

# *The Lincoln Highway's Seedling Mile*

by Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernek

On September 14, 1913, following months of publicity and speculation, the Lincoln Highway Association announced the official route of the nation's first transcontinental highway, to extend from New York City to San Francisco. The idea had originated with Carl Fisher, founder of the Prest-O-Lite Company, which manufactured carbide headlights for automobiles. Fisher had also launched the hugely popular Indianapolis 500 at his brick-paved Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1911.

In 1912, there were approximately one million motor vehicles registered in America—up from only 8,000 in 1900—but few improved roads. Of the 2.5 million miles of roadway existing throughout the country, the vast majority were dirt roads that were often impassable when wet. Experiments with concrete as a road material had only recently begun, with the first mile of concrete road poured in 1908, near Detroit. Long-distance travel by car was still very much a novelty. Doing so definitely required a taste for adventure.

Although the Good Roads Movement, aimed at improving the condition of the nation's roads, had been gaining momentum since the late 19th century, there was still little central administration and no federal funding for road construction when Fisher began planning his highway. He had realized that for long-distance automobile travel to be practical, a network of reliable, all-weather roads must be built. The "Coast-to-Coast Rock Highway" he envisioned was to be a grand boulevard across America, threading together historic routes and the main streets of towns from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Fisher's proposal for a coast-to-coast highway met with an enthusiastic response—at first. Within a month of publishing his *Ocean-to-Ocean Highway Bulletin*, a million dollars had been pledged to the project. By the fol-

lowing spring, however, donations from the auto industry had fallen off. Determined to find some way to get his highway built, Fisher convened a series of private meetings with Detroit capitalists in the spring of 1913. The group consisted of men with ties to the auto and highway construction industries. They included: Henry Joy, president of Packard Motor Car Company; Roy Chapin, president of Hudson Motor Car Company; Emory W. Clark, president of the First National Bank of Detroit, who would later become president of Nash Motor Company; Arthur Paddington, a promoter friend of Fisher's involved with the Good Roads Movement; and Henry E. Bodman, Joy's attorney. On July 1, 1913, this group officially incorporated itself as the Lincoln Highway Association (LHA).

The route would start in Times Square in New York City, traversing 3,389 miles through a dozen states: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California. The route ended at the Pacific Ocean in Lincoln Square, San Francisco.

Despite being named vice-president, Fisher would play a less central role in directing the efforts of the association. This position now belonged to President Henry Joy. He and the other officers stated the association's primary aim: "To procure the establishment of a continuous improved highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, open to lawful traffic of all description without toll charges: such highway to be known, in memory of Abraham Lincoln, as 'The Lincoln Highway.'"

Joy and the directors turned the building of the highway into a national cause, titling their public announcement of the route "An Appeal to Patriots." In their "Proclamation of the Lincoln Highway Association," issued



a month later, they explained how construction of the memorial highway was the "patriotic burden" of the states and counties through which the route passed.

Joy conceived of the organization's proper role as that of facilitating good roads activities at the local level and coordinating them into a national effort. A vigorous publicity campaign was launched. In addition to providing articles and photographs regarding the highway to newspapers and magazines, the LHA published a bimonthly magazine, *The Lincoln Highway Forum*, and produced short motion pictures showing the progress of the highway.

By tying the good roads campaign to themes of progress and economic prosperity for both the urban and rural dweller, the LHA hoped to appeal to the broadest audience and to convince them that good roads were good for all. America's love affair with the automobile had already begun, and good roads were the key to the automobile's success.

To initiate improvements on the highway at the local level, Joy and the directors implemented a multi-tiered organizational system of volunteer "consuls" to represent the association and promote its interests. The state consuls often created consular districts in addition to a network of county and town consuls.

There was never any question among the LHA directors that the nation's transcontinental highway would pass through Iowa; they needed a route to connect Chicago with Omaha and the Platte River Route, so of course the highway must pass through Illinois and Iowa. Joy later remarked that it was these two states that presented the biggest challenge in planning the highway. Because of the relatively flat terrain, there were any number of routes that could be taken across these states, all of them equally unimproved.

In Iowa, the bridge at Clinton was selected as the route's Mississippi crossing, and Joy traveled the state many times trying to determine the best means of connecting the two rivers. The route's 358 miles through the state passed through 13 counties: Clinton, Cedar, Linn, Benton, Tama, Marshall, Story, Boone, Greene, Carroll, Crawford, Harrison, and Pottawattamie. The main towns the west-bound traveler passed through were Cedar Rapids, Tama, Marshalltown, Ames, Boone, Jefferson, Carroll, Denison, Logan, and Council Bluffs.

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particularly vicious and viscous and generally impassable brand of mud peculiar to that state." Travelers were advised against even attempting to cross the state in rainy weather.

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SHSI (IOWA CITY)

bridges with concrete and/or steel structures, improved curves and railroad crossings, and widened the roadway to the standard cross section established by the State Highway Commission."

Despite this progress, Iowa was still notorious as one of the worst "mud states," and it was hoped that the Federal Road Act of 1916, providing federal highway funds to states, would result in permanent highway construction in Iowa. However, to qualify for the funding, states had to provide matching funds, and the

financing of road paving proved to be a challenge in Iowa. Opposition was especially vigorous among farmers, who saw it as unwelcome interference in local affairs by elites and outsiders (described by one farmer as "one-hoss lawyers in patent leather boots") for a cause that they deemed unnecessary, but more importantly, one that came at their expense. The legislature ended up voting to accept the federal aid in 1917, matching it with motor vehicle licensing fees.

Fisher's original goal of building a crushed-rock



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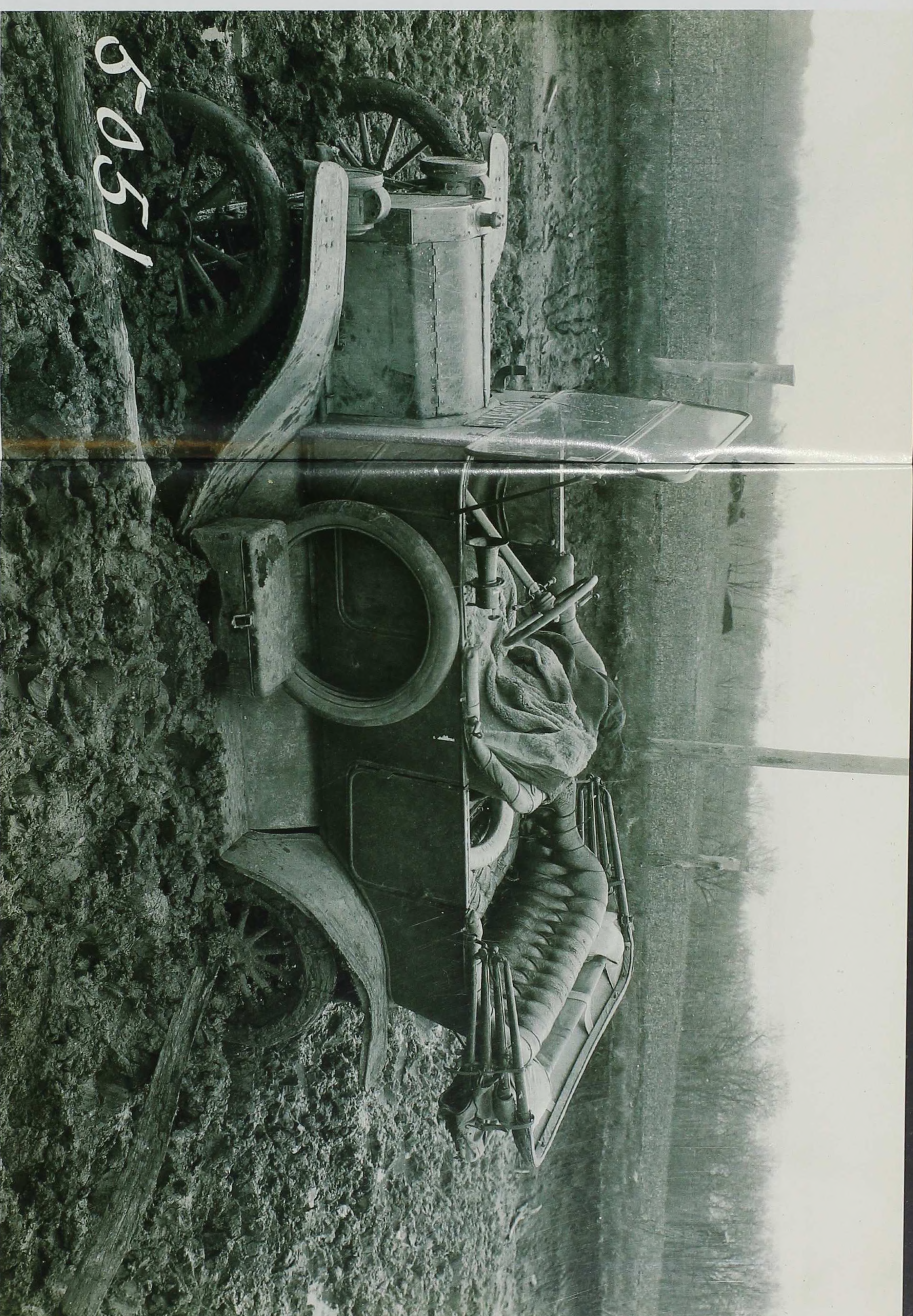
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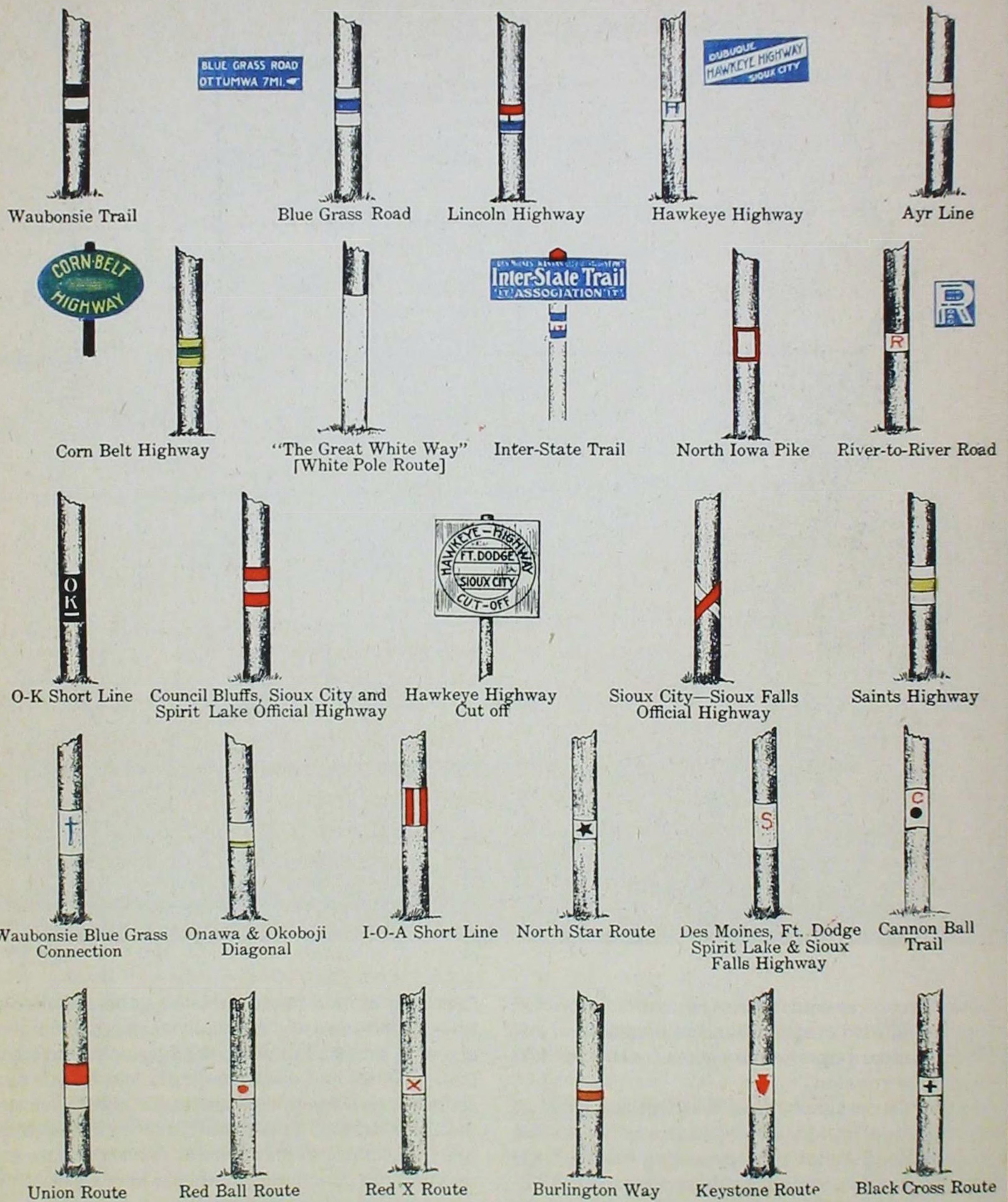
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## BLAZINGS OF PROMINENT ORGANIZED IOWA HIGHWAYS



SHSI (IOWA CITY), HUEBINGER'S POCKET AUTOMOBILE GUIDE FOR IOWA (1915)



highway in time for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition had by this time been replaced with the longer-term goal of paving the entire rural portion of the route with cement. Although concrete was initially more expensive than macadam or gravel, the LHA recommended concrete based in part on road tests that had noted superior aspects to cement paving for durability, better gas mileage, and less wear-and-tear on automobile tires. Hard surfacing meant "economy in maintenance and economy in operation." This idea bore "early fruit except in Iowa." Ironically, despite early experiments and "road school" training carried out by the State Highway Commission at Iowa State College in the early 1900s–1910s, Iowans remained resistant to road paving, lagging behind other states and earning Iowa the unwanted moniker of "The Gumbo State."

The "Seedling Mile" was an idea that Joy came up with to encourage rural communities to pave mile-long sections of the Lincoln Highway and to persuade counties and states to fund them. The Seedling Mile, it was hoped, would in turn create interest in additional improvements. "The easiest way to prove anything is by demonstration," Joy wrote, "and that is the principle upon which the Lincoln Highway is founded. It is a demonstration to the country at large of just what good roads, permanent roads, will do for the prosperity and happiness of the community. In most instances, the Lincoln Highway Association can persuade the communities to build their own demonstrating sections of Lincoln Highway; again, 'seedling miles' are necessary—miles built of cement furnished by the Association, upon the theory that one permanent mile established and built under the proper specifications will lead to further connecting miles of the same standard. And this theory has never failed to work out."

To that end, the LHA required that these paved miles be located out in the rural countryside, at least six miles from any town, at places where the topography made road travel difficult. The idea was this: once a driver was on the paved Seedling Mile and could speed along unfettered—and then suddenly had to drop back onto an unpaved, often mud, road—the dramatic contrast would demonstrate better than any other means the wisdom of paved roads.

The first Seedling Mile along the Lincoln Highway

was built near Malta, Illinois, in 1914. This was followed by seedlings built in Whiteside County, Illinois (1915), Grand Island and Kearney, Nebraska (1915), Linn County, Iowa (1918–1919), Paulding County, Ohio (1919), and a six-mile stretch near Fremont, Nebraska (1919–1920). Initially as narrow as ten feet, by 1918 the recommended width was 16 to 18 feet.

"The Iowa difficulty developed first during the efforts to establish Seedling Miles," according to the LHA. The association's "Secretary Pardington found that under Iowa laws the counties, which had full control of all road matters, were powerless to finance hard-surfaced highways even when the cement needed for the work was donated. The irony of this situation was that the Iowans were spending enough in maintenance to have amortized the cost of hard-surfaced construction in a few years. President Joy said they were practically rebuilding their dirt roads every summer and having them washed out by storms or torn up by struggling traffic every winter."

The LHA came to Iowa to promote Seedling Miles and to offer 8,000 barrels of donated cement for constructing four miles of pavement in four different counties. Unfortunately, because of "legal obstacles in Iowa state laws . . . the gift could not be accepted." By 1915, the LHA still had over 22,000 barrels of cement that had not been applied for and "offered 3,000 barrels to any community that would build one mile of concrete road on the Lincoln Highway." Preference was given to counties in Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

Eventually, Linn County competed with Greene, Marshall, and Pottawattamie counties for Iowa's first Seedling Mile. The July 1917 *Lincoln Highway Forum* noted that Linn County was assured delivery of 3,000 barrels of cement donated by Northwestern States Portland Cement Company of Mason City; however, by September the *Forum* was touting Marshall County as the site of Iowa's "first" Seedling Mile. That county had applied for 3,100 barrels of cement to be supplied by a Chicago company, and grading was reportedly already underway. However, actual construction of Iowa's first (and only official) Seedling Mile began in Linn County in August 1918.

The proposal for the Seedling Mile had been presented to the Linn County Board of Supervisors by local businessmen and LHA members Edward Killian and Willis G. Haskell. Killian owned a Cedar Rapids department store. Haskell owned a coal dealership but was also a state senator able to exert considerable influence on projects in which he was concerned.

**Left: For Iowa travelers in 1915, automobile guides like this one gave intricate directions, county by county, and depicted the terrain that travelers should expect. Roads marked by blazed posts as "highways" were graveled at best.**



Killian wielded local power; the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* crowed that Linn County's "recent progress in road improvements" was thanks to his "energy" and "keen business management." Killian began promoting the idea of free cement to build a seedling mile after having been appointed the county consul for the LHA. Private subscriptions and matching funds from the board of supervisors would help fund the project. The *Mt. Vernon Record* reported in June 1918 that Killian helped secure an \$8,400 donation. Although the cement was donated by Northwestern States Portland Cement Company through the LHA, the county would end up paying \$2,100 just to haul it to the job site.

By mid-July cement was being delivered and stored in local barns. Three firms submitted construction bids: Ford Paving Company and Perry Jayne, both of Cedar Rapids, and Cook and Keane of Dubuque. The bids were rejected. Ford Paving successfully rebid at \$3.15 per square yard (two cents per square yard less than their original estimate) but was persuaded by the State Highway Commission to reduce their bid to \$2.84, based on the negotiated change from two-course concrete paving to one-course concrete paving using Muscatine gravel as aggregate instead of crushed rock.

A contract with Ford Paving was finally signed on August 1. "Mike Ford is said to have the county by the nape of the neck," commented the *Mt. Vernon Record*, "and he knows it." Meeting the deadline required moving more than 100 tons of material a day from Mt. Vernon to the job site—a distance of five to six miles. Ford reportedly had crushed rock in the vicinity "tied up in contracts, so that no one else [could] buy their crushed rock at a price that [would] allow them to make a favorable bid."

Ford guaranteed the project would be finished in the fall. In fact, the contract specified a completion date of November 1, 1918, and "that the time of completion of said work is of the essence of this contract." The deadline would not be met.

One problem was difficulty in finding enough laborers. Other problems, outlined by Linn County Engineer R. W. Gearhart, included the "leisurely" way that Ford Paving Company got equipment to the job site; difficulties in transporting gravel from the Northern Gravel Company in Muscatine by rail, owing to a shortage of open-top cars; ten straight days of rain; and equipment breakdowns. The nation's growing involvement in World War I probably contributed to supply and shipping delays as well as labor shortages.

The *Mt. Vernon Record* followed Ford's progress and described his method. "One of the secrets of Mike Ford's success as a contractor is shown in his work here. The

first thing he did was to rent a strip of ground. . . . He has the cars of gravel and sand set in on this track, and unloaded with a steam shovel. It takes about one hour to unload a car of sand or gravel. The local pulled in with a car of sand one morning, and before the local was out of Lisbon the car was reported empty.

"A steam shovel also does the work cutting down the roads where grading is necessary. The big shovel takes one bite out of the bank, depositing it in a dump wagon, then another bite and the wagon is full. When the shovel needs to be moved the big crane is swung around, the heavy plank it runs on is hooked onto it, and it swings around, dragging the plank into place ahead of it, looking like nothing in the world so much as an elephant swinging a plank around with its trunk. The engineer then runs the shovel ahead onto the plank releasing another, which is picked up in the same way when needed.

"Thus far twenty-seven cars of sand and gravel [have] been unloaded. The cars are coming in regularly now and there should be little delay from this cause. However, it is not at all likely that the paving will be completed this fall. In fact such a thing appears to be outside the range of possibilities. But at any rate it will be completed some day."

Jean Stoneking Moore (the Stoneking family farms lined the Seeding Mile) later recalled that the laborers lived in a tent camp across the road from her father's house. Her grandmother cooked meals for the workers; many were Russian immigrants, although she remembered one Irishman named Dinty O'Leary among the crew. Moore recalled that "when her family became disabled by influenza late in 1918, some of the workers milked for them and slipped the milk pail through the kitchen door quickly to avoid being infected."

By October the *Mt. Vernon Record* noted that the pavement was "growing slowly" because of labor shortages, but it "makes a pretty sight down the roadway, and will look even more beautiful to the traveler that strikes it on a muddy day."

"The Ford gang, with their steam shovel, have graded the roadway east, and are keeping well ahead of the paving crew," the *Record* continued. "The pavers, by the way, work on alternate days. They can use up as much sand and gravel in one day as can be hauled out in two. The grade through that mile will be a pleasant one to travel. The hollow at the T. C. Stoneking place has been filled three or four feet, and the hillsides cut down an equal amount, giving a very light and easy grade."

The November 1 deadline passed. Finally, on June 18, 1919, the road opened to traffic as well as contro-



versy, as there were immediate concerns about the condition of the pavement. One complaint concerned a "hump" on the "Stoneking Hill" that became evident shortly after the concrete had been laid. Greater concerns involved visible cracks that had opened lengthwise and the lack of true expansion joints, although "on the whole, the paving is in very good condition," the *Record* commented. "The cracks were given immediate attention," a county history relates, and over the decades the pavement proved to be a "fairly good surface, though its width [was] the basis of much criticism."

The November 1918 *Lincoln Highway Forum* had assured readers that "early in 1919," two more miles would be constructed—the long-awaited miles in Marshall and Pottawattamie counties. However, by this time, the Seedling Mile program was all but defunct. The *Forum* noted that there had been a ban on road building during World War I, which may account for some of the delays. However, it is suspected that Linn County had leaped to the forefront to obtain "first" status because of problems delivering the cement to the other counties.

"People of Iowa have heard a great deal about the Linn County Seedling mile of concrete road," the Iowa State Highway Commission commented in mid-1919. "Many have praised it. Some have condemned. Users say it is great. Engineers say it is a fine piece of construction. Some, usually those who have never seen the road, only heard about it, have worried themselves sick over the cost of it. These, however, most all seem to live outside of Linn County. No sickness for those who live alongside the road or near enough to make use of it. After pounding along for hours on the dirt either side of the road, to come suddenly and unexpectedly upon this stretch of beautiful white roadway, makes one think of an oasis in the desert, a shade tree on a hot, burning prairie, or a cool flowing spring when you're thirsty. It looks good to a man longing for a real road. Before you utterly condemn these Linn County people for having gone crazy and spent \$34,936.81 building this road, take a run out over the Lincoln Highway east of Cedar Rapids, look at this stretch, note the homes adjoin-

ing it, picture yourself living along it, and then question yourself whether you blame them or not. You know time is fleeting and you're only going to live once and what you get out of life, this time round, is all you're absolutely sure of. Strange to say, with others half sick with worry over the cost of it, you find the Linn County People, who built the road, almost to a unit perfectly satisfied with what they got for their money, and seemingly enjoying life along it. It certainly is good looking, as the picture indicates."

The Seedling Mile was a few miles northwest of Mt. Vernon, on what had historically been an old wagon road and stagecoach trail and where road conditions were historically problematic. After the paved mile ended, the highway continued northwest, looping through Marion and then down into Cedar Rapids. While the intent of the Seedling Mile was to promote additional paving projects, it did not have these immediate results in Linn County. Delays were related to funding difficulties as well as a political power struggle between the cities of Marion and Cedar Rapids.

Marion had long been the county seat of government and was situated on the original route of the Lincoln Highway through Linn County. Cedar Rapids, having long surpassed Marion in both population and industrial and commercial development, coveted the county-seat designation and a direct connection west

COURTESY IOWA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (AMES)



**Above:** Linn County's Seedling Mile heading northwest in 1928 offered a pleasant break from gravel. The 16-foot-wide ribbon of pavement was 200 feet short of a mile. In 1919, Greene County also paved a section of the Lincoln Highway, six and a half miles, with the help of federal funds.



## OMAHA TO MARSHALLTOWN

**HERRING HOTEL      HERRING CAFE**  
**HERRING GARAGE    HERRING FILLING ST'N**  
*What More Do You Want?*



BELLE PLAINE - - - IOWA

# OFFICIAL LINCOLN HIGHWAY GUIDE THRU IOWA

## HOTEL JEFFERSON

(FIREPROOF)

*One of Iowa's Best*

CAFE AND CAFETERIA  
 GARAGES NEARBY  
 HEADQUARTERS FOR TOURISTS  
 IOWA CITY, IOWA

COPYRIGHTED 1920  
 MIDLAND MAP & ENGINEERING CO.  
 Des Moines, Iowa

**PRICE 25c**

A Belle Plaine entrepreneur wisely advertised the Herring hotel, cafe, garage, and filling station for travelers (map c. 1920.) Right: A 1928 ad for a state bond issue for road improvements promises no extra taxes (*Des Moines Register*).

from the Seedling Mile, bypassing the loop up to Marion. Cedar Rapids was finally successful in wresting the county seat from Marion in November 1919, shortly after completion of the Seedling Mile. This set the stage for bond issues to fund more paving projects.

Marion citizens were "mad as hell" about attempts to cut them off from the Lincoln Highway, according to writer Gregory Franzwa, and rural landowners were loath to agree to road paving funded largely through tax assessments. At least one road meeting in Coggon degenerated into egg-throwing and man-handling of paving proponents. The *Marion Weekly Sentinel* observed "that the goods roads question is one of the most important factors in the progress of a community is certain, and Marion could not afford to be negligent in doing her utmost to keep the Lincoln Highway in the present course."

Nevertheless, the paved shortcut to Cedar Rapids was finally completed in October 1921, providing a direct link to the Lincoln Highway. By 1925, one could drive from Chicago to Cedar Rapids on a continuous paved road, thus sealing the rerouting of the Lincoln Highway directly into Cedar Rapids, bypassing Marion altogether.

The Linn County Seedling Mile was not the first stretch of rural concrete pavement in the state. (That honor went to the 14-foot-wide concrete pavement laid in 1908 near Eddyville's Highland Cemetery.) But while it was Iowa's first "Seedling Mile" along the Lincoln Highway, it would be among the last in the nation because by 1919 the Lincoln Highway Association had concluded that Seedling Miles had served their purpose as object lessons to promote local improvements. World War I "finally made roads a national question instead of a local issue," according to the association. In July 1919, eight months after the armistice, the LHA dramatically demonstrated the need for improved roads; it had persuaded the government to send a military convoy across the country over the Lincoln Highway. The much-publicized trip brought a sense of urgency to the nation's need for reliable roads, and contributed to the successful passage of both local bond initiatives and increased federal funding for highway construction.

The LHA now concentrated in part on developing road standards and proposed constructing an "Ideal Section" as the next object lesson. Recommended features included a 100-foot right-of-way, 10-inch-thick reinforced concrete slab paving, overhead lighting for nighttime driving, rounded corners, shallow curves, guard



# ALL TOGETHER IOWA!



WE'VE GOT TWO WHEELS OUT OF THE MUD NOW!

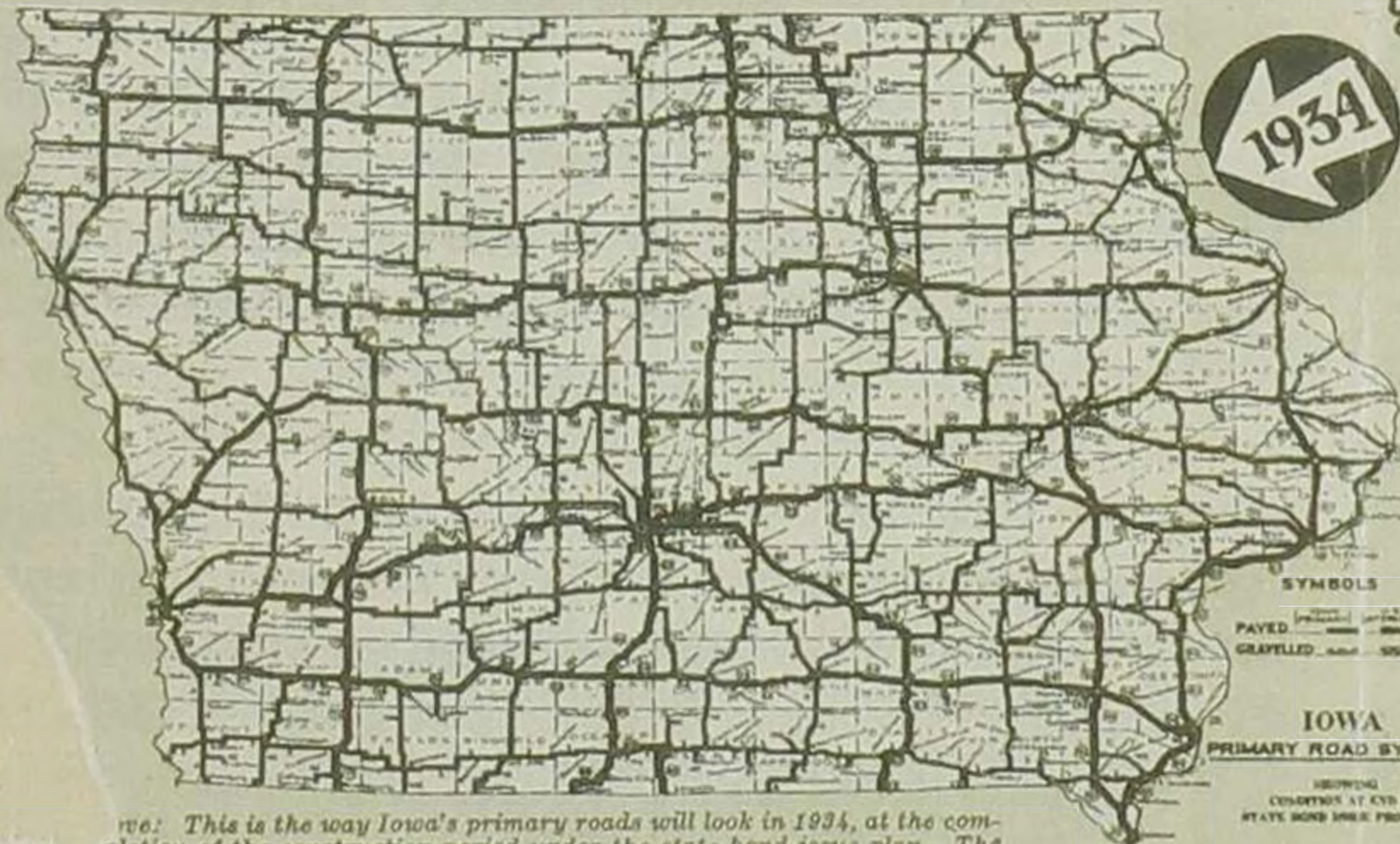
Let's Finish The Job By Voting "Yes"  
On The State Road Bond Issue Tuesday

IOWA will vote on Nov. 6 on whether we shall continue building our highways piecemeal, or adopt business-like methods for immediate construction of a connected state-wide road system.

The state road bond measure provides the following:

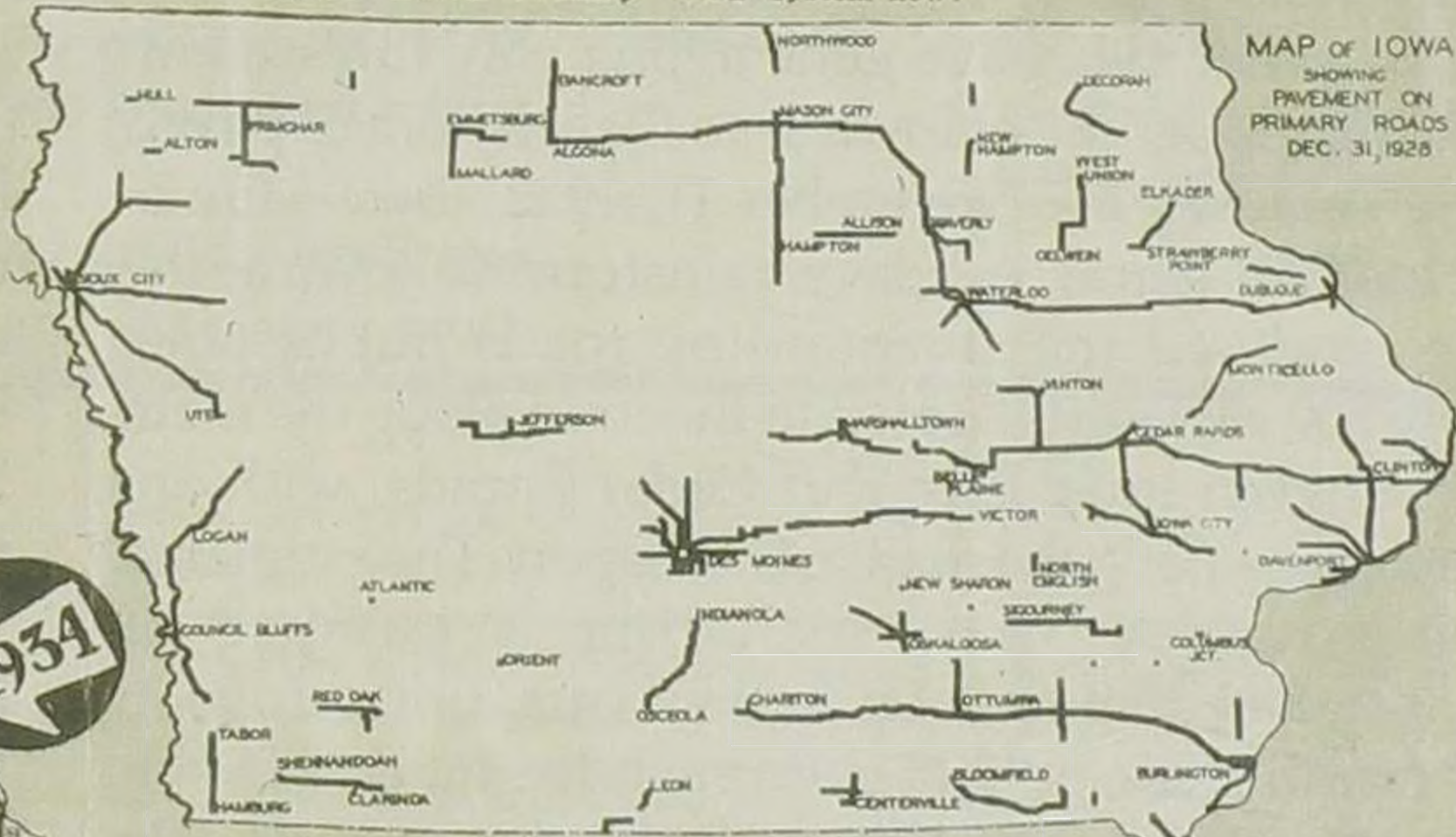
1. 4,933 miles of paving along main-traveled primary roads.
2. Graveling 1,732 miles of connecting primary roads.
3. Issue of not more than \$100,000,000 worth of state bonds to complete the work.
4. Assurance that all interest payments shall be paid for out of the primary road funds, consisting of auto license fees and part of the gasoline tax.
5. Assurance that the bonds will be retired by the primary road funds, without one cent state, county or municipal property tax.
6. Completion of the work within a six-year period.

Without additional taxes, here's what the state bond program promises:



See: This is the way Iowa's primary roads will look in 1934, at the completion of the construction period under the state bond issue plan. The black lines indicate paving, the checkered lines gravel.

Iowa's Paved Primary Road System now:



MAP OF IOWA  
SHOWING  
PAVEMENT ON  
PRIMARY ROADS  
DEC. 31, 1928

Above: It has taken ten years under the county bond plan to build 1,000 miles of disconnected, paved roads as shown above. By comparison with the other map you can see how the state bond plan will complete, in six years, a statewide comprehensive and connected road system.

## Iowa Is Paying for Good Roads Why Not Get Them NOW?

Iowa can have this completed primary road system without adding one cent to present state, county or municipal property taxation. Automobile license fees and the gasoline tax, which will provide funds to retire the bond issue, are fixed by law—AND MUST BE PAID WHETHER THE BOND ISSUE CARRIES OR NOT! If the bond issue carries, we get a connected, state-wide system of paved and graveled primary roads in six years, without extra cost. Early completion of our primary road system will hasten improvement of our secondary roads by many years. If the bond issue fails, we go on paying just as at present, but we will not have a completed primary road system for 16 years. IOWA IS PAYING FOR GOOD ROADS—WHY NOT GET THEM NOW?

This Advertisement Is Inserted and Paid For By the Following Organizations and Individuals Who Believe Approval of the State Road Bond Issue Will Advance the Welfare, Progress and Prosperity of Iowa.

Iowa Harding Highway Association  
Wm. Cochrane, Chairman  
Montgomery County Good Roads Committee  
Henry County Good Roads Committee

Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce  
Brooks Laundry, Fort Dodge  
C. Ed Beman, Chairman  
Oskaloosa Good Roads Committee

Jefferson County Good Roads Committee  
Union County Good Roads Committee  
Bremer County Good Roads Committee

Audubon County Good Roads Committee  
Mills County Good Roads Committee  
Ames Chamber of Commerce

Denison Good Roads Committee  
Anita Good Roads Committee  
Greater Atlantic Club  
A Jefferson Greene County Good Roads Booster

Shenandoah Chamber of Commerce  
Casey Community Club  
Harlan Good Roads Boosters  
Webster County Good Roads Committee

Citizens of Durant  
West Liberty Community Club  
Town of Stuart  
Adair Good Roads Committee  
Adel Good Roads Association

Be Sure To Vote "Yes" On The State Road Bond Issue On Voting Machine Or Separate Ballot



rails, warning signs, removal of visual obstructions, prohibition of advertising signs, underground utilities, dirt shoulders on each side of the pavement, elimination of side ditches, pedestrian footpaths, and abolishment of railroad grade crossings. Public facilities such as restrooms, tourist parks, and campsites were recommended as amenities. Because the Ideal Section was to be built at a flat location that posed no extraordinary drainage challenges, sites in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska were considered. In 1922, the "Ideal Section" was completed in Lake County, Indiana, 40 feet wide and 1.36 miles long, at a cost of over \$166,000.

The Federal Highway Act of 1921 helped clear the way for further paving of the Lincoln Highway in Iowa. But even when Iowa was shamed by the national press for its poor roads, the state legislature was slow to act. By 1922, the state had only 334 miles of paved road—just 5 percent of the total road mileage. According to the LHA, "negative rural sentiment carried the day and the roads stayed dirt" until the unequal property-tax structure that placed a greater burden on the farmer "and created a general dislike for the notion of expensive, high-type roads" was finally relieved by federal funding and amended state law.

One event may have gone a long way towards influencing the people of Iowa as to the wisdom of paved roads. This was the November 11, 1922, Iowa-Minnesota football game. A heavy rainstorm following the game rendered the surrounding roads impassable. Nearly 500 cars mired down in the mud along the main road between Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, with another logjam along the road to Davenport. The estimated 1,500 stranded fans, including a number of out-of-staters, had to sleep in their cars, find refuge in local farmhouses, or trudge through the mud to the interurban railroad. The *Chicago Tribune* even took note of the muddy mess. "Enough was enough," and "the next spring the legislature reversed all previous stands and authorized the counties to issue bonds for road-building, the bonds to be retired from the proceeds of a state gasoline tax." Voters followed suit as counties began to approve bond issues for paving projects across the state.

By 1924, nearly 20 percent of the entire route from New York to San Francisco had been paved, although until that year, the only paved sections of the rural part of the highway in Iowa were in Greene and Linn counties. Part of the delay in paving was due to the State Highway Commission's requirement that extensive preliminary grading must be completed first. The other problem was funding. Between 1919 and 1926, no new county bonds for road improvements were approved.

By 1928, the entire length of the Lincoln Highway across Iowa was either graveled or paved. Within a few years a traveler could drive on pavement all the way from New York to Council Bluffs, where the highway crossed over to Nebraska.

The Federal Highway Act of 1921, a bill that the Lincoln Highway Association had helped draft, had drawn the government directly into the business of building roads for the nation. As the government assumed what the LHA had believed to be its proper role in road construction, the association ceased its central administration role. However, it had not foreseen that this would lead to dismantling both the "Lincoln Highway," as it was known, and the LHA itself. In 1927, having largely fulfilled its original mission, the LHA disbanded and closed its offices. Its last act was enlisting the Boy Scouts of America to memorialize the route by placing 3,000 concrete markers bearing a bronze bust of Lincoln along the entire length of the highway. The highway itself was no longer officially called the Lincoln Highway. Over the objections of the LHA, the coast-to-coast Lincoln Highway had been divided into federal routes 1, 30, 30N, 30S, 530, 40, and 50. In Iowa, the route was designated as Highway 30.

Despite local delays and political controversy, the Seedling Mile program, even in Iowa, had the desired effect; the LHA's "object lesson" had demonstrated the utility and cost effectiveness of concrete pavement for rural roadways. As such, the Seedling Mile played perhaps a small but notable role in helping to bring Iowa "out of the mud," even though it took longer to accomplish than first hoped. By 1930, the *Des Moines Register* was able to proclaim that "Iowa Has Stepped Out of the Mud!" Except for several short segments, Iowa's Lincoln Highway had been completely paved, along with 2,000 other highway miles in the state. ❖

*Leah D. Rogers has been a member of Tallgrass Historians L.C. in Iowa City since December 2001 and is an archaeologist and architectural historian with that firm. Clare L. Kernek has been a research assistant with Tallgrass Historians L.C. since 2002. This article is adapted from their longer work, The Lincoln Highway Association's "Object Lesson": The Seedling Mile in Linn County, Iowa.*



## THE HAPPY VALLEY GAS STATION

The Happy Valley gas station was situated on the south side of the road at the east end of the Seedling Mile in Linn County. The station was built in 1928 by Harry Stoneking, whose family had lived along this roadway long before it became part of the Lincoln Highway. Typical of early gas stations along the Lincoln Highway, this canopied building was across the road from Harry Stoneking's bungalow house, which had been built c. 1913.

Willis Bachman of Cedar Rapids recalled his boyhood days living in the Happy Valley gas station in the years 1938 to 1942. His family rented the station from Harry Stoneking and they managed the business, which sold Skelly gasoline and oil.

Van and Bev Becker of Cedar Rapids recalled, "There were two hand-operated gas pumps and eventually one electric pump. The electric pump was used intermittently as the electric power was not very reliable. The family also operated a lunch counter inside the station.

A row of booths, a counter serving only cold meat sandwiches and pop. No beer. There were two pool tables in a back room (how was it possible to play pool without beer?), a small kitchen that served the entire family, one bedroom barely large enough for two double beds, and an indoor bathroom about the size of a small closet containing only a stool. In the winter the station was heated only by locally cut wood. . . .

"On Sunday mornings, the neighbors would come to the station to pick up their newspapers. By afternoon there were baseball games (home plate was down by the creek; right field up by the highway) and the lunch counter menu expanded to include the only hot food item—hot dogs. By evening, there were midget races. Yes, automobile races! A close neighbor brought a scraper and shaved about 3 inches of sod to form an oval track west of the baseball diamond."

While the gas station itself was never robbed, there was a close brush

with John Dillinger's gang in the late 1930s. One morning the Bachmans awoke to find the highway strewn with newspapers. "It seems that one of the Chicago gangsters (John Dillinger) had a run-in with the local law and was leading a hot pursuit back toward Chicago," Van and Bev Becker said. The gangsters threw out newspapers from their car to plaster the windshields of their pursuers, an attempt that was less than successful and primarily resulted in a mess on the highway. The gangsters managed to escape anyway.

The gas station ceased operations in the 1940s, with the building subsequently converted completely into a residence. More recently it had stood vacant until it was partially demolished a few years ago. The ruin of the gas station today stands sentinel near the east end of the Seedling Mile.

—by Van and Bev Becker,  
with additional comments  
by Leah D. Rogers

### The Linn County Seedling Mile Today

In 2002, the Linn County Engineer's Office reconstructed Mt. Vernon Road from the city limits of Mt. Vernon west to what historically had been the western terminus of the Seedling Mile. The historic right-of-way, drainages, and pavement of the stretch of road that once contained the Seedling Mile were widened and reconstructed. In the process, 48 percent of the Seedling Mile pavement was overlaid with new concrete, and 52 percent of the older pavement completely replaced. Steps were taken in the design and materials of the new roadway to pay homage to the historical significance of the Seedling Mile. These steps included use of concrete surface pavement for this nearly one-mile stretch, with scored lines demarcating an older pavement width, and a stone marker with the Lincoln Highway Association logo placed near the west end of the Seedling Mile, among other actions. A booklet, *The Lincoln Highway Association's "Object Lesson": The Seedling Mile in Linn County, Iowa* (2004) was published as the final contribution to the commemoration of the Seedling Mile in association with the Mt. Vernon Road reconstruction project.

### NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources include: Rebecca Conard, "The Lincoln Highway in Greene County" (National Register of Historic Places MPDF, 1992); *The Complete Official Road Guide to the Lincoln Highway*, various editions; Decision Data and Tallgrass Historians L.C., "The Lincoln Highway: Historic Byway Inventory and Evaluation" (Ames: Iowa Dept. of Transportation, 1998); Drake Hokanson, "Seedling Mile: The first mile of concrete highway paving in Linn County was fine if you could get to it," *Iowan* 17 (Fall 1968); Iowa [State] Highway Commission, *Service Bulletin*, 1919 and 1921; Henry B. Joy, "What the Lincoln Highway Means to the Countryside," *Countryside Magazine* (June 1915); *The Lincoln Highway: The Story of a Crusade that Made Transportation History* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935); Lincoln Highway Association, *A Picture of Progress on the Lincoln Way* (Detroit: Lincoln Highway Association, 1920), and *An "Ideal Section" on The Lincoln Highway* (Detroit, c. 1920); Richard J. Maturi, *American History* (June/July 1994); George May, "The Good Roads Movement in Iowa," *Palimpsest* (February 1965); Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers and Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Lena Sweeten, "Concrete Pavement at 330th, Eddyville, Wapello County, Iowa," Iowa Site Inventory Form 62-00026, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines (1998); contemporary and current-day articles in the *Lincoln Highway Forum*; and newspaper articles and city and county directories. Other sources include: Chronology and Outline of the Activities of the Lincoln Highway Association: 1908-1928, Lincoln Highway Collection Catalogue, Transportation History Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; material in the Iowa Department of Transportation Library, Ames; Linn County Board of Supervisors minutes; and Iowa Highway Commission records. For the Happy Valley Gas Station, see Iowa Site Inventory Form 57-00681, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, and Van and Bev Baker, "Have Spare Tire, Will Travel," *Along the Lincoln Highway*, vol. 5, nos. 2, 3. The *Mt. Vernon Record*, *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and *Marion Weekly Sentinel* traced the construction and controversy in Linn County. See also the interviews by Lisa Randolph with Liz Michaels, Public Affairs Manager, Lehigh Cement Company, Mason City, August 18, 2003, and Tracy Farrell, Human Resources Director, Holcim, Inc., Mason City, August 19, 2003; Leah Rogers interviewed Jean Stoneking Moore in person on November 11, 1993. The booklet (see left) is fully annotated.