spread west. Early advocates promoted education about road building and emphasized that building roads would enable rural populations to obtain social and economic benefits; once free of the limited range of railroad tracks, rural populations could experience improved community cohesion and increased market options.

The first auto-oriented members of these new organizations were wealthy automobile enthusiasts and local boosters. By the 1920s, every state had its own Good Roads Association. Local boosters advocated for highways throughout the country, and the men who joined these organizations became the primary advocates for road development in the United States. Originating in Kansas, the Meridian Highway soon extended from Winnipeg, Canada to Laredo, Texas with plans to extend into Mexico City. Before the route to Mexico City even existed in a finished form, the Meridian Highway became U.S. 81, and its boosters hoped to extend its influence even further south, aiming to be the primary route from Canada to Argentina. Who were the people who encouraged the formation of the Meridian Highway? What impetus was there for the

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popularity of good roads? And what happened to make this highway—once optimistically heralded as the “greatest highway”—fade into relative obscurity?

Regional boosterism was at its height in the United States in the 1920s. Not all boosters shared the same goals or philosophies about development. In his study of parkway development in the interwar years, Matthew Dalbey describes the division that existed in booster ideology as a division between regionalists and metropolitanists. Regionalists envisioned idealistic futures and sought to achieve those through radical regional planning. Metropolitanists wanted to expand the opportunities of their location through regional planning as well; however, they took a more reserved approach, employing tools available to them and working within the limitations of existing structures and markets instead of actively seeking to revolutionize these structures. Dalbey correctly identifies historical divides in the role of a regional planner. However, the divide between metropolitanists and regionalists has far more gray area than Dalbey allows. Metropolitanists took a more practical approach to their regional planning, but boosters with metropolitanist leanings were not satisfied with the status quo. The act of regional planning itself—especially when done by an unpaid booster—revolutionizes preconceived ideas about space and its uses.

The unaffiliated boosters of the Meridian Highway fought for road development that would change perceptions of the middle of the United States. The development of an automobile culture and the roads that accompanied it signified a shift in the conception of geography in the United States. Following the Civil War, railroads became the de facto

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7 Dalbey, *Regional Visionaries*. 
mode of transportation. However, railroads followed strict timelines, steel tracks, and inconvenient pricing structures. The track layout itself limited the movement of people. Instead of easy connections between point A and point B, travelers needed to connect through hubs. The hub-and-spoke structure of the railway spread into the rural community, limiting communication between rural towns. 8

The introduction of automotive technology transformed the geography of the United States—both physically and experientially. In contrast to hub-and-spoke model of the rail, the good roads movement improved roads between communities—not just roads to the nearest railroad station. This created a web-like structure, linking people together. With this change, rural people could shed their dependence on the railroads. The convenience of travel without strict timetables made regional trips more common and more convenient. In Peirce F. Lewis’s study of landscape, he presents the following axiom: “People will not change th[e] landscape unless they are under very heavy pressure to do so.” 9 Following these words, the impetus for a significant landscape revision like that of national highway development must have come from extremely heavy pressure.

While businesses haphazardly followed developing railroad lines, the same was not true for early roads. Good Roads activists, including businesspeople, bicyclists and

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automobile enthusiasts, demanded better roads that would fit their needs rather than the whims of a corporation. In other words, these activists wanted roads that emerged from democratic processes. People throughout the country joined the good roads movement and various highway associations, determined to speak for their needs rather than submit to the whims of existing transportation standards.

Little has been written about the creation of roads in this period. Most transportation historians focus on the development of railroads or pioneer trails. What little has been written on roads centers around a basic debate: Did roads develop because of the needs of increasing automotive ownership? Or did the presence of drivable roads create a situation ripe for the consumption and use of automobiles? The argument that credits automobile owners as the agent of change limits the cast of historical actors to wealthy early car owners, city dwellers, pleasure seekers, and capitalists. Moreover, in this version of the chicken-egg debate, upper class urbanites pursuing leisure activities create the demand for roads. City dwellers wanted better rural roads for their cross-country auto tourism and for their Sunday country picnics. Capitalists invested in car companies and promoted the development of a car culture. Even author Theodore Dreiser promoted the idea that human nature drove the spike in automobile popularity.

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11 Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910–1945* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979); David Blanke *Hell on Wheels: The Promise and Peril of America’s Car Culture, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007); and John T. Bauer, “The Gliddenites are Coming!: Nebraska and the 1919 Glidden Tour,” *Nebraska History* 93 (Fall 2012): 110–125. Blanke particularly advocates for the perspective that wealthy car owners drove road development, believing that this road development was actually detrimental to the United States due to unsafe driving habits.
“Man must naturally prefer choice. Only the dull can love sameness.” To Dreiser, and the immense number of automotive pleasure seekers, driving cars opened opportunities and variety.

The other side of the debate—that roads predated cars—over-emphasizes both the slow pace of automobile adoption in rural areas and the speed of road development. Early roads developed slowly for a variety of reasons. First, after the Civil War, the U.S. government deemphasized road building and focused instead on developing railroad networks, since trains seemed likely to dominate future transportation. Second, automotive technology surpassed road technology. In the beginning of the twentieth century, road technology had not developed dramatically since the Middle Ages. These roads could not withstand the weight and frequency of auto traffic.  

Early urban road advocates promoted, popularized, and normalized the automobile. By doing so, they promoted the widespread adoption of this transportation technology. More significantly, the rural free delivery postal system encouraged the quick development of many rural roads, especially roads that otherwise would have struggled to receive government funds to aid their completion. By 1912, this system utilized 1.2 million miles of road to deliver mail by car. Though many of those were dirt, they developed due to the rural free postal delivery act. Another important component to the rising popularity of the Good Roads Movement was the development of certain

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13 Blanke *Hell on Wheels*.
14 Ibid., 58 and Wayne E. Fuller, “Good Roads and Rural Free Delivery of Mail,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42 (June 1955): 67–83. The origin of Rural Free Delivery marked a significant change in federal funding for “good roads.”
types of vehicles. Henry Ford’s Model T possessed progressive developments, such as a higher carriage and interchangeable parts that aided its use as a popular vehicle over difficult terrain.\textsuperscript{15}

The automobile was not simply a luxury good. Rural adopters saw automobiles as potential laborsaving devices. Michael L. Berger argues in \textit{The Devil Wagon in God’s Country} that while rural people demonstrated initial ambivalence to the automobile, they slowly adapted and adopted the car. Initially, rural residents believed that an automobile was an unnecessary luxury, more likely to spook horses and get stuck in mud than be helpful. Yet eventually car technology developed, especially with the introduction of the Model T, that enabled the automobile to be more useful for rural residents. Beyond labor-saving possibility on farms, roads opened paths to markets and to neighbors who might otherwise have been largely inaccessible. Thus, rural residents became primary proponents of the good roads movement.\textsuperscript{16}

The automobile went through many transformations before becoming the vehicle familiar to us today.\textsuperscript{17} And with these many transformations in automobile, there were changes in support for the car and the roads it would need from various groups. Despite initial support—including reduced fares for “Good Roads Trains” which traveled the country to build object-lesson roads and demonstrate the need for good roads—the railroad industry eventually fought the spreading influence of the car, knowing that it

\textsuperscript{16} Berger, \textit{The Devil Wagon in God’s Country}, 49.
would alter the status quo for transportation.\textsuperscript{18} With the popularization of the automobile, the rural need for road improvement increased. However, modern highway development had far to go, and road engineers attempted to find the best strategy for incorporating the diversity of climates and soils through North America which made it difficult to produce one, coherent method for road building.\textsuperscript{19} In the chicken-egg debate, good roads and good automobiles developed concurrently. New technologies emerged for both, spurring development of the other. However, roads and cars did not spur these changes themselves. People—especially highway associations in rural areas—encouraged the development of good roads that could sustain the pressure of good cars.

Good Roads activists advocated building, improving, and maintaining “Good Roads.” By creating the best road with the best technology, these boosters could encourage travelers who would naturally have to stop at their cities for lunch, buy gasoline, or shop for goods at the hardware store. Major competition—both between the roads and for public attention—arose between the boosters of these privately marketed highways. Good Roads boosters came from all occupations. Some were lawyers and doctors. Others were mechanics and car enthusiasts. They shared a desire to promote good roads for rural consumption and to potentially increase traffic to their hometowns—raising the town’s profile and aiding its economic development.\textsuperscript{20}

The rural element of good roads boosters was prominent in the West. In the Great Plains especially, boosters developed campaigns that would raise the profile of their

\textsuperscript{18} Michael L. Berger, \textit{The Devil Wagon in God’s Country} and Goddard, \textit{Getting There}, 32.
\textsuperscript{20} Francis A. Long to John C. Nicholson, 23 September 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
region nationally and address the needs of their citizens for better roads. In 1911, John C. Nicholson, a lawyer from Salina, Kansas, created the International Meridian Highway Association, and struggled with competing regional business interests, internal divisions and other developers until the early-1930s. The Meridian Highway became U.S. Highway 81 in 1926. From its origin in 1911 until its dissolution, the Meridian Highway Association attempted to introduce a more democratic understanding of transportation—one that followed the needs of the people. In building roads, highway associations changed the physical and experienced landscape.

In the first chapter, I discuss the evolution of roads in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The grassroots nature of the Good Roads movement involved a cross-section of the American public and threatened the centralized railroad network, thus also threatening the centralized authority of the railroad. By building roads, activists reoriented geography—demanding a spatial democracy. The citizens of the United States demanded roads and actively participated in building them for a common good. In these ways, the roads developed from the needs of people, in contrast to railroads that emerged because of plans made by distant, profit-driven overlords.

The nature of railroad tracks and stations developed a hub-and-spoke geography of movement. Travelers were reliant on the location of stations, often making several connections, following timetables created at the whim of railroad companies.

Automobiles and roads allowed for freedom in travel. Roads increased direct

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21 Dr. Francis A. Long Papers, RG2171, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
22 While the “robber baron” nature of railroad magnates has been a predominant idea for a while, Richard White’s book *Railroaded* presents further justification for their reputations as money-hungry moguls, recklessly manipulating the system to build poorly planned and inferior railroads. White, *Railroaded.*
communication between neighbors. The freedom of roads changed both the physical landscape and perceptions of movement and travel from the hub-and-spoke geography to a more accessible, web-based movement structure with increased pathways between major places.

The second chapter expands how the Good Roads movement attempted to shift America’s geographical historical narrative. The Meridian Highway ran from north to south. Dominant ideas about movement in the United States, as espoused by Frederick Jackson Turner, relied on the settler narrative that emphasized movement west. Turner delivered his Frontier Thesis in Chicago in 1893. At the same time, in the same place, the National League of American Wheelmen was meeting in their own attempt to determine American character related to movement. The promoters of the Meridian Highway agreed with the significance of movement as an American characteristic, but they attempted to center this movement through the middle of the country—not east to west.

In order to guarantee the development of a north-south primary road structure, the promoters emphasized the region’s connections with Canada and Mexico. The promoters attempted to redefine their route as the “Main Street” of North America and made the Meridian Highway a significant international path. However, instability in Mexico prevented their progress in developing their international road south of the United States. Still, they used “Main Street” to realign ideas of movement in the United States from east-west to north-south. Furthermore, the narratives they used in their promotional materials emphasized the shortness of physical distances. With continual advances in
automotive technology, travelers reached distant destinations more quickly and with less difficulty—in a sense, shortening geographic distance.

In the third chapter, I trace the development of government control of road building. Responding to the efforts of local boosters, citizens throughout the United States demanded that the federal government get involved in road building and maintenance. However, these local promoters did not seem to realize how much control they would lose. Whoever had the money also had the power. Highway associations lobbied Congress, state legislators, and municipal authorities to encourage them to adopt the boosters’ geographical vision. But the dominant east-west nationalist narrative about geography and movement in the United States prevailed.

The Meridian Highway might have transformed the region’s image as the “flyover states” to something more dynamic and historically significant had boosters been successful. According to cultural geographer James R. Shortridge, “The flyover image is almost entirely the creation of outsiders. Whether or not local residents agree is a question rarely asked. . . . Plains people, with their small populations, have never had much control over how others have seen them. The possibilities for distortion, misunderstanding, and general mythmaking are enormous.”23 However, the Meridian Highway shows that this lack of control over the perception of the middle of the United States is not due to lack of effort. The Meridian Highway Association used multiple, inventive solutions to present their highway and the cities through which it crossed as

central and significant to North America. By doing so, they attempted to put the voices of Midwestern, rural residents at the center of a national narrative.

Overall, the Meridian Highway Association reflects a larger trend. The evolution of roads and decline of railroads created an opportunity for people in rural areas, especially in the middle of the country, to reinvent the narrative of movement and space in the United States. From the bicycle roots of the Good Roads Movement in the 1890s until World War II, people pushed for their own understanding of their location to become dominant. However, these efforts never became prevalent nor were they cohesive enough to control their narrative once they lost dominant control of the road.
Figure 1. The Meridian Highway Association placed strips—long, thin maps such as this one—in gas stations along their route. The back listed mileage between each town, 1927. Item no. 1659, John Charles Nicholson, 1862–1942, Kansas State Historical Society.
CHAPTER 2
GOOD ROADS ON THE SIXTH PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN:
RECONCEPTUALIZING DISTANCE WITH 1920S HIGHWAY BOOSTERISM

This road, at the start, was not straight and long,
No one would have thot to sing it a song.
It was short—it was bumpy and you rattled along
O'er its bumps and its ditches which, of course, was all wrong.24

The phrase “Main Street” evokes idyllic images of small town life—Fourth of July parades, neighborly conversations, and mom-and-pop stores. “Main Street” means the center of civic activities, personal communication, and commerce. This rhetoric became popular for highway associations of the 1920s, most familiarly with the Lincoln Highway, which declared itself “The Main Street of America.” Yet, at the same time, another highway was asserting an even bigger claim on that title. The International Meridian Highway advertised itself as “The Main Street of North America.” Claiming more than just the country, the Meridian Highway set its sights on the entire continent.

Running from Winnipeg, Canada to Mexico City, Mexico and roughly following the Sixth Principal Meridian, the International Meridian Highway was the first north-south transnational automotive route through the United States. The boosters of the Meridian Highway Association emphasized the idea of a main street through the United States, promoting the road as a technologically advanced, and thus, convenient, route that would aid communication and commerce through the country. In the creation of the road and the promotion of it, they reconceptualized ideas of geography in North America.

John C. Nicholson initiated the Meridian Highway on 1 June 1911 in Newton, Kansas. Calling together a meeting of Good Roads Association and Commercial Club members throughout the state of Kansas, Nicholson recommended a north-south road through Kansas. The constitution calling for this road to be built also included drafting of a potential sign, confirmation of a potential route, and determination of a name: The Meridian Road. The meeting concluded with a final instruction: to promote the road south to the Gulf of Mexico and north to Canada—in other words, to create an international, north-south highway through the United States.

Nicholson and his Kansan colleagues solicited other good roads organizers in the states along this route—North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas. The men who joined the Meridian Highway Association were business and tradesmen—shop owners, mechanics, lawyers, doctors. The Meridian Road connected with the Chisholm Trail autoroute, so named because it followed the legendary cattle trail from Kansas to Red River, which marks the border between Oklahoma and Texas. From there, the Meridian Road connected with the descriptively named Red River to Gulf road. By the end of July, Nicholson and his fellow boosters formed the southern portion of the Meridian Road, though much of the road itself was relatively impassable for automobiles. In an auto tour in September and October, Nicholson and his colleagues developed the autoroute and the Meridian Highway divisions for Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. By November, only four short months after the initial meeting

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25 The Meridian Highway has several variations on its name—from the Meridian Road to the International Meridian Highway. “Meridian Highway History,” *Texas Oil News*, [1918?], folder 5, series 1, Long Papers.

26 Ibid. and Nebraska Department of Roads, *Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey: Historic Highways in Nebraska* (August 2002), 73 (hereafter *Historic Highways*).
in Kansas, the Canada Division organized in Winnipeg, making the Meridian Road the first organized international automotive road through the United States.\textsuperscript{27}

On 18 January 1912, the state divisions gathered together, changing their name to the International Meridian Road Association in order to reflect the extensive nature of the burgeoning highway and adopting a charter that laid out their goals:

The Meridian Highway shall be well graded, well drained Highway with permanent bridges, substantial culverts and kept in a condition to facilitate travel, and it shall be the aim and objective of the Association to secure the construction and maintenance of a hard surfaced road as soon as conditions will warrant the same and is justified.\textsuperscript{28}

The state organizations were responsible for maintenance of roads and signposts. The international organization was in charge of advertising and tours of the road, as well as settling disputes between states. A two-sided emphasis emerged: constructing modern, good roads and promoting those roads.

In 1919, the Meridian Road became the “Meridian Highway.” The roads continued to be improved, and in 1924, a bridge connecting South Dakota to Nebraska was completed. The Yankton Bridge, or the Meridian Bridge, was the last step in making the road entirely drivable, removing the inconvenience of a seasonal ferry across the Missouri River.\textsuperscript{29} Inclement weather could still hinder motorists along unpaved or ungraveled stretches of road, but the opening of the Meridian Bridge signified a major

\textsuperscript{27} Historic Highways, 73.
\textsuperscript{28} Meridian Highway Constitution and By-laws, Long Papers.
\textsuperscript{29} Referring to the road as entirely drivable means that, in decent weather conditions, an experienced motorist could make the drive from Winnipeg to Laredo, Texas. Very few sections of the Meridian Highway were paved, nor were they hard-surfaced until the end of 1928. This is in keeping with the majority of highways forming at the same time throughout the United States. Additionally, since developing a highway was a continual process, pinpointing specific completion dates for early highways becomes difficult. Most highway associations subverted this by promoting their road as if it were already completed, even if significant portions of it were impassable. Frederic L. Paxson, “The Highway Movement, 1916–1935,” American Historical Review 51, no. 2 (1946).
milestone in highway achievement, a turning point in the accessibility of the Meridian Road.

In 1921, the Meridian Highway Association cemented its international standing by touring Mexico. The booster tour included stops at Mexican cities and meetings with officials of the Mexican government. The tour, funded by the Mexican government, marked the official inclusion of Mexico on the Meridian Highway maps and opened a new avenue for marketing the road. Still, the quality of roads in Mexico did not improve as quickly as in the United States and Canada, making the route south of Texas difficult to travel for many years.

Road construction for the Meridian Highway did not begin from scratch. Highways connected existing routes that had emerged over time, as people needed them. The Meridian Highway unified these connections under one name. With the support of an association such as the Meridian Highway, roads had a better chance of receiving funds—both from local fundraising and state and national funds—and attention necessary for improvement and completion.

Highway associations throughout the United States stymied highway commissions who found that they were unable to construct the roads that they deemed most important because independent associations comprised of prominent citizens would demand funding from the state legislature for their own routes. A member of the state highway commission in Utah, reflecting on this situation in that state, said, “Salt Lake City was perhaps blessed, or should I say cursed, with more highway associations than

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30 “Reflections on trip to Mexico,” folder 1, series 5, Long Papers.
any other city in America.” Members of highway commissions across the United States echoed this Utahn’s opinions on the highway associations emerging throughout the country. While highway associations may not have been popular with state and national highway commissions, they still represented a democratic, grassroots movement. The organizers may have been prominent men and frequently the routes they organized directed traffic through choice towns, but the call for rural good roads like the Meridian Highway emerged from the needs of rural residents. In a speech to businessmen in Columbus, Nebraska, Nicholson said that the route of the Meridian Road followed “the main traveled roads leading to the county seat, and the principal towns located close to the line.” Nicholson emphasized the importance of the Meridian Highway not as a scenic route—unlike boosters on either coast who emphasized scenic tourism—or the one with the most advanced road technology. Instead, he focused on the logical passage of the road through necessary cities, sometimes inciting conflict. Towns near the Meridian Highway desired a place on that map; at least twice, the Meridian Highway Association modified their route, caving in to citizen demands.

In an era when many roads were following the tracks of existing railroads, people moved east to west in droves. In popular understanding, the entire direction of movement in the United States became east-west. The Meridian Highway reoriented that movement, creating a road that ran north-south. Rural residents drove this change. Rural roads were particularly horrible. These roads were nearly impassible in the winter and spring, especially due to mud. Ungraded, the roads presented a dangerously bumpy ride on their

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31 Virginia Rishel, *Wheels to Adventure: Bill Rishel’s Western Routes* (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1983), 89–90.  
32 Nicholson, quoted in the *Columbus (NE) Telegraph*, September 1911, in folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
best days, but rural denizens still needed these roads in order to complete their work. In the 1920s, especially, the automobile had swept through rural America and the advances in technology benefited farmers and ranchers in the Great Plains.

Additionally, the Meridian Highway Association promoted the road to people who might be unaware of it. After successfully unifying both the route and the organizers along it, the international organization took over non-local promotion both by posting signs along the highway and through a series of promotional campaigns as simple as placing Meridian Highway maps in gas stations. The official signs adopted by the Meridian Highway were posts with bands of red and white. Red and white banded poles designated turns, whereas red posts marked regular road markers. All posts had the letters “MR” (and later, “MH”) painted on them. Early on, the state divisions were responsible for additional signage. In Nebraska, for example, this sign was white with blue lettering, the words “Meridian Road” and an outline of Nebraska. The discrepancy in signage had the potential to be confusing for motorists and contributed to the federal numbering of significant national highways in 1926, when the Meridian Highway became U.S. 81.

Roads versus the Railroads: Democratic Road Building

The Meridian Highway Association emerged from a good roads tradition that began in the late 1870s. The first activist group within this movement was the League of American Wheelmen. At the time, it was primarily a movement for bicycle enthusiasts who hoped to improve the state of rural roads. Their motto reflected this goal: “lifting our

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33 Historic Highways, 75.
34 Ibid., 80.
people out of the mud.”35 The movement spread west and gained even more traction with the introduction of the affordable automobile.36

Michael Berger argues convincingly that rural residents were slow to adopt the car—or “the devil wagon.” While at first the rural resident may have been wary of the automobile, they eventually saw its practicality, especially as new technology made it increasingly versatile.37 Automobiles were stronger and faster than horses or carts. Farmers could modify newer cars themselves to perform a variety of tasks on the farm. In the center of the country, especially, there was a correlation between the rise in automotive purchases and the decline of land purchases in the 1920s. Between 1920 and 1925 in Nebraska, the average farm acreage decreased from 339.4 to 329 acres, but registered vehicles increased from 205,000 to 301,716.38 Motor vehicle registration itself jumped from 1,087 in 1906 to 419,198 in 1929.39 In the midst of a dust bowl, people who otherwise might have expanded their farms or ranches were using their savings—or even selling acres of their family farms—to buy cars instead. Car ownership had officially arrived—and with it, the need for better roads.

Farmers and ranchers realized that cars could be useful for business. In 1920, the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce conducted a study that showed the average farmer drove 4,600 miles a year; 78% of that mileage was for business.40 Even so, many

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37 Berger, Devil Wagon.
39 Historic Highways, 12 and Berger, The Devil Wagon in God’s Country, 42.
40 Berger, Devil Wagon, 42.
farm towns had only four months per year during which the existing roads were sufficient for hauling produce or other farm products.\textsuperscript{41}

In the early 1900s, good roads were essential for rural areas. Drivable roads allowed freedom of movement for rural populations.\textsuperscript{42} Increased mobility even aided political participation throughout the Midwest. Historian Michael Lansing discusses how political groups used good roads to canvas and to bring voters to the polls in rural areas.\textsuperscript{43}

One of the major boosters for the Meridian Highway was a former surgeon who still practiced medicine in Madison, Nebraska. Many boosters joined the movement out of necessity, including Dr. Francis A. Long who needed to drive on rough rural roads to reach patients. Long focused his energy on the development of good roads in the 1920s, becoming secretary and then vice-president of the Meridian Highway Association. Long’s need for good roads inspired his involvement in the movement.

Rural citizens advocated for good roads, forcing state and federal governments to provide for road development. Karl Edward Wallace III described the process.

Far from being motivated by a desire to facilitate tourism, or escape the impersonal quality of daily life in industrialized cities, the true roots of the good roads movement were in fact agrarian in nature and motivated by much more serious socio-economic concerns . . . The fact that the Office of Road Inquiry was placed within the Department of Agriculture reveals the true roots of the good roads movement.\textsuperscript{44}

Rural residents such as Long used good roads to reach more people more quickly than they had been able to before. Phil Patton elaborated on how highways might create 

\textsuperscript{41} Goddard, \textit{Getting There}, 45.
\textsuperscript{42} Berger, \textit{The Devil Wagon in God’s Country}.
stronger social connections, “Roads are social models at least as much as buildings or parks, a sketch of how we deal with human freedom and interaction.”\textsuperscript{45} Automotive roads did not lie on top of the landscape; in the 1920s, they became a part of it. Rural roads, while being useful for work, represented connections between people, and as roads improved, these connections became stronger. Berger argues for these connections, citing increased church involvement, community dances, and more civic participation.\textsuperscript{46}

Because of the democratic nature of road development, the roads that emerged were drastically different from those that had existed before. The U.S. West developed as the railroads emerged. Railroad speed and technology expanded individual horizons by increasing the distance a person could reasonably consider traveling and correspondingly decreased experienced distance. An individual had the option to travel further, faster. Individuals reached their destinations more quickly, and those destinations seemed less distant to the speedy traveler. The speed of railroads and its east-west movement defined the way ordinary citizens conceptualized space in the West, and that conceptualization stayed stagnant until the 1920s. “[T]he people of the regions were nearly as far apart and as local in their activities as they had been when the railroad checked the covered wagon in its process of binding the regions with the roads.”\textsuperscript{47} Railroads did not follow the needs of the people. They followed the wallets of scheming industrialists. Railroads created towns from nothing as they progressed, and they left behind ghost towns. In following the frantic need to put down more iron rails, no matter that the gauges would not match

\textsuperscript{46} Berger, \textit{The Devil Wagon}.
\textsuperscript{47} Paxson, “The Highway Movement,” 237.
between lines, that the work was shoddily done, and that mismanagement was de facto, railroads left behind the people.\textsuperscript{48}

In other words, according to historian Frederic Paxson, “[i]n place of self-sufficient regionalism, lightly bound by roads, the United States became a congeries of localities, with the railroad station at the very center of every web of life.”\textsuperscript{49} The railroads shortened distance throughout the United States, making nearly every place more accessible. However, its configuration also shifted the structure of neighborhoods and communities. A hub-system emerged in which proximity to the railroad was more important than proximity to a neighboring town and its residents or potential economic exchanges in those towns—instead of only market exchanges reliant on the railroads. Because of railroad influence and monopoly over movement, roads were market-driven instead of community-driven.

Good Roads advocates sought to reclaim the ways people moved between towns in rural areas, fundamentally changing ideas about geography and distance, removing some of the influence from railroad hub cities. In a review of the history of the highway movement in 1946, Paxson argued: “the war [between road and rail] itself turn[ed] the motor vehicle into a weapon which must have a road on which to do its work.”\textsuperscript{50} This “war” had many fronts: seeking funding, especially from the government; discovering new technologies for building good roads; and preventing the railroads from reclaiming their monopoly on U.S. movement. The Meridian Highway, with its lack of majorly

\textsuperscript{48} For more on the haphazard and undemocratic nature of railroad building, see White, \textit{Railroaded}.
\textsuperscript{49} Paxson, “The Highway Movement,” 238.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 243.
significant cities, followed this trend of structuring itself away from existing routes and shifted away from major railroad hubs.

Articulating democratic sentiments, the president of the American Automobile Association (AAA) wrote in 1906, “roads are for the common use of all and not the private property of a few rich enthusiasts. . . . The doctrine that streets are for the public is part of our common law and is so old that we may safely hazard a guess that it is coeval with the existence of highways themselves.” For the AAA, the modern, automotive road took back the supposed democratic nature of earlier roads. Even the word “highway” emphasized the public nature of roads, its etymology reflecting on major thoroughfares in England that were under the protection of the king for use by all. Roads in the United States “assert democracy, the power of the people, the service of the public.” Despite the modern technology of automobiles and advancing road building, public roads harkened back to their idealized history—as pathways for trade and communication between people. According to historian David Blanke, “The roadway is a unique physical place, a sort of modern meeting hall where the public tests, refines, and validates its own rules and assumptions.” The railroad was private, but the highway was public.

Beyond the actual structure of the railroad and the way it separated communities, railroad travel lacked the freedom that would come with automotive tourism. Prior to the

52 Patton, *Open Road*, 19.
53 Ibid., 6.
introduction of the car, travelers relied on train schedules. Passengers were not the priority cargo for most railroads, and travelers felt that keenly.54

Early automobile tourism narratives are full of references to the freedom of the road. No longer were travelers shackled to strict timetables that forced them to catch a train at one a.m. They could begin or interrupt their journey whenever they wanted. Travelers were no longer restricted to ten minutes for lunch at a depot lunch counter before barely catching their next connection, and subjected to delays at the whim of the railroads.55 With this increased freedom of movement, tourists actually felt that distances were shorter.

The freedom tourists felt is clear in tourist narratives. Edith Wharton, for example, wrote about the liberty of the road in A Motor-Flight Through France. “Freeing us from the compulsions and contacts of the railways, the bondage to fixed hours and the beaten track, the approach to each town through the area of desolation and ugliness created by the railway itself, it [the automobile] has given us back the wonder, the adventure and the novelty of our posting grandparents.”56 As Warren James Belasco covers in Americans on the Road, the rise of auto-camping especially was an experience for U.S. citizens that furthered this sense of freedom from timetables and railways.

Some roads followed existing railroads, but this did not mean those paths were the most logical. The Lincoln Highway, currently U.S. 30 from New York to San Francisco, cut across Nebraska and intersected the Meridian Highway at Columbus, Nebraska. The

54 White, Railroaded and Belasco, Americans on the Road.
55 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 20–22.
Lincoln Highway claims to be the first transnational highway, this assertion is dubious at best. The Lincoln Highway was considered complete as soon as plans to organize the route were finished—even though the road at that time was frequently not passable. In August 1913, the Lincoln Highway planners decided its route and organized meetings in movie houses and the occasional church, declaring the road a completed endeavor. One of the major promotional strategies of the Lincoln Highway was that it would “be talked about as though it were built.”

With a sad dearth of maps demonstrating ideal places for road building, the Lincoln Highway used railroad timetables and mileages in order to plot its route. The highway widely regarded as the first transnational highway neither was the first transnational highway nor was it an organic evolution from the needs of local people. It was an inorganic structure even though it emerged from the grassroots organization of the Good Roads Movement. Moreover, The Lincoln Highway Association conceptualized their highway and put their plan into action two years after the same process had begun for the Meridian Highway.

Whereas the Lincoln Highway emerged from a publicity stunt that was admittedly successful, the Meridian Highway emerged from the needs of rural people. While Paxson argues that, “railroads had generally paralleled the most obvious natural highway routes,” the Meridian Highway followed a north-south trajectory that did not seem to follow any

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57 The Meridian Highway was completely organized from Winnipeg, Canada to Laredo, Texas by January of 1912, superseding the Lincoln Highway as a transnational highway. However, the Lincoln Highway’s promotional strategies and the bias for east-west routes has helped the Lincoln Highway maintain their dubious claim as the first transnational highway. Although the Lincoln Highway attempted full completion in time for a caravan to drive to the 1915 World’s Fair in San Francisco, it was not fully drivable until 1923 when the U.S. government stepped in to aid its completion. Patton, Open Road, 43–44 and Paxson, “The Highway Movement,” 239–241.
one railroad. When the Bureau of Public Roads, which would later become the Federal Highway Administration, emerged, it asked states to “prepare lists of not above seven percent of their roads whose reconstruction would bring such a [federal highway] system into existence.” The Meridian Road was one of the seven percent of roads presented and chosen for inclusion. Moreover, when the United States codified roads under numerical terms, the Meridian Highway was one of the few that maintained a number throughout most of its path.

The federal government numbered highways because the variety of unregulated names became very confusing. For example, there were at least three different highways with some variation of the word “Dixie”—the Dixie Highway, the Dixie Beeline, and the Dixie Overland. If motorists were not careful, they might accidentally jump off the road and end up in Chicago instead of Detroit or in Atlanta instead of Nashville. Markings for these highways were irregular, and people found themselves getting lost far too frequently. A clearly marked highway would be a preferred route to many travelers.

Technologically Shrinking Geographic Distance

New technology, especially that which benefits communication, according to Paxson, tends “to lessen the sharpness of sectional differences, to build up the national interest, and to shade the autonomy of the states.” The introduction of new technology, especially when that technology improves communication, can help build unified

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59 Ibid.
nationalism and understanding between disparate people. In the United States, railroads preceded cars in their remarkable ability to shrink distances. Yet the introduction of the automobile itself changed ideas about geography in America, regaining control from the railroad monopoly on movement. Instead of more organic wagon trails, bridges, and canals—routes created by people as they needed—the railroad reshaped the way people moved between towns.

Another way in which distance actually changed was improved communication. Emphasizing this idea was the emergence of the Rural Free Postal Delivery (RFPD), which was finally implemented in 1902 and was another main motivator for improving the conditions of roads in rural areas. Before RFPD, rural residents would travel an average of five miles to get a newspaper and pick up their mail. During the muddy seasons, even this was impossible. By 1903, there were 8,600 carriers traversing 200,000 miles a day to deliver mail to nearly five million people. However, when roads were impassable due to weather, the carriers were allowed to stay home. Once rural residents had experienced RFPD, they wanted it year round. Thus, they began lobbying the U.S. Congress for federal funds to develop postal roads. With improved mail service, communication became faster and again decreased perceived distance between places.

RFPD encouraged the development of rural roads, but the main impetus for road improvement was the popularity of the automobile. Prior to 1912, Michael L. Berger identifies four major obstacles to rural automobile ownership: utility, reliability, roads, and cost. Many farmers had yet to see the practical uses of the automobile in their lives.

63 Wayne E. Fuller, “Good Roads and the Rural Free Delivery of Mail,” 83.
64 Goddard, Getting There, 48.
The majority of automobiles were not durable nor were they easy to repair. Country roads themselves were nearly insurmountable. And a new car could cost as much as $5,000, whereas a quality horse could be as low as $500.\(^{65}\)

However, despite the expense, rural residents began to see the benefits to automobile ownership. One man addressed the benefits—both in time management and financially—of automobiles over horses. “Many a time I have lost hours from business to feed or water the brute [the horse]. In the winter, when I close up my country place for six months, I have been forced to find the horse a boarding-place, since he wouldn’t obligingly hibernate. He had to eat and be cared for, and a nearby stock farm boarded him for $12 a month.”\(^{66}\) In comparison, an automobile, while requiring maintenance, could cost about the same or even less. Articles in popular magazines, such as *Scientific American*, emphasized the cost benefits when discussing the automobile.

The functionality and financial viability of the automobile mattered to the rural consumer. While auto purchases had increased since the 1900s, the 1920s and the introduction of the Ford Motor Company’s Model T revolutionized the industry and helped create the car culture that would continue to grow during the twentieth century.

[The Model T] was a much better car in many ways than those we had a few years later. It was simpler. . . . [I]t was high enough to keep its crankcase from being broken by ruts, ditches, or low road crossings. It needed no brake fluids, special gasolines, greases, or doctored motor oils. A healthy man could lift it up by a corner for repairs. The fenders needed no expensive repairing, the body no specialist’s body work...In clumsy hands, with non-mechanical minds, it ran well.\(^{67}\)

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\(^{66}\) Ibid., 33.

The Model T may be remembered primarily for Henry Ford’s oft-misquoted quip, “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black,” but the simplicity of design made the Model T the car of choice. By 1912, Ford dealers were everywhere—in practically every town of 2,000 citizens or more. Moreover, the use of standardized, interchangeable parts made replacement simpler for farmers. From the Model T’s introduction in 1908 until the late 1920s, it dominated rural auto usage. The high carriage, especially, made formerly impassable roads suddenly accessible. In turn, the increase of cars on the roads encouraged further advances in road building.

In 1904, a federal census of national road infrastructure found that 93 percent of roads were just graded dirt. Only 141 of a total two million miles of road were paved with a substance more durable than macadam. The namesake of macadam roads, John Loudon McAdam, was a pioneer in road building. In order to produce a high quality, durable road that was less expensive than previous methods, he did away with heavy foundational bases that prior road engineers considered necessary. McAdam believed that the soil under roads would be sufficient to support the road, provided the road surface itself protected the soil from water. Macadam roads consisted of ten inches of broken stone directly on the earth. Unlike earlier roads, the center of a macadam road only rose about three inches higher than the sides, which was still sufficient for adequate drainage. This method relied on small, sharp stones, much smaller than the width of a carriage wheel, carefully spread evenly upon the road surface. Road traffic itself was the binding

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70 Ibid.
71 *Historic Highways*. 
agent; ideally, traffic upon a road would shift stones so that their sharp edges aligned and merged over time—a process that could be difficult on horses but for which automobiles were well suited.\textsuperscript{72}

The first macadam road in the United States was completed in 1822. Instead of waiting for road traffic to serve as a bonding agent, the construction team utilized a roller. Further advances in road building and related technology, such as rock crushers that quickly made rocks of the appropriate size, continued to decrease the cost of macadam roads. However, engineers pointed out the difficulty of using only one method of road building across the entire United States. In a meeting of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, one participant noted that “it is impossible to give hard and fast rules for road construction for any locality.” Some areas of the United States lacked appropriate road-building stone within a reasonable distance. Other areas had different drainage needs than the basic macadam road offered.\textsuperscript{73}

Despite their technological advances in road building, macadam roads still suffered from problems. They rutted easily. Throughout the United States, engineers in different locales tried multiple methods for maintaining or building roads. Some water- or oil-treated the macadam to help the road last longer. Others looked into natural resources for alternative surfacing, using hard baked clay as “stones” for a macadam-style road or experimenting with sand-clay mixtures. Even with advances in road technology, two million miles of U.S. roads were still just dirt prior to World War I.\textsuperscript{74} The process for

\textsuperscript{72} Holley, \textit{The Highway Revolution, 1895–1925}, 15–17.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 17, 21.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 22–23.
making these roads all-weather involved draining, realigning, reducing grades, and surfacing. This is where highway associations stepped in.

Beyond creating roads that could survive varied weather conditions, highway engineers had another major construction concern: river crossings. Bridges were necessary for eliminating bottlenecks in traffic. Earlier bridges were either too narrow or too weak to handle new auto traffic. Some autoroutes lacked even existing structures for river crossings. For example, prior to the 1924 completion of the Meridian Bridge in Yankton, South Dakota, vehicles had to cross the Missouri River by a ferry that only operated during certain times of year since ice and mud on the banks of the river made reaching the ferry nearly impossible. During the winter and spring months before the Meridian Highway Association raised the funds to complete the Yankton Bridge, travelers had to go far out of their way, following several different, poor quality roads, to get from South Dakota to Nebraska. The creation of the Meridian Bridge was both a technological advance and a promotional necessity for getting people to drive the Meridian Highway instead of other routes.

Just over 21,000 automobiles passed over the Meridian Highway Bridge during the eight days of celebration that accompanied the opening of the bridge. In a short newsletter written for the Meridian Highway Association, Francis A. Long reflected on these figures, “Evidently the bridge fills a need. Nothing could more vividly portray the importance of the Meridian Highway.” The Meridian Highway filled the need so well that other highways attempted to take advantage of it.

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76 “Yankton Bridge is Being Erected,” folder 2, series 5, Long Papers.
77 Francis A. Long to John C. Nicholson, 2 November 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
Sunshine Trail, decided to use the Meridian Bridge as well. While the Meridian Highway Association had done the legwork to convince the city of Yankton to build the bridge and aided the city in fundraising, they did not have the right to keep the Sunshine Trail from also utilizing the new bridge. News of the Sunshine Trail’s bridge poaching elicited the potentially over dramatic response from Long that “it seems to me little short of a calamity.”

Conclusion

Beginning in Newton, Kansas, a movement emerged. In promoting the Meridian Highway, boosters used technological advances and the democratic nature of roads to reconceptualize geography in the United States. This was not done unwittingly. Members of the Meridian Highway Association understood their importance in advancing democratic communication. “It would be hard to conceive of anything more important than an international highway from Winnipeg to the City of Mexico,” T. J. Norton wrote to Nicholson, “It will develop a new line of travel, and of a kind most important. The intercourse which will be brought about by this highway will develop better acquaintanceship and better relations. In a way, it will operate as the Atlantic cable has.” Norton had internalized the rhetoric of improved communication shrinking both differences and distances, and without stating it explicitly, he acknowledged the advantages of automobile travel over trains. Later in the letter, Norton pontificated on how the Meridian Highway, and many other highways in the United States would

78 Francis A. Long to John C. Nicholson, 23 September 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers. In the end, the Meridian Highway Association came out on top, as the Sunshine Trail became U.S. Route 281, the three letter code indicating that it is a child route of U.S. 81—the Meridian Highway.

79 T. J. Norton to Nicholson, 7 October 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
become the lifeblood of the United States, just as Roman roads served the Roman empire at the height of its power.80

Promoting the Meridian Highway as an international road added credibility to its position as an important highway. “The M.H. is the only international highway and the best highway between the Mississippi River and the Rockies.”81 For local boosters, these promotions could mean increased auto traffic through their towns and ideally would correspond to increased revenue for local businesses.

The Meridian Highway Association emphasized ideas of convenience, short distances, and ease of travel in their promotional materials. Especially the slogan, “The Main Street of North America,” prominently plastered on their advertisements, attempted to equate the almost 2,000 miles of road with the much shorter main streets located in the center of many towns and often considered the hub of business and social interaction for that town.82 The Meridian Highway tried to plant this idea that it too was the hub of business and social interaction. By making the comparison between a huge transnational highway and a shorter, local road, the Meridian Highway Association attempted to shrink geographic distances. Highways reached more places than trains had, were increasingly technologically advanced in their construction, and were instrumental in changing modes of communication and geographic understanding by helping U.S. citizens see themselves in relation to others—not in relation to the railroads.

Ideas of “Main Street” shortened geographical distances. At the same time, these ideas attempted to associate movement in the United States with a north-south

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80 Norton to Nicholson, 7 October 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
81 Dr. Francis A. Long, Good Roads speech, [1924?], folder 2, series 7, record group 2171, Long Papers.
82 Official letterhead for the Meridian Highway Association, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
movement. Chapter 2 builds on the ideas of shifting geography presented in this chapter, focusing on the Meridian Highway Association’s trip to Mexico and the ways they manipulated their international connection to emphasize the importance of north-south movement and direction in the United States.
Figure 2. The colored backside of this Meridian Highway Association stationary, c. 1920, featured the route along with visual highlights of the road. The association used this stationary primarily for major promotional letters. Long Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
CHAPTER 3

THE INTERNATIONAL HIGHWAY:

SITUATING THE U.S. PLAINS AT THE CENTER OF NORTH AMERICA

I’ll tell of another and better by far
Laid out by the law as good roads always are.
Tho it ran across draws and oft a sand bar
It always ran true—right toward the North star. 83

“Movement” is a central theme in the American historical narrative. As writer John Jerome succinctly stated, “America is a road epic.” 84 The Gold Rush, the Dust Bowl, the Oregon Trail—all reinforced western movement in the U.S. historical memory and the popular imagination. These events chronicle movement from east to west, but, beyond the orientation of movement, they have one significant point in common—they are routes. For the Oregon Trail, wagons slowly cut wheel ruts so deep that their unpreserved remains are still visible in places. This single route significantly contributed to myth building about the U.S. West, helping foster ideas of a United States culture of constant advancement.

When historians sought to define the character of U.S. settlers, distinct from their European roots, they looked to movement. Frederick Jackson Turner, in giving his famous Frontier Thesis, saw this distinction in the process of moving West. 85 In overcoming supposedly barren and wild lands, the white European-American male became solely American. Turner’s thesis resonated for decades, becoming an enduring

83 “The Meridian Road,” folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
part of the historiography of the United States until the new west historians of the 1980s and 1990s offered revised, less nationalistic critiques. Still, the enduring legacy of Turner’s thesis promoted the idea that movement west defined U.S. character and entrenched this partiality toward east-west movement.

Indeed, settlers traveled west, but others migrated north, south, and even to the east. Despite significant events in U.S. history that involve westerly migration, that movement was not de facto. Fur traders regularly crossed borders between the U.S. and Canada. The African American Great Migration after the Civil War saw six million former slaves relocate from the south to industrial cities in the north. Despite significant migrations at both the northern and southern borders of the United States and in a north-south direction within the United States, popular imagination continued to define the United States in an east-west direction.

Manifest Destiny and culturally-based ideas about “progress” kept the United States in a rut. Society itself saw the West as the place for expansion. After the frontier was declared closed, the U.S. empire grew beyond the borders of North America, looking to the Pacific world—the Philippines and Hawai‘i. The empire expanding, following an insatiable drive to conquer—sometimes in the name of improving other people’s lives. This same paternalistic imperialism applied to economic imperialism in North America. In Mexico, especially, U.S. business interests exploited Mexican resources.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the introduction of the affordable automobile revolutionized rural life in the United States. With new technological advances came potential for increased comfort and convenience. In order to use their vehicles, rural residents needed functional roads—so they built them in a democratic process, utilizing the citizen-driven Good Roads Movement. Because the roads were generally more organic in origin than the paths railroads took, the direction of movement between neighbors and neighboring cities changed. Moreover, the needs of people influenced the direction of movement on automotive roads. East-west directionality maintained a foothold in road building orientation, but north-south routes emerged as important, especially to the people who lived on them.

Nicholson and his boosters did the unthinkable with the creation of the Meridian Highway. They designed an international highway straight through the center of the United States. Placing what we now call “flyover states” in the center of the first transnational highway, the boosters, in their creation of the Meridian Highway, defied ideas about what early roads should be. While passing through some scenic lands, it was not a scenic byway. While it served a purpose for local populations, the early automobile tourist was not interested in the cornfields of Kansas or in the cattle of Oklahoma. In order to promote the road to non-locals, the Meridian Highway needed a draw. They found this with their international strategy.

Canada was on board with the Meridian Highway nearly from its 1911 inception. However, the road to Winnipeg only extended 78 miles beyond the North Dakota border. As most urban centers in Canada are close to the U.S.-Canada border, extending the road
further was illogical. Thus, Canada did not occupy a significant length of the highway.

Canada’s system of roads, while fairly well developed, had grown outdated quickly with the introduction of the automobile. Canadians did not form their own Good Roads Association until 1914.  

Canada’s section gave the Meridian Highway its international aspect, but Winnipeg did not represent the draw for motorists that the highway boosters hoped to find. However, Mexico had potential. By incorporating Mexico into the Meridian Highway, both the Meridian Highway Association and the Mexican government benefited. For boosters in the middle of the United States, colonizing Mexico was not their ultimate goal, though they contributed to a growing industry of Americanization in Mexico. Expansion to the southernmost tip of South America would make their road incomparable. An incomparable road would merit more automotive traffic, even drawing some of the popular automotive speed trails and endurance races that had captured the public imagination.

Before the Meridian Highway could expand into Mexico, the association needed to improve its position in the United States. From 1911 to 1920, the boosters of the Meridian Highway concentrated on organization; they recruited more boosters to their cause, marked out routes that would utilize some of the better existing roads, and began

90 For more on early speed and endurance trials as major tourist events, see John T. Bauer, “The Gliddenites are Coming!: Nebraska and the 1919 Glidden Tour,” *Nebraska History* 93 (Fall 2012): 110–25 and Havig, “Louis W. Hill, the Great Northern Railway, and the Origins of Automobile Tourism in the Northern Plains,” 56–69.
marketing themselves as an official highway. The Meridian Highway became the first north-south transnational highway.⁹¹

Boosters completed the long preliminary action of unifying roads to create a highway through promotional tours that encouraged community support and political agreements with chambers of commerce along the route. While unifying existing roads into the Meridian, the association, led by Nicholson, debated which communities would be included and excluded in order to increase potential promotional value while maintaining high levels of community support. In 1920, these actions were complete, and the boosters became increasingly promotional in nature. They focused on proven advertising strategies—such as placing maps in service stations along their route, writing for local and national newspapers, and encouraging their visibility in official Good Roads publications. While the boosters used these traditional advertising strategies, the Meridian Highway Association geared itself toward urban residents; they hoped to attract more outside traffic. Non-local road traffic was probably one of two things in the 1920s: a tourist or a bootlegger.⁹²

Tourism in the 1920s was in a delicate state of flux. During the nineteenth century, most U.S. tourists sought nature, for its alleged health benefits or for its grand views. John Sears argues that United States nature tourism centered on grand views—such as Niagara Falls—that could potentially rival the cathedrals and museums of

⁹¹ Historic Highways. ⁹² I have yet to uncover even a rumor that the Meridian Highway was used as a bootlegging route during Prohibition. Many bootleggers stayed on back roads.
Europe. For the Meridian Highway, the focus on big nature tourism was problematic. An uninhabited prairie is impressive, but prairies do not inspire the same awe as canyons, forests, or other remarkable natural features. None of these existed along the route for tourists to write home about.

While U.S. tourists still sought nature, urban tourists found a new foothold in the touring population. Catherine Cooks argues that the interest in urban tourism emerged because of changing divisions in the public/private divide that allowed for increased movement outside the home by upper class women especially. Additionally, changes in city planning and advances in technology—such as electric lighting—made cities safer.

The Meridian Highway fell outside both nature and urban tourism. In Texas, the road passed through the cities of Austin and Laredo. The Meridian Highway also passed through Wichita, Kansas, and Fargo, North Dakota. Yet, these cities still lacked the tourist draw of older, cosmopolitan cities like Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., New York, or San Francisco.

A third type of tourism, developed before the 1920s but fully realized in the 1930s, was the "See America First" movement. The “See America First” campaign emphasized citizenry through tourism. By encouraging U.S. citizens to travel at home, local boosters promoted nationalism—a pride in the local sites that did not have to be compared with the cathedrals of Europe in order to be justifiable places for vacation.


95 Marguerite S. Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940 (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). I addressed three major trends in tourism; however, it is important to note that they are not entirely mutually exclusive. In the U.S. tourism style depended heavily on class and
This is the tradition in which the Meridian Highway Association found a home.

Following the discussion of roads as products for “the people,” it made sense to have the same democratic principles apply to tourism. Traveling the heartland of the United States, despite the lack of discernible destination or tourist draw on the Meridian Highway, could be considered a nationalistic pastime. The Meridian Highway Association tried to mold their route to fit the expectations of the tourist. In doing so, they created a space for revising ideas about geography.

In chapter one, we addressed how road building was a democratic movement, arising from the needs of the people. Appealing to tourism along the road was a strategy with multiple benefits to the local boosters promoting their roads. First, increased tourist traffic would include people who might stop at hotels and businesses in their town, improving the town’s economy. Next, increased traffic along the road would aid boosters in their appeals for federal and state funds to build and improve roads. Boosters who were able to convince members of highway commissions and the emerging Bureau of Roads that their routes were highways of marked significance would get priority for the little funding that was available. The language used in promotional materials did not actively discuss the ways the roads helped farmers get their goods to market. Nor did promotional materials talk about rural postal delivery. Nor, in fact, did they mention the use of roads to canvas and control local populations or increase the lack of federal control over the location. Each of these authors approached tourism through a historical lens. Looking at tourism through a sociological perspective or with an emphasis on economics will result in different divisions in the evolution of U.S. tourist practices. For examples, see Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990); Hal K. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and Valene L. Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).
rural hinterlands. The promotion of roads did not always align with their most common usage—local traffic. Booster promotion of highways looked to the tourist first. Proving all people would use a road was a more effective incentive for federal and state funding than roads used only by rural residents. Outside traffic had a better chance of increasing a state’s visibility, contributing to a growing trend of regionalism.

Thanks to the Meridian Highway Association’s vocal promotion of tourism to Mexico—and through the Great Plains—newspapers latched onto the idea of the highway as a U.S. tourist route. The Newton Journal of Kansas proclaimed the possibilities of travel, repeating advertising slogans utilized by the association. In an article about the Meridian Highway, the paper printed, “Think of the possibilities for the tourist. Think of all the benefits it will bring to our business relations with these countries and the better understanding between nations which would surely result. It is a dream that almost takes the breath away by its magnitude, this possibility of ‘Rolling Down to Rio’ in a Rolls-Royce, yet it is sure to come true in time.”

Another Kansas newspaper, the Wichita Beacon, emphasized the tourism narrative again. “Mr. and Mrs. Wichita may jump into the old bus and ride all the way to the capital of the Mexican republic.”

The Wichita Beacon promoted the road as a tourist route for locals who would tour—not just for urbanites passing through.

The Mexican Revolution and Tourism

Tourism to Mexico was a tradition in full swing by the time the Meridian Highway Association began their campaign. Railroad travel to Mexico was a popular

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97 “From Winnipeg to Punta Arenas,” Wichita Beacon, clipping, folder 2, series 5, Long Papers.
subject of travel writers. By 1910, private automobile caravans offered tours of Mexico from the U.S. Southwest. Yet some tourists worried about the instability in the Mexican government after 1910. The Mexican Revolution began in 1910, sparking a decade of tumultuousness. Francisco I. Madero led an uprising against Porfirio Díaz, the President of Mexico. Díaz had been popular with the U.S. government. He had encouraged foreign investment in Mexico, often to the detriment of the Mexican people’s own commercial interests. Already unpopular in Mexico, when he blatantly rigged a national election, the Mexican people began to protest. After Díaz was overthrown, the various rebel factions faced conflicts about who should run the government and how. The Mexican Revolution lasted until 1920, though periodic outbreaks of violence continued.

Along with the official end of the Mexican Revolution, according to historian Jason Ruiz, “the 1920s represented for others a potential for a return to a Mexico that was again a playground for both American tourists and industrial capitalists.” The Mexican government recognized this turn toward tourism when it invited the International Meridian Highway Association to tour the country in 1921. Still the 1920s did not mark the end of turmoil in Mexico. In 1920, Álvaro Obregón took part in an assassination plot against Venustiano Carranza and replaced him as president of Mexico. In 1924, Plutarco

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98 For an example of travel writing about Mexico, see W. E. Carson, *Mexico: Wonderland of the South* (1909).
Elías Calles became president. The government nationalized oil and other industries. Calles attempted to suppress the power of the Catholic Church, and Catholic lay people rebelled, calling themselves *Cristeros* and fighting against the government’s anti-Catholic policies.\(^{102}\) Obregón became president again in 1928, the year historian Dina Berger marks as the beginning of an even more concentrated, state-driven tourism movement in the country.\(^{103}\)

The collaboration between the International Meridian Highway Association and Mexico predated the increased tourism drive of the late 1920s. Berger identifies 1928 as the beginning of a tourism industry in Mexico that highlighted internal contradictions between the emergence of a new, democratic Mexico and the need to draw in tourists and foreign business investment through tourism promotion. Tourism was a logical sector for the government to develop because of its low production costs. Indigenous structures such as pyramids at Teotihuacán served as pre-existing tourist attractions. Creating infrastructure to serve visiting tourists was the next step. The creation of this infrastructure also aided internal development and created jobs. The state-driven industry was:

an industry made for and by Mexicans. Motorists would drive on government-financed highways where they would buy gas at government-regulated Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) stations, rent rooms in government-licensed hotels built by Mexican companies, and eat at locally owned restaurants. Finally, tourism innately celebrated and evoked pride in things Mexican. Like the celebrated murals, folk art, films, and music, its tourist industry was inspired by and built on ideas of Mexican grandeur—vast beaches, curative waters, Mesoamerican


\(^{103}\) Berger, *Development of Mexico’s Tourist Industry*. 
pyramids, Indian villages and markets, colonial buildings, Porfirian monuments and boulevards, and modern constructs.\textsuperscript{104}

The designers of the government-based tourist industry in Mexico utilized ideas of Mexicaness—actively projecting positive images of the country that blended classic and folk Mexico with modern technological innovations and comforts.

When the Meridian Highway Association met with the Mexican government, the contrast between the nation-based nature of Mexican tourism and U.S. tourism was clear. In highway associations, individuals in loosely formed coalitions fought for federal funds and for state support. In doing so, they sought to reestablish ideas about geographic orientation and movement in North America. In contrast, the Mexican government met with the International Meridian Highway movement to build a highway for international tourists to come and spend money that would help develop Mexico. While the new government, known especially for its increasing state control of industries, showed contradictions in its messages by promoting tourism, outsider influence, and foreign perspectives on Mexico, they also presented a contrast to the “See America First” movement. While the United States was promoting the use of its burgeoning infrastructure to visit different places in the United States, Mexico was creating infrastructure to encourage others to visit Mexico. In other words, Mexican tourism officials promoted their country to foreigners, whereas the Meridian Highway Association’s take on tourism focused on U.S. travel.

Tourism in Mexico succeeded by juxtaposing ideas of rustic quaintness with technological modernity. In order to maintain the attraction of Mexico, promoters and

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 2.
tourists touted it as foreign. As Ruiz observed, “At the same time that Mexico became
closer, American reminded themselves and others that it remained foreign, delightful for
the fact that it was such a nearby source of this foreignness.”105 Most U.S. tourists needed
railroads or, later, more advanced cars such as the imminently drivable Model T, to visit
Mexico. Transportation industries in Mexico did not cater to the tourist alone. To the
outsider, these industries represented modernity in Mexico. Even with the advances in
Mexican infrastructure, tourists maintained a contradictory idea of Mexico as
underdeveloped and backwards.

Early tourists advanced this contradictory view of Mexico upon their return home,
showing the endurance of the myth of a traditional, rustic Mexico. Mexican industry and
infrastructure continued to modernize despite these inaccurate tourist narratives.
Mexicans also drove cars and used roads. In a letter to the Meridian Highway
Association, a booster for Mexico, Lewis O’Donnell, reported that the Ford Motor
Company sold 600 cars per month in Mexico through 40 different agencies. According to
O’Donnell, in Mexico City in the early 1920s, there were 65,000 automobiles in use.106 In
contrast, the number of vehicle registrations in 1920 for the entire United States was
9,239,200.107 Mexico fell behind the United States in overall automotive numbers, but the
government was enthusiastic to build the roadways that would encourage outside tourism.

The Meridian Highway Association, in discussing the potential of Mexico,
addressed its role in driving traffic along the highway—to both the south and north from

106 Lewis O’Donnell to Long, c. 1921, folder 4, series 1, record group 2171, Long Papers.
(New York: Cambridge University, 2006).
Mexico. O’Donnell explained, “The tourist trade alone over this highway is of vast importanceto the automobile trade, oil and supply companies, hotels, etc.” This sentence, in the same paragraph as statistics on Mexican car owners, indicates that the Meridian Highway Association, which targeted the U.S. tourist market, fully expected Mexican citizens to use their road as well. The north-south highway emphasized movement between countries, highlighting the importance of each country and their relationship to each other. The Meridian Highway Association never actively marketed to Mexican tourists, but their rhetoric indicated bidirectionality.

**The International Meridian Highway in Mexico**

The Mexican government invited the officers of the International Meridian Highway Association to visit Mexico, hoping to promote the road and tourism travel in Mexico. Railroads decreased travelers’ perceived distance because of the high speed of rail travel. Automobile travel continued this trend and this restructuring of perceived space in Mexico. At the same time, traveler perception of differences between places seemed to increase. Decreasing travel time also decreased the gradualness of acclimatization. The foreign became more foreign, more exotic all because of the suddenness of its foreignness.

Boosters from both Mexico and the United States actively promoted the differences between the countries. Promoters on both sides of the border emphasized the pre-modern, slowness of Mexico. Despite emphasizing perceived differences, promoters encouraged a view of decreased distance. The official motto of Mexican tourism,

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appearing in full-page ads in American travel magazines was “Mexico: Closer than Ever.” This phrasing aimed to situate Mexico as geographically nearer to America as continual transportation advances shrank distances. This ad campaign promoted the idea of permeable borders as well. The border was strong enough to keep the exotic in Mexico for tourists to visit but not so strong the U.S. visitors could not experience it.

Along with a narrative of shrinking distance, the road boosters equated their highway with important historical routes. O’Donnell wrote to Long in 1924 to encourage the Meridian Highway to keep promoting the road to Mexico City. The Meridian Highway “can be put in first class this year as the road South of the border follows the old ‘Camino Real’ road built in the old Spanish days as a stage coach route from Monterrey to Mexico City. It is still traversable and can be made into a fine road at low cost. The Mexico Government favors the project and will aid it.”109 “Camino Real” refers to a royal route. The best-known Camino Real connects Mexico City with Santa Fe, New Mexico, but O’Donnell refurbished that image to describe the Meridian Highway passing through Monterrey instead.

O’Donnell began soliciting members of the Meridian Highway Association about constructing a highway down to Mexico upon the association’s origin. He continued to encourage the Meridian Highway Association to more actively organize the route south, ensuring Nicholson and Long, among others, that there would be plenty of tourist and commercial traffic along this road. The creation of the highway would undoubtedly aid his own business. O’Donnell boasted, “We are in position to bring the great value of the Meridian Highway to the attention of some of the foremost interest in Mexico and the

United States without much if any cost to the association.” O’Donnell also sent Long a copy of his magazine, “Mexico Financial, Commercial and Mineral News,” which included letters to the editor from citizens actively interested in Mexican affairs.110

In 1921, the Meridian Highway Association acted on the interest of the Mexican government who invited the U.S. boosters to visit. A corps of engineers met the Meridian Highway Association at the Rio Grande and accompanied the men to Mexico City. G. A. MacNaughton, then-secretary of the Meridian Highway Association and an active member of the organization, expected the trip to yield political benefits, since the Governor of Texas, Pat M. Neff, expressed interest in accompanying the group. Neff believed his participation would be essential as governor because Texas was the bridge between Mexico and the rest of the Meridian Highway. However, Nicholson limited space on the trip to officers of the Meridian Highway Association.111

The Meridian Highway Association, so pleased by their all-expense paid trip to Mexico, sent a telegram to President Warren G. Harding announcing the undertaking.

The International Highway delegation officially representing Canada and the States of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, and the Texas Highway Commission and Laredo Chamber of Commerce, all cooperating with the Department of Communications and Public Works of the Mexican Government with the object of extending this opportunity to advise you that we held conferences with the Governors of the States and Chambers of Commerce at Monterrey, Satillo, Matehuala, San Luis Potosi and Queretaro, and the Departments in Mexico City. We have been received with cordiality and enthusiasm in each State and City. Our delegates testify to the fact that according to our interpretation the attitude of the Mexican business man, the commercial organizations and the officials of the Mexican states traversed is entirely favorable to Americans and our Government, and they are in a receptive mood for mutual co-operation along all lines. All organizations in Mexico have pledged

110 O’Donnell to Long, 21 February 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
111 G. A. MacNaughton to Long, 4 March 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
their sincere co-operation to secure the establishment of an International Meridian Highway across the Republic to bind the two peoples more closely together.\textsuperscript{112}

David E. Colp, secretary of the Texas Good Roads Association and actively involved in several road development projects through Texas, decided to send the telegram to promote the Meridian Highway as an essential North American road. For the U.S. boosters, the Mexican government’s invitation to the Meridian Highway Association justified the international character of their endeavor. The association seemed to realize that the international aspect of the highway would benefit not only tourism, but could also be a significant tool in encouraging the federal government’s interest in funding for the road. Drawing attention to the international aspect in many ways promoted the national interest, as Colp’s telegram demonstrates, with his careful demonstration of the many government officials and potential commercial interests involved in the expansion of the Meridian Highway.\textsuperscript{113}

This telegram also demonstrates that the Mexican government hoped to reestablish its relationships with U.S. businesses and promoting tourism after the revolution. By bringing enthusiastic local boosters to Mexico, the government showed the boosters—many of whom owned businesses—that Mexico was a state to consider seriously in partnerships. The telegram repeatedly emphasizes the pro-United States attitudes of all the peoples and municipalities of Mexico. The telegram also shows the business and commercial success of Mexico, positioning it as a cordial and worthy partner for improved international relationships. The telegram shows the erasure of

\textsuperscript{112} Telegram from D. E. Colp to Warren G. Harding, 20 June 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.

\textsuperscript{113} A discussion of evolution of government financial aid and control of U.S. highways and the ways in which they both changed international relations and reestablished dominant geographical ideas will occur in chapter three.
uncomfortable U.S. suspicion of Mexico since the Zimmerman Telegram of 1917 in which Americans discovered a covert agreement between the Kaiser of Germany and the Mexican front during World War I.

The telegram did not stop members of the association from viewing Mexico positively. In fact, Long praised the country of Mexico as “a country of great possibilities.” After the Meridian Highway Association visit, Long was convinced that the U.S. as a whole had misunderstood Mexican people. According to Long, individual Mexicans were attempting to better their impoverished situations by echoing the developments of the United States. Thus, for Long, as Mexicans imitated U.S. success, relations between the U.S. and Mexico would improve. And, for Long, that meant better roads. In a speech to the Columbus, Nebraska chamber of commerce, Long insisted, “I believe that with the development of a NATIONAL highway system, and the full fruition of the Automobile age in Mexico, her people will be immensely benefited.”

Three years later, Long used his experiences in Mexico to promote good roads activism throughout the Great Plains. For Long, the success of Mexican roads was a powerful motivational tool to inspire Americans. If the “backwards” people of Mexico could successfully develop transportation infrastructure, then why was it so difficult for the people of America to work together to build roads that would connect rural towns? “I often wonder whether we fully appreciate the good roads we have. If we lived in Mexico a while where up to three years ago they had trails only, we would learn to appreciate real roads. Except for a distance from 40 to fifty miles out from Mexico city there were no

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114 Emphasis in original, Long to [Laredo?], 22 June 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
highways in Mexico 3 years ago when the M.H. Mission was down there,” he reflected.\textsuperscript{115}

In addition to reaching Mexico City, the Meridian Highway Association hoped their road would stretch to the southern tip of South America. A 1927 bulletin for U.S. 81 promoted this vision, “Our nickname is ‘The Main Street of North America’ but we would prefer it be in truth and fact ‘The Main Street of North and South America.’”\textsuperscript{116} This goal eventually became a reality, though not in the way the Meridian Highway Association intended. The Meridian Highway is part of the modern Pan American Highway, but by the completion of the Pan American Highway in the 1950s, the Meridian Highway Association had informally disbanded.\textsuperscript{117} The early addition of Canada to the highway supported their claims, but progress south of Laredo stalled after the 1921 trip.

The Meridian Highway boosters kept using Mexico to further explain the significance of their road. In the 1926 dedication of the Meridian Highway Bridge at Yankton, SD, speakers addressed the possible future of the Meridian Highway. Long discussed “Mexico, Future Tourist Paradise,” Secretary-Treasurer of the Manitoba Motor League, A. C. Emmett promoted a “Summer Outing in Canada.” Even before the Yankton Bridge helped solidify the route, the Meridian Highway Association included both Canada and Mexico in their plans. Letterhead in use as early as 1920 advertised the international character of the Meridian Highway, “connecting directly Winnipeg, Canada,

\textsuperscript{115} Dr. Francis A. Long. Good Roads speech, [1924?], folder 2, series 7, Long Papers.
\textsuperscript{117} Nicholson to Long. 16 January 1928, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
with Mexico City—the frigid north with the tropics.” (See figure 2.) This sentence again emphasized a world of contrasts, positioning the United States as the moderate center.  

Highway associations often referred to their roads as finished long before the associations built, connected, or improved the roads. Because of this strategy, completion dates vary. Soon after the Meridian Highway Association’s return from their 1921 trip to Mexico, F. Roel, the Subsecretary of Communications for Mexico, wrote to MacNaughton claiming that the Mexican government would undertake “in earnest” the construction of the Meridian Highway in Mexico beginning on 1 January 1922. Roel claimed that Mexico would complete this construction in two or three years.  

In 1931, the Lawrence Journal-World reported that the Meridian Highway “connects at Laredo, Tex., with Mexican federal No. 1, which continues to Monterrey, and Mexico City. The Mexican government has surfaced 150 miles from Laredo to Monterey and announced the last link, Tampico to Mexico City, will be completed late in the summer.”

Another article published later that year addressed the problems in completing the Mexican road. “[I]ts condition for 200 miles in Central Mexico was such that only burro trains and road workers were able to traverse the stretch.” Even so, an opening ceremony was held in the spring of that year. Evidently, the road was hard-surfaced until Ciudad Valles where it encountered a stretch of “mountainous country” that made travel difficult. According to The Daily Times out of Beaver, PA, the Mexican government had hired 7,000 workers to improve the highway which was “one of the most difficult in the world”

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118 MacNaughton to Long, 25 September 1920, Meridian Highway Association letterhead, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
119 F. Roel to MacNaughton, 28 June 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
to construct. The Meridian Highway Association planned a goodwill tour from the United States down to Mexico after that section was finished.

With continued conflict in Mexico, completion dates for the Meridian Highway in Mexico were uncertain. Along with completion dates, the amount of men working on the road itself changed regularly. In a letter to Long, Nicholson claimed that 3,000 men were working on the road between Laredo and Monterrey. He thought that section would be completed by 1 May 1928. As with most discussions of its completion, Nicholson claimed that a caravan of U.S. boosters would take the road to Mexico three days after its supposed 1 May completion.

Nicholson’s guess was somewhat accurate. A caravan did make the trip to Monterrey that May. Just as in the first trip to Mexico, they traveled by car and train. Nicholson drove from his home in Kansas to Laredo, Texas. However, he left his car in Laredo and made the trip to Monterrey by train with the rest of the organization. Train travel was more comfortable for this group of auto enthusiasts, as it was faster, smoother than the unfinished Mexican roads, and enabled more time for talking. Nicholson found the trip successful, “We enjoyed the trip very much and we got a lot of publicity for the road out of it also much good for the extension to Mexico City and South America.”

Despite the increasing convenience of roads and the Monterrey connection’s completion, Nicholson and his fellow travelers preferred train travel for the Mexican portion of their journey, boding poorly for the comfort of future Mexican auto tourists.

120 “Road to Link Three Nations,” The Daily Times (Beaver, PA), 16 September 1931.
122 Nicholson to Long, 7 April 1928, folder 7, series 1, Long Papers.
123 Nicholson to Long, 19 May 1928, folder 7, series 1, Long Papers.
Nicholson experienced the road both as a booster and as a tourist. In the same dichotomy between “primitive” and advanced that permeated tourism experiences for Americans in Mexico, Nicholson wrote, “We saw the primitive man also the aristocracy and wealth also the vacant churches and vacant parochial schools.” He contrasted abandoned churches and primitive men, both somewhat oblique references to turmoil in Mexico, as conflict between church and state escalated into the Cristeros War from 1926–1929. Yet Nicholson did not admit he was aware of these conflicts. Instead, he concluded his letter with a sentence about progress as he perceived it—in development of infrastructure. “Some 2500 men were at work on the road [from Monterrey to Mexico] but it is kept open.”

As the road through Mexico developed, the boosters of the Meridian Highway felt more pressure to ensure they retained control of the highway. If this route was to be the international road, sanctioned by the United States government, it was essential that the road through Mexico and continuing further south connect with U.S. 81 at Laredo. Nicholson addressed these concerns. “The job is to hold it to Meridian. Forbes for May 1st prints a map showing it via New Orleans. Motorists via Little Rock and US 66 will claim it that way and our job is to hold it and the traffic as far north as we can and get all the credit we can for M.H.” Regional boosters fought each other for the right to this Mexican Highway—with promotional materials that advertised theirs as the superior road and with lobbying efforts at the federal level.

125 Nicholson to Long, 19 May 1928, folder 7, series 1, Long Papers.
The Meridian Highway Association included Mexico on their promotional maps as if the roads were completed. But such wishful thinking worried Nicholson. He expressed concern about “innocent people” who might believe that the road is “in existence” and passable if it was included on maps. Colp justified the inclusion of impassable roads through Mexico by comparing them to the Dakotas. “We must get some pep into this proposition and carry out our part of the work. The indications are that the Mexican Division will have a completed highway before North and South Dakota gets one.” After all, how could he push Mexico for completion if the road in the U.S. was not even finished?

A year before, Nicholson had estimated the road to Buenos Aires would not be completed for another twenty years. Commenting on a Washington Star story in which the author proclaimed the Pan-American Highway could be completed in the next five years (in 1932), Nicholson, in his experience with the Meridian Highway and frustrations of attempting the stretch through Mexico was more practical with his 1947 completion date. Either way, he was not pessimistic: “it [the road] is coming just the same.”

Boosters’ concerns about the location and quality of the road remained, but the movement to make the Meridian Highway an international route gained momentum. Nicholson contacted representatives to the U.S. Congress, soliciting their support for the Pan American Highway project. “I am going to ask State Officers to ask Senators and MC8s along MH to be for it [the Pan American Highway]. I am having a cut made to run

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126 Nicholson to Long, 26 November 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
127 Colp to Long, 25 October 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
128 Nicholson to Long, 28 May 1927, folder 6, series 1, Long Papers. In 1950, Mexico completed its portion of the highway. The highway through South America remained incomplete.
on back of letterheads. American Motorists had quite a write up about it.”129 If the Meridian Highway Association managed to join their road with the plan for the Pan American Highway, which would stretch further south to Argentina, they could ensure the endurance of the Meridian Highway.

**Conclusion**

The Meridian Highway Association saw their affiliation with Mexico as a way in which they could continue to promote their road as a historically significant route. By marking their north-south route as significant—both in history and in modernity—the boosters argued against the east-west orientation of movement in the United States.

Long ago, during the period made famous by ‘Wild Bill’ Hicock, a series of distinct paths began to form north and south through this region, and the importance of tying them together into a continuous artery was early seen. Step by step continuity was established and recognition gained until today, as the Meridian Highway, the route ranks with the Dixie and other highways as a north and south highway of national importance.130

The Meridian Highway Association harkened back to a frontier past in order to enforce the north-south direction of the road as a natural direction of movement for the United States. The boosters emphasized the existing nature of their north-south roads to show that people needed and used these routes.

Long asserted that he liked maps that showed the entire nation as opposed to smaller maps that would represent the states themselves. This small decision represented a choice to emphasize the national character of the map. In promoting the national map, Long made a conscious decision to promote the convenience of the road for national, not

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local causes. “I cannot so much enthuse about state route strips—I like the national ones.”

Promotion, for Long, needed to be national.

The Meridian Highway would be an international road, but its benefits appealed to locals. The Meridian Highway, while it had to be an international route, would be the Main Street of North America—expanding the ideal of a small town center of commerce and communication to the whole nation. Connecting three countries on the Main Street of North America also included ideas such as emphasizing commonalities between countries, encouraging communication. Furthermore, it would increase the importance of the road in the United States. Long was so sure that this route would become dominant that he told Nicholson, “We sure would have the Main Street between the Rocky Mountains and Kansas City.” The boosters believed in the potential of their route.

The trip to Mexico encouraged the Meridian Highway Association to continue to emphasize their north-south route as a main street. The Meridian Highway gains importance because of its relationship as a corridor between two dramatically different places. In contrast, the United States, along the Meridian Highway, became the calm, comfortable, and seemingly normal “Main Street” between these locales. On the north side of the route, Canada was a significant feature. However, it lacked some of the exoticism of Mexico. In 1916, in a survey of the entire route, the Meridian Highway Association journeyed to Winnipeg. On the way, the association met with fanfare at many towns where they stopped to promote the expansion and improvement of the burgeoning Meridian Highway. However, Winnipeg’s placement a mere 78 miles from

131 Long to Nicholson, 21 February 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
the United States border and relative cultural homogeneity with nearby U.S. towns removed the appeal of the Canada as a major advertising hook for the highway.

Still, the international appeal of the Meridian Highway extended both north and south of the United States, a fact that would matter when the Meridian Highway Association requested their part of new federal road appropriations, the feature of the next chapter. Highway associations fought for the legitimacy that came with federal funds. Official recognition as a significant federal route would ensure this. Increased funding ensured improved roads—especially their likelihood to be paved. Better roads, in turn, meant even more tourist traffic, which ideally improved economic conditions for the states through which these highways passed. In this circular manner, the federal government determined which routes would become significant and, in turn, determined the direction of travel.
Figure 3. The back of official stationary for the Meridian Highway demonstrates the fervor for the Pan-American Highway, the prevalence of east-west oriented routes, and the promotional strategy of advertising a highway as if it were completed, c. 1930. Item no. 1659, John Charles Nicholson, 1862–1942, Kansas State Historical Society.
CHAPTER 4
WHICH ROAD? WHAT ROAD? WHERE ROAD?:
NATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC ROADS IN THE 1920S

Who fathered this highway? what man pushed it thru?
The leader who did it, is it nothing to you?
What a vision he had of the good it would do!
His time he has given and his good dollars too.\textsuperscript{133}

Frederic Paxson, in his study of the Good Roads movement, claimed that their goal was “to open the sections and break down state lines.”\textsuperscript{134} Paxson argued that increased speed and ease of communication unified a singular U.S. culture and diminished regional differences. However, his words applied to an even more basic concern of roads boosters: money. Good Roads organizations conducted extensive fundraising campaigns and appealed to their local communities for money, materials, and labor. They also lobbied the federal government for funds, in order to minimize the strain on local communities. They hoped to break down the separation of funding and pass the burden onto the federal government. After all, the roads in each state eventually connected to each other and created a useful national infrastructure.

Who should be responsible for the creation of infrastructure in 19th century United States was a hotly contested topic. Initially, the work of road building was the domain of the national government. Federal officials then turned it over to the individual states governments, who in turn shifted the responsibility onto individual counties. Road construction had boomed in the early republic, but the financial panic of 1837 slowed

\textsuperscript{133} “The Meridian Road,” folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
\textsuperscript{134} Paxson, “Highway Movement,” 236.
development. In 1854, road construction began again, but it halted shortly after the end of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{135}

Road construction ceased after the Civil War for a variety of reasons. The war settled the issue of slavery in new states, marking a decisive moment in U.S. western expansion. Roads should have been an important aspect of this new stage, as they could connect the nation—north and south, east and west.\textsuperscript{136} W. Stull Holt’s monograph on the Bureau of Public Roads addressed these changes.

The reasons for the cessation of all the government’s activities in road work are obscure. . . . The improvement of rivers and harbors had always received much the same treatment at the hands of Congress as public roads until the Civil War. In fact, before the war they seemed to be considered subordinate to roads; but after the war, the government’s expenditures for rivers and harbors increased by leaps and bounds while public roads received nothing.\textsuperscript{137}

While Americans still debated the role of the government as funder of infrastructure, Holt rejects constitutional objections about the responsibilities of the federal government as the reason for the cessation of government-funded roadwork. Nor does he accept the argument that perhaps the U.S. government lacked funds after the Civil War, since other internal improvements abounded. For American investors and the government, the railroads were the routes of the future. Since these railroads received land grants from the government, people began to think of railroads as the sole transportation method of the future.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{136} Scholars argue that the south was unfairly underdeveloped after the Civil War.
\textsuperscript{138} Holt, \textit{Bureau}, 4.
As chapter one discussed, a primary problem with railroads was limited geographic connections between people due to the hub-and-spoke model. In contrast, individual-driven decisions based on multiple routes create a web of connections. Corporations decided where to locate railroads, and created the spoke-like diagram of movement between people and places. People were becoming increasingly reliant on the railroads—especially for economic reasons. Christopher Wells argues that people looked to the railroad as a cultural attempt to make sense of the chaos that resulted from rapid industrialization and technological development after the Civil War.\footnote{Wells, \textit{Car Country}, 7–8.} However, these rapid changes left behind a large number of people, especially in rural areas. The boosters of the Good Roads movement sought to solve this problem.

Chapter two examined the increasing importance of highways. Highway boosters attempted to change ideas about geography and movement in the United States. To do so, they emphasized the importance of their routes. The Meridian Highway especially concentrated advertisements on its international nature, highlighting its connections to both Canada and Mexico. As these ideas became more prevalent and pervasive, the Good Roads movement gained the traction needed to force the federal government to contribute to road building.

Americans agreed that the federal government should pay the bill for new and improved roads. However, once the federal government began doling out appropriations for road building, the Bureau of Public Roads controlled where the funds would go. The national government had the opportunity to reinforce previous ideas about geography and
movement, ideas that would erase the work being done by the International Meridian Highway Association.

A History of the Bureau of Public Roads

The Bureau of Public Roads, the predecessor to the modern Federal Highway Administration, began with minimally appropriated funds that would focus solely on educational initiatives. Congress appropriated funds to the Department of Agriculture to study road building and disseminate information about good road building practices. In turn, the Department of Agriculture created the Office of Road Inquiry in 1894. The department that would later evolve into the Bureau of Public Roads did not originate from an act created by Congress, but rather indirectly through an appropriation for a specific task. Holt even claimed that the National League for Good Roads was “instrumental in having the Office of Road Inquiry created.” Their lobbying was successful, but national funding would remain largely stagnant until 1916.

The primary goal for the office was to compile information about the laws that states had created to manage their road systems. In doing so, the office was charged with also evaluating the types of materials that might be used to create roads, such as macadam and stone roads; gravel roads; and highways without gravel or stone. Upon researching these methods, the office also published bulletins about the best methods for transporting materials needed for road creation.

Despite minimal funding and clerical support, before July of 1894, the Office of Road Inquiry published nine bulletins addressing issues ranging from individual state

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laws about road and highway construction and the proceeds of state Good Roads conventions. In 1896, the Office built short stretches of different types of roads in Atlanta before the National Road Parliament. Local people donated the labor and material to build these stretches of road, the Office’s first major foray into the education program known as “object-lesson roads.”

The Office of Road Inquiry built object-lesson roads to demonstrate different types of materials and techniques used for building roads. Since building roads that could sustain auto traffic was in its infancy, object-lesson roads were the most important task of the early Office of Road Inquiry. The diversity of soil, climate, and natural materials throughout the United States meant that one surface would not be adequate for the entire country.

In 1913, the Office of Road Inquiry and the Division of Tests, the department of the Bureau of Chemistry that tested road materials, consolidated and became the Office of Public Roads. The Department of Agriculture increased appropriations, out of its own budget, for the Office of Road Inquiry from $10,000 in 1894 to more than $200,000 in 1913. Since these appropriations were indirect—coming from the Department of Agriculture, not from Congress itself, the increase in expenditures developed from local interest in good roads—funds collected by states, counties, and townships. At this point, most states relied on “statute labor” to help fund road creation and maintenance. Statute labor allowed farmers to pay road taxes through their labor. Farmers could use their farm equipment and time to physically build or improve roads themselves, instead

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of paying a monetary tax. The farmer’s labor took many forms, depending on the needs of the road in question. Most often, they worked to improve existing roads, especially by grading them. Slight modifications to heavy farm equipment could be used to even out existing roads. Alternatively, the same heavy equipment was useful for bringing materials to road building sites and crushing small rocks into the road bed to create the macadam surfaces. Other states used poll and property taxes to help pay for roads.\footnote{144 Wells, \textit{Car Country}, 18.}

Holt attributed the prevalence of state aid, especially statute labor with the “growth of interest in the problem of public roads. The idea that the government was necessary for the solution of the problem became more and more widely held.” This turn in public opinion about the responsibilities of the U.S. government resulted in good roads activists encouraging their congressmen to submit increasing numbers of bills to Congress that requested federal support for building and maintaining roads. From December 1911 to June 1912, Congress introduced more than sixty bills asking for direct aid in order to create and improve roads at the request of states across the U.S.\footnote{145 Holt, \textit{Bureau}, 14.}

In 1913, the appropriations for the U.S. Post Office Department included a clause about investigating the need for more or improved roads. This clause also included $500,000 for the committee and the implementation of its findings. However, committee members could only further disperse those funds if “the state or local subdivision thereof in which such improvement is made under this provision shall furnish double the amount of money for the improvement of the road or roads so selected.”\footnote{146 Post Office Appropriations Act of 1913.} They chose seventeen projects—463.5 miles of road—for improvement. These projects were completed in
These 463.5 miles of improved roads helped good roads activists encourage more federal involvement in funding road projects. The successful completion of the first seventeen projects for the RFPD demonstrated the potential of federally funded, long-lasting roads nation-wide.

The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 created a bureaucratic nightmare for states. After states presented their plans for road creation and improvement, the Secretary of Agriculture would approve the plans. However, his approval did not guarantee an automatic dispersal of funds. The Department of Agriculture only actually dispersed funds to states that had already completed the work. States could receive up to half the cost of the road, but only after paying to finish the road themselves. While a logical approach to prevent the abuse of funds, this strategy still limited the progress of road building. Furthermore, if the state did not maintain the road after its completion, the Secretary of Agriculture could refuse to approve further funds.\(^\text{148}\)

The Federal Aid Road Act required that states organize highway departments. In 1916, eleven states lacked existing highway departments, and the status of five others was doubtful within the requirements of the federal law. The requirements took many forms. In some cases, states had not granted their highway departments sufficient power for the direct supervision required by federal law. In others, state funding for highway departments could not match federal aid, and states were unwilling to give assurance of adequate maintenance provisions for roads to be built with federal funds.\(^\text{149}\) Thus, even


with the clamor for good roads, many states were not able to meet the responsibilities given to them by the country.

States unable to meet the financial burden of road building received a short reprieve from their bureaucratic nightmare with the United States’ entry into World War I. The war postponed construction work on existing projects, and federal focus went to maintenance of highways that linked military bases and supplies. Non-military projects continued, but road builders could not acquire necessary materials for road construction. Coal, cement, asphalt, oil, tar, steel, crushed stone, or brick were in high demand, and priority went to military usage. Even with the interruption of the war, all states managed to create a highway department and agree to the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act by that summer. Despite apparent setbacks due to the war, the Bureau of Public Roads only disapproved four projects during the fiscal year ending in June 1918.\textsuperscript{150}

The Bureau approved twenty-three project proposals, involving a total length of 188.58 miles at an estimated cost of $1,845,433. State requests for federal aid for these projects reached $846,152.\textsuperscript{151} After the end of the war, road construction resumed full force. Repairing damaged roads was a major aspect of the new work. However, returning soldiers were another concern. Demobilized soldiers found potential employment in road construction. For the fiscal year of 1920, the Post Office appropriations act set aside $200 million specifically for additional federal aid under the Federal Aid Road Act.\textsuperscript{152}

After the war, road building found abundant supplies in surplus war materials and good roads agitators expanded their efforts. Even with the benefits from surplus

\textsuperscript{150} Holley, \textit{Highway Revolution} and Holt, \textit{Bureau}, 21.
\textsuperscript{151} Holt, \textit{Bureau}, 20.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 22 and 1920 Post Office Appropriations Act.
materials, road construction was slower than some anticipated. Despite the returned soldiers, road building slowed when builders suffered from a scarcity of labor, “the shortage of transportation facilities, and numerous strikes.” In 1921, these conditions changed to favor road construction. Labor, transportation, and material became more available.\textsuperscript{153}

Mileage approved for roadwork increased from 1917 to 1920. In 1917, the Bureau approved only 188 miles. Three years later, in 1920, the total approved miles jumped to 16,673. The mileage projects approved in 1921 and 1922 fell to 6,081 and 4,539, respectively. However, this decline only included approved new projects. Completed projects continued to increase steadily from a measly two miles in 1917 to 10,247 completed in 1922. At that point, the Bureau approved 20,000 miles of road that had yet to be completed. Seventy percent of completed roads were earth, sand, clay, or gravel. 10-percent were macadam. 20-percent were concrete, brick, or asphalt. These latter roads took up 45 percent of the funds, however.\textsuperscript{154}

Opinions about how and where to spend federal money on road improvement fell into two primary camps. The first camp felt that developing interstate highway systems was a financial priority. Otherwise, as proponents of this thought process expressed, “the money would be... scattered all over the states, resulting in little stretches of road leading from nowhere to nowhere.”\textsuperscript{155} The prevalent concern about roads leading to nowhere made it important for highway associations asking for government funding to emphasize the significance of both their route and the significance of its terminus. People who fell

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\textsuperscript{154} Holt, \textit{Bureau}, 26, 29.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 29.
\end{flushright}
into the second camp of opinions on how to spend federal money on road improvement felt that the county should decide which roads were most important. Local roads connect “the farmer with his market, and therefore, those should be built before the interstate roads which are used mostly by tourists.” This second group emphasized the importance of local peoples and rural communities in which railroads were not meeting the community's needs. Even with this debate, the only restriction on actual funding was that roads must be built where the USPS would deliver mail.

The Federal Highway Act of 1921 shifted things again. It introduced requirements for road surface types. Furthermore, this act introduced a solid policy on the location of roads that received federal aid. The state highway department would designate a highway system, no more than 7 percent of the total miles of roads in the state. Of these seven roads, they would be divided into two groups—primary/interstate highways and secondary or intercountry highways. The act showed that it intended that both interstate and intercounty roads should be built at the same time, as it stipulated that not more than 60 per cent of the federal aid allotted to any state should be expended on the primary or interstate highways.

Earlier laws required that states maintain their own roads. However, the Federal Highway Act of 1921 changed this. Initially, the penalty for not fixing a road would be limiting further allotments of funding. However, after 1921, the Secretary of Agriculture could approve plans to improve roads and take the cost of those improvements out of

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156 Holt, Bureau, 30 and Holley, Highway Revolution, 98.
157 Holt, Bureau, 31.
funds given to the state. Appropriations for 1922 were 75 million dollars.\textsuperscript{158} The tasks and responsibilities of the Bureau of Public Roads remained largely the same until 1939 when it became the Public Roads Administration. Today, it is known as the Federal Highway Administration.

**Government or Community: Meridian Highway Funding Woes**

Even though local road building projects received funding, federal support remained elusive for many highway associations. Despite active lobbying, the Meridian Highway Association did not always see federal or state money. In 1928, Nicholson wrote to Long that the State Highway Commission of Kansas had offered one county $109,000 to complete the highway in that county alone. While completing this stretch would also signify the completion of the Meridian Highway through Kansas, the county board turned down the state funds, angling for more money to build another highway—US 40N—through the county.\textsuperscript{159}

The Meridian Highway Association operated as a coalition of states—each responsible for their own road and funding. The promotional aspect of the highway fell mostly to the international association. Still, the disparate progress of road building led to constant tension between members of the association from different states. States along the Meridian Highway adopted different strategies for obtaining funds. For example, each community along the stretch of the Meridian Highway in Oklahoma paid a dollar per mile. Fifty cents would go to the international organization for promotional aspects, and

\textsuperscript{158} Federal Highway Act of 1921.  
\textsuperscript{159} Nicholson’s letter refers to “40n.” U.S. 24 through Kansas was originally known as U.S. Route 40N. Nicholson to Long, 16 January 1928, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
fifty cents went to the state organization for road construction and maintenance. In contrast, other states pocketed funds they collected instead of sending those funds on to the international organization, frustrating Nicholson and other officers of the Meridian Highway Association.\textsuperscript{160}

States coped with the financial burden in different ways. In 1924, a former President of the Oklahoma Division of the Meridian Highway, F. J. Gentry, became the Chairman of the Oklahoma State Highway Commission. Because of his work with the Meridian Highway Association and good roads boosterism, he encouraged the passing of a gasoline tax. Oklahoma passed a 2.5 cent per gallon tax, with the proceeds going “to build permanent highways.” Furthermore, a major goal of the organization was to “build a paved road from Texas to Kansas as soon as possible which may be the M H or it may be about thirty miles east of it through Oklahoma City.”\textsuperscript{161} The fact that Gentry had worked with the Meridian Highway in the past worked in the association’s favor when it came to seeing the proceeds from the gas tax go toward their highway and not others in Oklahoma.

Long bemoaned the fact that the Nebraska state constitution prevents gasoline taxes such as the one Oklahoma had enacted. Frustrated, he complained, “And we cannot do it under the Benefit District law.” Still, he encouraged Nicholson to follow Oklahoma’s lead in Kansas. Nicholson, in attempting to emulate Gentry, found that he was too late to participate in the race for the Kansas State Highway Commission. However, Nicholson was still hopeful about the potential of the Kansas portion of the

\textsuperscript{160} Nicholson to Long, 16 February 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
\textsuperscript{161} Long to Nicholson, 20 March 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
Meridian Highway receiving funds from a gasoline tax. Because federal law required states match federal contributions, state-level gasoline taxes would increase funding on both the state and federal level for new roads. Nicholson attempted to navigate the many levels of bureaucracy surrounding the receipt of funds for new and improved roads. “Our new road law puts the gasoline tax and license tax into hands of County Commissions to spend on our inter county seat roads of which the MH is one and it is going to get quite a bit of money this year.”162 A month later, Long wrote to Nicholson, claiming that the gasoline tax in Kansas had garnered two million dollars in revenue already.163

The tension in the Meridian Highway Association at state level and the disparities in state fundraising could be exceptionally frustrating for the more levelheaded members of the organization. Long, for example, wrote a lengthy complaint to Nicholson after several months of mediating disputes between Colp, Nicholson, and MacNaughton. Nicholson attempted to impeach Colp. MacNaughton, Nicholson, and Colp all believed the other owed money to the organization. Long complained, “I never saw a big thing [the construction and maintenance of the Meridian Highway] undertaken with so little regard for the ordinary formalities or rules of procedure governing associated bodies.”164 Long equated an important undertaking with good organization, and the loose coalition of the Meridian Highway Association, compounded by discrepancies in state and county-level funding made that organization difficult for the Meridian Highway.

State agents for the Meridian Highway Association were responsible for obtaining state and local funding. Members of certain states felt that they were carrying the

162 Nicholson to Long, 8 April 1925, folder 5, series 1, Long Papers.
163 Long to Nicholson, 21 September 1925, folder 5, series 1, Long Papers.
164 Long to Nicholson, 22 December 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
financial success of the entire organization. In order to create a functional national highway, the association as a whole needed each state to contribute enough to justify their claims that the entire stretch of the Meridian Highway was worth traveling—not just the smooth roads through Oklahoma.

The fact that the Meridian Highway boosters were largely comprised of businessmen did not mean that these men operated efficiently. In one long letter, Nicholson, a lawyer who had been involved in state politics, rambles on about how he failed to secure state funds for the Meridian Highway. He made stickers for people who paid their membership dues, but failed to issue those stickers. He wanted to create membership cards and membership rosters, but he only had one copy of the member list and lacked the time necessary to copy it. Nicholson spent a good deal of time complaining about the organization in Texas, comprised of officers who “were not M H Representatives”—“which proves that Texas organization is in bad shape.”

Long faced problems in trying to organize funds. After the 1921 trip to Mexico and continued complaints from the Meridian Highway Association’s treasurer, Long wrote to the Community Club of Osceola, Nebraska, lamenting the fact that the Meridian Highway Association was nearly broke. Long reminded the club that each community owed one dollar per mile of Meridian Highway that passed through that community, and he requested that larger or wealthier towns contribute an additional five dollars of support in order to compensate for smaller towns along the road. Long punctuated the importance

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165 Nicholson to Long, 9 July 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
of his plea by reiterating the significance of the highway. “Surely the only international highway—The Meridian—must not be pauperized or allowed to go bankrupt!”\textsuperscript{166}

While funding disputes between states created tension in the organization, funding differences within communities also created problems. Nicholson complained particularly of the disparate amounts of city-sponsored funds. “The other thing that rankled in my mind was to have a little village like Humphrey send in $20.00 to me and $10.00 to Hahn and a city claiming 100,000 people [like] Wichita write its own Ad for our map and promise to pay $25 and do nothing besides making me a lot of trouble.”\textsuperscript{167} Wichita, a larger city, included itself in the map that would be included in major advertising. However, they never paid their subscription, while an unnamed, much smaller city gave more money to the Kansas organization without the cushion of more formal representation in promotional materials. This imbalance vexed both Long and Nicholson.

City boosters felt comfortable that their cities would draw traffic along the highways without special promotion. They simply expected to be included on any main route. Community bonding and support for road building came from smaller communities that felt more pressure to contribute to the association and justify their presence on the route. They feared exclusion from major routes, the traffic along which had the potential to benefit small cities economically. This is something that Nicholson noted especially. He felt that communities wanted the federal government to give all the money and do all the work. “Several of the cities,” according to Nicholson, “‘Want George to Do It.’ After

\textsuperscript{166} Long to the community club in Osceola, NE, 11 July 1921, folder 2, series 1, Long Papers.
\textsuperscript{167} Nicholson to Long, 14 May 1925, folder 5, series 1, Long Papers. Hahn was the treasurer for the organization.
a city gets the highway it will hardly turn a wheel unless it thinks it is likely to lose it, in a lot of cases.”

Nicholson harped on this point repeatedly, feeling frustrated at the community’s unwillingness to continue supporting a road that had already been built—regardless of how the communities would benefit from improved roads. “It is strange how hard a community will fight for a thing and after it gets it how satisfied they are until they feel they are about to lose it. You can hardly raise a dollar on the MH without greatest effort to increase its usefulness, but let it change its location and miss a garage a block and what a howl that garage will set up.” Community members were deeply invested in the location of their highway, but once the government began contributing to highway development and maintenance, communities themselves felt less pressure to step up and contribute.

The Meridian Highway Association faced the difficulty of obtaining funding again and again. W.W. Watson, a former president of the Meridian Highway Association, wrote to Long proclaiming his deep desire to pass legislation that would place the financial responsibility for road construction and maintenance on the government. “One of my first wishes was to get an organization that would have some financial backing that we might get legislation that would bring about results in road building without putting all of the burden on the farmer and while I expect to confine most of my efforts to my own State and hope to get results, I feel that the organization should have one objective.

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168 Nicholson to Long. 26 September 1929, folder 7, series 1, Long Papers.
169 Nicholson to Long. 7 August 1929, folder 7, series 1, Long Papers.
and work to that, to the best interests of all.” As part of the Good Roads Movement, the Meridian Highway Association lobbied for legislation that would encourage individual state governments and the federal government to assume financial responsibility for the highways that would become essential infrastructure.

Long acknowledged the essential nature of community support for road building. Not just important businessmen encouraged road building through their communities. The communities themselves got together to actively create the roads themselves, donating money—and more importantly—time. “We raised some money in Madison,” Long wrote, “some of the farmers along the route put up and Norfolk is putting up some, to add to the auto license fund of the county to assure its completion this season.” The roads were significant for multiple people along them—the rural farmers needing paths to get their goods to market or to socialize easier with their neighbors and communities.

**The Pan-American Highway: Future of the Meridian Highway**

Before it even became clear that the International Meridian Highway would eventually be completed from Winnipeg to Mexico City, the boosters began positioning themselves to be the road of choice further south. Long and Nicholson conspired about potential avenues for bringing the Meridian Highway to national attention in Congress. Nicholson wrote, “A bill is before Congress to promote a 10,000 mile Pan-American Highway across North, Central, and South America. A part of US 81 will surely be used, and I would like to see the entire US 81 made a part of this line.”

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170 W. W. Watson to Long, 10 December 1923, folder 3, series 1, Long Papers.
171 Long to Nicholson, 21 February 1924, folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
172 Nicholson to Long, 4 April 1927, folder 6, series 1, Long Papers.
this, Nicholson thought the surest method would be making the Meridian Highway entirely hard surfaced before the end of 1928. The Dakotas were a major concern for Nicholson. Despite the feuding with Texas, the relatively better weather of Texas and the high traffic meant that the roads there were mostly completed. The Meridian Highway was about 20 percent earth road still, leaving much to be done if they were going to hard surface it.173

This plan to become part of the Pan American Highway became an obsession of Nicholson. In a letter to Long a scant week after the previous one, Nicholson emphasized the possibility of completing the Pan American Road as part of the Meridian Highway. “I think we should feature the Pan American Highway—Winnipeg to Buenos Aires. It is just as possible and indeed as probable as was the MH to Mexico City ten years ago and it will be a fact in from ten to twenty years from now. It should stimulate our road to build.”174 Like the members of the Lincoln Highway Association, who promoted their road as if it were finished, Nicholson thought that the Meridian Highway Association could begin publishing maps that portrayed the path to Buenos Aires as both completed and part of the Meridian Highway itself. By conflating the future Pan American Highway with the existing Meridian Highway, Nicholson believed he could force the issue. Nicholson continued to look toward the federal government to ensure the longevity of the Meridian Highway.

Conclusion

173 Nicholson to Long, 4 April 1927, folder 6, series 1, Long Papers.
174 Nicholson to Long, 12 April 1927, folder 6, series 1, Long Papers.
Prior to the evolution of the Bureau of Public Roads, highway development desperately needed organization. The local officials who oversaw it had little engineering background. The community members who built the roads used farming tools, poorly suited to many road construction tasks. Roadwork proceeded as people were able to participate—during breaks in the agricultural calendar. The flawed nature of this system sparked the ire of reformers, who pushed organized, central authorities to solve the problems of rural roads.175

The Good Roads movement shifted the way rural people viewed roads. Poorly maintained, muddy roads stopped being “natural.” In other words, the Good Roads Movement contributed to a significant restructuring of ideas about the visual geography of roads, changing understanding of acceptable natural environments. Wells details this process thoroughly.176 However, in creating this change of perception, the roads advocates changed something they had not anticipated—expectations about whose responsibility it was to create and maintain good roads.

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Figure 4. Map, c. 1920s, showing a national highway plan proposed by the National Highways Association. The plan shows a network of roads that the association considered the most significant. Their plan would serve 92 percent of the U.S. population, according to their calculations. Federal Highway Administration, fhwa.dot.gov.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

A highway was dreamt of—a highway so grand
That would stretch from the North to the South’s shining sand;
A bright shining highway—a bright silver band,
Known and admired thruout our great land.177

In 1921, Long raised concerns about the future of the Meridian Highway Association. In an angry letter to Nicholson, Long explained his frustration. “I am unable to comprehend the actual situation of the Meridian Highway muddle—for a muddle it must be. Here is the most promising north and south highway in the United States, practically bankrupt, and the officials apparently at loggerheads, and apparently everything is in status quo. I wish I might be able to get some true light, and I wish I might be able to help disentangle the matter.”178 Long, despite his frustration, seemed intent on moving the organization forward.

Ultimately, the inefficiency of the highway organization mattered little. The rhetoric of highway boosters became dominant enough to establish the importance of what would become U.S. Highway 81, even if they did not manage to change the hearts and minds of America. The Meridian Highway Association did not manage to restructure the ideas about movement in the United States, and their “Main Street of North America” never caught on. Despite this, the Meridian Highway’s lobbying efforts did succeed in making it the primary component of the emerging Pan-American Highway.

177 “The Meridian Road,” folder 4, series 1, Long Papers.
178 Long to Nicholson, 22 December 1921, folder 2, series 1, record group 2171, Francis A. Long Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
The Pan-American Highway system stretched from Canada down to the tip of South America. Initially, it appeared that the Meridian Highway would succeed in becoming the main route for this highway through the United States and Mexico. In some ways, the work of the Meridian Highway Association did ensure that the path through Mexico would be used in the Pan American Highway. However, official designations in the United States ran slightly to the east of the Meridian Highway, following U.S. Highway 85, which followed approximately the route of I-29. Now, the entire interstate system of the United States is considered part of the Pan American Highway.

Despite the international significance of the Pan-American Highway and U.S. 81’s presence on the route, the emerging interstate system reinforced earlier ideas about movement in the United States. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 created the interstate system. Initially Eisenhower believed that three east-west and three north-south routes could comprise the entire system, but the system that actually came to be emphasized east-west movement. Furthermore, the interstate system encouraged its drivers to zoom past towns on their route. While the structure of roads in general still maintained their web-style intersections, as opposed to the railroad style hub-and-spoke form of geography, the speed of interstates lessened the need to interact with neighbors and those nearby. The introduction of the interstate system and the disappearance of highway associations marked the end of a democratic movement in road history.

The Meridian Highway Association faded in the 1930s as the state highway departments took over maintenance responsibilities. Once state and federal funding became standard, there was less need for private citizens of highway associations to
support road development. The Meridian Highway faded from popular memory except in certain places, like Columbus, Nebraska, where it intersected with the Lincoln Highway.

For a time the boosters of the Meridian Highway were able to define themselves and their location as one central to the country—and even the entire continent. That time passed, and the Meridian Highway is no longer “the Main Street of North and South America.”
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