

# A Nevada View of the Lincoln Highway

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In the period following the organization of the Lincoln Highway Association in 1913 and before the completion of all route studies, Vice-president Carl Fisher was adamant that no routes would be announced. While the investigation of possible routes was underway, assurances were put forth that the route would be as direct and straight as geography would allow. This principle was not to be compromised by the highway's wandering from city to city, but rather it should be "as straight as a string."

Meanwhile, early in 1913, the Hoosier Motor Club at Indianapolis (at that time a city as important to the young automotive industry as were Detroit and Chicago) was planning its annual Four State Tour. The idea was suggested to make the 1913 tour a trip to the Pacific Coast. They persuaded Fisher, founder of the Indianapolis Speedway, to sponsor the trip. Word of the tour traveled west like wildfire, creating a great interest in the emerging Lincoln Highway plan. Fisher held fast to his belief that no specific routing would be endorsed until the entire route had been investigated. This mandate, coupled with the straight-line, shortest-distance philosophy, guided the Hoosier expedition, and much of its route was later incorporated into the final Lincoln Highway plan.

In Nevada a reception was arranged for the Hoosier expedition by Gael S. Hoag, an Ely mining and insurance businessman and a Good Roads advocate. As organizer and secretary of the Nevada division of the American Automobile Association, Hoag headed a delegation of eight cars from Ely to meet the expedition at Kearney's Ranch (Callao, Utah). Hoag's entourage led the Hoosier Motor Club tour from Callao via Ibapah to the state line and down the road that was later to be both the Lincoln Highway and Nevada State Highway. At Ely the group was met by Nevada Governor Tasker L. Oddie, who traveled with Fisher across the state. During the trip Governor Oddie "promised he would call a special session of the legislature, if need be, to act on any proposals the Lincoln Highway Association might put before it."

The publicity generated by the Hoosier Motor Club tour caught the imagination of enough state and county officials across the nation that the Lincoln Highway Association was given a place on the agenda of the National Conference of Governors held in Colorado Springs in August 1913. During the conference a route was finally presented. The plan connected existing turnpikes, county and farm roads, western wagon roads, and established trails that, according to Fisher, would then be paved or improved and marked as one continuous road.

LHA officers and staff presented the governors an illustrative and upbeat explanation of the Lincoln Highway development to date, explaining the financial arrangements—Fisher's strategy to raise \$10 million from public memberships, the automotive industry, and automotive-associated businesses.

The highway then was described as nothing but a "red line on the map." In a sense, the description was accurate, for west of Pittsburgh it lacked any semblance of a travelable route, and in all its length, from coast to coast, there were but 650 miles of good macadam or stone road. Nor was there any paving on it outside the corporate limits of cities. To that extent its merely a line, but that line stood for an objective toward which the association proposed to work

even if, as the directors believed, twenty years should be required for attainment.

“What we really had in mind,” said Henry B. Joy, LHA president, “was not to build a road but to procure the building of many roads, by educating the people. Beyond question we did bring about what is known as the Good Roads Movement in America. We knew that a real road across the country would have to come; our problem was to get steam behind the idea.”<sup>1</sup>

The governors were to fire the boiler for the first steam. While the state executives looked at the red line on the map, Joy, Fisher, and Arthur Pardington, also an LHA vice-president, formally asked them to lead their states in support of the Lincoln Highway. They outlined the reasons for choosing the route shown and underscored the fallacy of acceding to local clamors for diversion from the red line on the map.

It was pointed out that a transcontinental highway that wound from large city to large city, from one wonder of nature to another, would constitute a devious and winding journey. The founding principle was to stimulate travel across the nation using the straightest course that geography and weather would allow.

The arguments were persuasive, and the road alignment presented to the governors was very close to what became the actual route. There was one exception. The Colorado delegation insisted on a major detour. It involved a circuitous diversion from Julesburg to Denver, then back to Cheyenne, Wyoming. In spite of the Colorado-demanded sashay, which was included, the governors’ endorsement left unchanged a debated alignment connecting Nebraska to Wyoming. A resolution was then presented to the conference requesting that “copies of these resolutions be sent to the President of the United States, to the Governor of each state, to the Members of the National Congress, and to the Members of the Legislature of each state.”

The route had been chosen, and the association’s statement reinforced Joy’s policy of a road “as direct as practicable considering the limitations by Nature in the topography of the country.”

The state of Nevada officially joined the effort on October 29, 1913, when Governor Oddie issued a Nevada Lincoln Highway proclamation and forwarded his own five-dollar contribution to the Lincoln Highway Association secretary.

The money that Fisher had raised was earmarked to help local governments take part in improving the selected routes through their areas. The major contributors by the end of 1913 numbered over fifty companies and individuals. An additional list of financial supporters of the association grew as time went by and included a stellar array of the top organizations and personalities among the automotive, road building, newspaper, and cement industries. Further backing came from allied interests, including the League of American Wheelmen, state and national automobile associations, and the National Good Roads Association; these were banded together under a general heading of “good roads activists,” all of whom supported the efforts of the Lincoln Highway Association.

Fisher took advantage of every gimmick he could to further his project. He realized the need for a tangible goal to motivate others to complete his dream highway. So he aimed for providing nationwide automobile access to the Panama Pacific Exposition in the spring of 1915, which was to celebrate the building of the Panama Canal, one of the greatest engineering projects of all time. His strategy was to underline the urgency in achieving, at least in a substantial degree, the coast-to-coast rock road.

Unfortunately, as the Fisher dream was beginning to take physical and fiscal form, the mechanism to make the dream reality was hampered by lack of organization among the road-planning entities of the states and counties along the way. Almost all road building that had been done to date was due to the efforts of the local towns and counties. As late as 1912, there were

only two effective state highway offices in the nation and they were short on engineering capabilities and maintenance experience. Almost universally, political agendas, rather than traffic needs, guided local efforts. What little road construction there was that reached beyond a few main streets within the town limits was not well correlated with rural needs.

In 1912 the U.S. Agriculture Department, which operated the Office of Public Roads, was compelled by Congress to estimate the funds expended for roads, because the few states with highway departments had expenditure records ranging from pitiful to nonexistent. When the survey was completed it revealed that only twenty-eight states had spent any money at all on new roads.

LHA officials recognized the lack of state highway financial and construction operations. They decided to solve the problem by approaching a long string of counties across the twelve original states that fell within the alignment of the Lincoln Highway route plan. In each county they located a “good roads advocate” and appointed him as a Lincoln Highway consul. These consuls provided leadership in crystallizing public support for the Lincoln Highway in their community or town and recruited other local consuls. State and district consuls were also appointed, resulting in three or four levels of organization among local residents who were enthusiastic about the Lincoln Highway.

The major achievement of structuring the national grassroots effort was accomplished by Henry Ostermann. He brought with him a background of railroad operation and equipment engineering which was followed by firsthand experience in the developing automotive business. He was added early to the association’s staff as field secretary. In addition to naming consuls, his duty was to contact wealthy citizens along the proposed route to induce them to subscribe funds. He frequently traveled along the proposed highway, arousing interest in the LHA plan, recruiting members to the association and issuing annual association membership certificates in return for a donation of five dollars. He also helped acquire donated cement for the counties through an arrangement made by the association with the Portland cement industry.

Ostermann often used his camera to document both the problems and the achievements of the project. His incomparable dedication to the association’s goals earned him respect and admiration from all he encountered. The growing scope and stature of the project soon caught the attention of citizens and the news media.

As the activities of the association grew, the local and state citizenry came to realize that their ambitions could best be served by enthusiastically embracing the plans and funding provided by the association.

While some lobbied and appealed for state and federal governmental support, the Lincoln Highway Association gathered private funds, befriended local road agencies with engineering ‘help,’ and provided leadership in getting each to improve the mapped section through their county.

Typical of the early efforts were the activities of the state of Nevada and of particular interest, are the efforts of Churchill County.

Nevada, in the view of the Lincoln Highway development, presented a unique exercise in both topography and population density. Nevada was also unique in that it had the enthusiastic support of three of its leaders, who had early embraced the Fisher and Joy dream.

The three were Governor Oddie, Hoag of Ely, and I. H. Kent of Fallon. On the day of Governor Oddie’s return from the Colorado Springs National Governors’ Conference of 1913, he issued a Nevada Lincoln Highway Proclamation. He sent copies of the document to all the newspapers along the recently-announced path of the highway through Nevada. The governor was a steadfast

supporter of good roads in general and the Lincoln Highway project in particular and carried forward that enthusiasm when he represented Nevada in the U.S. Senate.

From Ely came Gael Hoag. At that time he was occupied with mining promotion and the fire insurance business. Schooled at the University of Michigan, he gained early exposure to the West as a newspaperman with Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* and later with the Cripple Creek (Cob.) *Times Citizen*. He attributed his awakening to highway interests to the New York-to-Paris Auto Race of 1908, much of which was run along a route in the U.S. that would later be developed as the Lincoln Highway. His interest in the highway problems led him to organize the Nevada State Automobile Association. He was the LHA Nevada State Consul from the time he was recruited in 1913 until 1920, when he resigned the post to become Oysterman's successor as field secretary of the association. I. H. Kent, a businessman and leader in the Churchill County Chamber of Commerce, was appointed by State Consul Hoag to represent the Lincoln Highway interests in Churchill County. Kent almost immediately gathered an enthusiastic cadre of believers to help with the county and state interest in promoting the ideals of the association, and he took action to accomplish the physical work required to build the highway in Churchill County and Fallon. He soon gained a statewide reputation as one who led the road improvement movement with a strong focus on the Lincoln Highway.

Hoag continued to organize the Nevada Association by recruiting local leaders. His Automobile Association efforts paid off, and he managed to choose the right people as his associates in the Lincoln Highway efforts. Consuls were put in place in twelve areas: local consuls at Austin, Carson City, Ely, Eureka, and two in Reno. Four county consuls were appointed in Lander County, White Pine County, Eureka County, and Churchill County.

In the meantime several important national decisions put three western states in continuing turmoil. The problems that developed were rooted in both political and population concerns and revolved around competing proposals for an eastern Utah route. The state government of Utah was happy to have the Lincoln Highway directed through Salt Lake City and made special efforts to bring the road that far, but there the problems began. The line west of Salt Lake City followed, in general, the Pony Express route as far as Shelburne, in White Pine County, Nevada. However, tourism advocates in Utah wanted motorists to turn south at Salt Lake City and work their way to Los Angeles by traveling the length of Utah, leaving tourist dollars along the way. In 1913 and through most of the next twelve years, on-again-off-again negotiations were undertaken between the Lincoln Highway Association and the State of Utah, the State of Nevada, and even interests in California.

Finally, after the 1921 Federal Highway Act became operative, in May of 1923, the Bureau of Public Roads of the U.S. Agriculture Department agreed to a meeting with the Lincoln Highway Association and representatives of Nevada, Utah, and California interests. In Washington, at a meeting before which Agriculture Secretary Henry C. Wallace presided, there gathered a galaxy of highway notables such as had seldom before been assembled. The subject before them was the building of a viable, all-season road across the salt flats from Salt Lake to Wendover, Utah, known as the "Liquid Highway." The secretary "solved" the problem by proposing a plan by which the funds for the primary road program were to be allocated by the Bureau of Public Roads. The bureau approved funds for the Salt Lake City-to-Wendover road, thus leaving the Salt Lake to Los Angeles route across Utah unfunded. The "War of the Liquid Highway" had been won by advocates of the direct route.

After two years of failure and three full-scale attempts to keep the new Salt Lake! Wendover road from washing away with the seasonal spring rains; it was finally stabilized for all-weather

traffic late in 1925. This affected the traffic density of the Lincoln Highway and resulted in a real need for Nevada to build a road between Scheilbourne and Wendover. The new section of road was undertaken as soon as funding became available. It was completed in 1930 and was quickly adorned with Lincoln Highway red, white and blue signs.

The Lincoln Highway Association of Nevada produced a pamphlet in 1930 entitled *The Trail of Memories*, subtitled *A Dream Come True*. It notes, "Reaching from New York to San Francisco, the Lincoln Highway is 3,143 miles in length. It bisects the heart of the United States, serves 60% of the population and is directly available to 67% of the registered automobiles."

Both Nevada and California had alternate routes of the Lincoln Highway, due to conditions over the Sierra Nevada. In Nevada, the difficulty of crossing Donner Summit via Verdi and Truckee prompted the selection of an alternate route west beginning at Reno and going through Carson City to the scenic Lake Tahoe route by way of Glenbrook and Lakeside near the state line. This prompted California to designate two versions of the highway as well—one through Truckee and one south of Lake Tahoe through Placerville, both joining again at Sacramento.

In 1921 the Nevada legislature added the section of Nevada State Route 2 to the Lincoln Highway between Leeteville junction just west of Fallon and Carson City.

In the meantime, Fallon had become an activity center on the Lincoln Highway, both politically and socially. Its hotels had become well known among travelers, as evidenced by the Overland Hotel's ad in the 1916 LHA *Guide* claiming that they were "just an easy day's ride from Austin." *The Churchill County Eagle* of the era is replete with stories of the growing parade of tourists, usually detailing their names, points of origin and destination, and often describing the cars they were driving.

A high point in LHA plans for the Fallon area was reached on October 13, 1915. On that date Ostermann spoke to a public gathering there. He also met with the Churchill County consul, I. H. Kent, and the various highway-related committees of the Churchill County Chamber of Commerce. While in town he stayed at the Overland Hotel.

A five-vehicle convoy from the association had earlier spent time in Fallon during their production of a coast-to-coast motion picture of America as seen from the Lincoln Highway. (See *Forum*, Vol. I, No. 4) The movie production crew made stops all along the route. The filming at Fallon turned out very well, showcasing the agriculture and commerce of the area. Upon completion, the film was shown continuously at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition and was displayed in the Transportation Palace at the Lincoln Highway's picture mural exhibit.

At the close of the exposition, when on its way home to Detroit, the three-hour film was shown at many highway locations that had supported the project. It was shown at the Rex Theater in Fallon on January 3, 1916, to a packed house, running almost continuously from late morning until nearly midnight. School was adjourned at noon to allow children to go to the theater, see the entire film, and still get home at the regular time.

At a later date, Churchill County was provided with LHA funds to weatherproof sections of the road on the Eight Mile Flat and the Four Mile Flat east of Fallon. Both the Fallon Flats and Frenchman Flat sections of the road were also recipients of LHA assistance. The association moved to make good on their plans and promises to Churchill County and to show good faith, they placed \$20,000 in escrow in Nevada banks.<sup>8</sup> However, legal difficulties interposed, and it was not for several years, until after a constitutional amendment had been adopted, that Nevada could accept the money.

By that time, much more was needed. "It developed that Nevada, once she swung into action,

would be able to use considerably more than the \$30,000 remaining in what was called the Willys-Overland Fund.” The directors asked several leaders in the automotive industry to talk the matter over with them. At a gathering in Detroit, the field secretary was called upon to name the points at which he felt outside aid would be needed to bring the entire Lincoln Highway in Nevada up to the standard demanded by the traffic.

One by one he rattled them off, with mileages and other data.

“What will it cost to take care of them all?” demanded W. C. Durant, president of the General Motors Corporation

“A hundred thousand dollars,” was the answer.

“All right, we’ll take that,” snapped the motor magnate. “What’s the next order of business?”

And so it came about that instead of Willys-Overland money being used in Nevada, the association in 1919 offered the state a total of \$104,000, including the \$100,000 General Motors Trust Fund.

Nevada accepted and used during the ensuing six years \$75,296.60. As a result of this contribution Nevada was able to construct 103.0 miles of road, costing \$1,299,732.93.

The construction projects were:

1. Across the Fallon Flats, in Churchill County.
2. Across Frenchman Flat, in Churchill County.
3. Over Carroll Summit, in Lander and Churchill counties.
4. Between the Eureka/White Pine County line and the Devil’s Gate, twelve miles west of Eureka.

Nearly \$20,000 was returned to General Motors.

In the summer of 1920, Ostermann was killed in an auto rollover accident near Tama, Iowa. From the start of his tenure, he had been a leading force in the organization. His death was compounded in Nevada when state good roads advocates also lost their close relationship with Hoag, who filled Ostermann’s position.

Nevada’s loss, however, was, in retrospect, a true gain for the whole movement. Hoag remained on the association staff, first as field secretary and later as general secretary until its dissolution. In that position, he was able to pull together all of the scattered segments of the association. Typical of his administrative action was the practice of having each state consul telegraph a road condition report to Detroit on Wednesday night each week. By Thursday morning a consolidated Lincoln Highway condition report went out by telegraph to approximately 1,500 newspapers situated along the highway. In a peak year, the Detroit office was handling between 1,400 and 1,500 pieces of mail each day with a staff of general manager, secretary, two stenographers, a cashier/bookkeeper, and a mailing clerk.

As the Lincoln Highway Association continued its work, a federal roads program also began to take shape. Although the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 provided matching funds on a fifty/fifty basis, World War I overshadowed the highway efforts and the full benefits of the 1916 Act were not realized.

The Federal Highway Act of 1921, however, continued to provide the matching funds and created the pattern for interstate planning incorporating each state’s road plans. The act specified that certain coexisting roads be qualified as federally assisted roads and must include “projects as will expedite the completion of an adequate and connected system of highways, interstate in character.”

The creation of the federally designated Federal Highway Act of 1925, GPO. highways came with the 1925 Federal Aid Road Act. The colorful highway and trail names were replaced by a

numbering system. The Lincoln Highway was predominantly designated U.S. 30. However, in the Pacific Slope states the Lincoln Highway was variously designated as U.S. 40 and U.S. 50. The route across Nevada followed a line similar to the Pony Express trail. The Lincoln Highway adopted this alignment as Nevada Route 2, much of which, under the 1925 act, became U.S. 50. Although the government mandated in the highway numbering regulations that all non-government signs and markers be removed, the Lincoln Highway Association petitioned for and received permission to place concrete posts bearing the familiar red, white, and blue Lincoln logo along the route. Adorned with a small bronze medallion bearing Lincoln's likeness, 3,000 of these markers were planted along the route by Boy Scouts on September 1, 1928. The petition to place commemorative markers along the highway was the last official act of the Lincoln Highway Association. Ironically, the very highway system the association helped create also rendered it unnecessary.

During the summer of 1929, after the Lincoln Highway Association had ceased operations, Hoag left Detroit for his new home in Oakland, California.

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## Lincoln Highway Proclamation

Friday the 31st day of October by statute a legal holiday is the 39th anniversary of the admission of Nevada into the Union, the only state admitted during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. It happens that on the evening of this day in all the cities and towns of all the states through which the proposed Lincoln Highway will pass public service will be held celebrating the name of the route and testifying to public cooperation in support of this great beneficial enterprise in memory of Abraham Lincoln and which will bind the nation together in yet closer ties. It is therefore fitting and proper that Nevada as well hold such services and that in such manner we evidence our purpose of cooperation to aid in the realization of this great achievement.

I therefore urge and recommend that on such evening public service be held and in further compliance with the services proposed to be held in other states on such route that on Sunday November 2nd the clergy in our churches take as a subject for their sermons the life and ideals of the great Abraham Lincoln with the view of impressing the same upon the younger generation in testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused to be affixed the great seal of the State of Nevada done at Carson City this 29th of October AD. 1913.

-Tasker L. Oddie, Governor

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