

A transcontinental road dream fulfilled - Highway 40

By Nancy Dingler

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Highway 80 is a transcontinental ribbon of road connecting California to the East Coast. This "transcontinental" highway did not come about easily. Signs have sprung up along roadways in Fairfield, Suisun and Cordelia designating the route of the old Highway 40.

Highway 40 was the precursor to the current highway and a dream of one man - Carl Fisher - who inspired others to bring his dream to fruition.

As a boy, Fisher was inventive and gregarious. When he was 16, he founded the Zig-Zag Cycle Club and became an ardent racer. He loved speed and he was a born salesman. He sold magazines and newspapers to train passengers.

By the time Carl was 17, he had saved \$600. He opened a bicycle repair shop and soon became a leading distributor for major bicycle manufacturers. When automobiles appeared, Carl started racing them all over the Midwest.

By his 30s, "Crazy Carl" quit racing to sell cars. In 1904 he started the Prest-O-Lite car headlight company. Fisher prospered and had factories from New Jersey to Los Angeles.

While this was going on, with three partners, the Indianapolis Speedway was built. Americans were taking to the road. There was just one major problem. Most roads were suitable for horses, not cars.

Carl had a vision of not just good roads, but a good road that would stretch across the continent. He wanted to call it the Coast to Coast Rock Highway.

It was going to take a lot of money to construct a good road across the country. Fisher tried to enlist Henry Ford into the project, but Ford turned him down, citing that the government should build the road, not private entrepreneurs.

Henry Joy, head of the Packard Motor Co., agreed with Fisher and felt the only way to get a transcontinental highway built in a timely manner was for the private sector to promote and build it. Jay idolized Abraham Lincoln and proposed that the highway be called the Lincoln Memorial Highway.

Thus, the Lincoln Highway Association was formed in 1913. It would continue until its last gasp on Dec. 31, 1927, after 3,000 highway markers had been set by Boy Scout troops across the country to mark the route. Some of the original concrete markers can still be found, but most have been vandalized or destroyed.

Since the end of World War I, people needed to focus on something optimistic and uplifting. They found an outlet for this need in the automobile.

In just two decades, the country had seen the development of the first horseless carriages to owning 6.5 million vehicles. Thousands of people migrated to Detroit to find employment in the automobile factories. Akron, Ohio, employed thousands more in their Goodyear, Goodrich and Firestone tire plants.

Carl Fisher's dream of a transcontinental highway through the now active Lincoln Highway Association juxtaposed nicely with the desire of the other members to promote the sales of cars, trucks, tires, oil, gas and cement.

In the summer of 1913, it became clear to the members of the association that Fisher's original plan for 3,300-mile highway to be built with \$4 million of pledged money and free cement was woefully inadequate. The big looming problem was how they would be able to raise enough money.

Congress got into the act. There were more than 40 bills related to road improvement. The best known came from Sen. Charles E. Townsend of Michigan (Detroit!). The Townsend Bill called for a national system of highways and a federal highway commission to run it.

In the spring of 1919, the government sent the first transcontinental motor train out of Fort Meigs. Motor vehicles had been used to a limited extent in Europe during the war. This would be the largest convoy of military motor vehicles ever assembled.

Before departing Washington, D.C., the convoy formed a massive semi-circle around the Ellipse in Potomac Park. The convoy was over 2 miles long and could not be captured in its entirety by a camera lens.

The convoy was made up of Companies E and F of the 433rd Motor Supply Train, Company E of the 5th Engineers and Service Park Unit 595. There was a medical detachment along with a field artillery detachment.

Among the 17 commissioned officers was 28-year-old Capt. Dwight D. Eisenhower. "Ike" later, after heroically and brilliantly defeating the Nazis during World War II and becoming president, would promote a "National Defense Highway".

This would end the bitter battles that had gripped the route for more than 50 years. It would be a straight, direct highway as Joy and Fisher had envisioned. Its creation would abandon the old Lincoln Highway route.

In all, there were 81 vehicles. The 46 trucks ranged from three-quarter ton Dodges to monster Macks with more than 5 tons of capacity. A huge behemoth named the Militor topped it off.

The Militor would prove to be indispensable and perhaps the most important vehicle in the fleet. The truck was a custom built "Wrecker Winch" or "Artillery Wheeled Tractor" that had cost the army almost \$40,000.

The Army enlisted a civilian, Henry Osterman, to pilot the convoy. Osterman had already driven from coast to coast 19 times and was considered an expert.

Most importantly, "he was the only man who knew the way." The roads crossing the Midwest were almost impassable. Just about every bridge the convoy came to had to be shored up or rebuilt by the engineers. The terrain was so rough that it virtually shook the trucks and cars apart.

Finally, after sheer willpower and determination, the convoy arrived in Sacramento on Sept. 3. Once they got out of the Sierra Nevada, the roads were surprisingly and welcomingly good.

California had formed a bureau of highways in 1895, followed in 1910 by an \$18 million bond to build good roads throughout the state. Cheering crowds lined the streets of Sacramento as news went out to all the newspapers heralding the convoy's arrival.

Carl Fisher's dream of a transcontinental road never fully matured. It would not happen until Eisenhower was president.

For more information about Highway 40 and the transcontinental motor train, read "American Road" by Pete Davies.

As part of Fairfield's year-long celebration of its 100th anniversary since incorporation, visit Aug. 8 at City Hall park and pond, the "Pig-out at the pond" and police safety fair. Aug. 15 there will be a chili cook-off and auto show at Armijo High School. Both events will feature centennial souvenirs with the proceeds going to charity.

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