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The Kansas Root of the Interstate Highway System

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Space Below
Kim Eichler Messmer

THE KANSAS ROOT OF THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

A significant stretch of highway lies in the northeastern Flint Hills of Kansas on Interstate 70 between Valencia Road and Maple Hill Road.

These are the first eight miles of interstate highway completed after the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. People traveling on this stretch of road today may find it difficult to imagine our country without the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System, but from these eight miles of highway grew a public road system which now contains 46,876 miles of highway in all 50 states.

AN EISENHOWER PRIORITY

The interstate highway system was a priority for President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a significant accomplishment to meet the challenges posed by a growing post-World War II America.

As a young Army lieutenant colonel in 1919, the future president participated in a transcontinental Army convoy and became convinced of the country's need for better, safer and speedier highways. As a general in Europe during World War II, Eisenhower saw and experienced the benefits of the German autobahns. By the time he became president, Eisenhower knew that the newer, multi-lane highways would be essential to fuel a growing postwar economy and provide for a strong national defense.

In 1919, it took over two months for the Army convoy to make the trip from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco over roads and bridges that often had to be repaired in transit. For a nation emerging from World War II with global diplomatic, economic and strategic responsibilities, this situation was unacceptable. National

unity, prosperity and defense hinged on the ability to move people, goods and materials safely, efficiently and cost-effectively from one end of the country to the other.

Eisenhower tapped Army Gen. Lucius Clay to study this problem. Clay had served as U.S. commissioner in Germany and witnessed, himself, the value of the autobahn system to German recovery after the war. He proposed a 30-year plan to upgrade the nation's roadways.

Eisenhower wanted it done in 10.

In 1955 and again in 1956, Eisenhower appealed to Congress to pass the legislation necessary to provide the country with the road system he was convinced was vital to the nation's future development.

In his 1956 State of the Union address, he stated: "Legislation to provide a modern, interstate highway system is even more urgent this year than last, for 12 months have now passed in which we have fallen further behind in road construction needed for the personal safety, the general prosperity, the national security of the American people. During the year, the number of motor vehicles has increased from 58 to 61 million. During the past year over 38,000 persons lost their lives in highway accidents, while the fearful toll of injuries and property damage has gone on unabated.

"In my message of February 22, 1955, I urged that measures be taken to complete the vital 40,000-mile interstate system over

a period of 10 years at an estimated Federal cost of approximately 25 billion dollars. No program was adopted. If we are ever to solve our mounting traffic problem, the whole interstate system must be authorized as one project, to be completed approximately within the specified time. Only in this way can industry efficiently gear itself to the job ahead. Only in this way can the required planning and engineering be accomplished without the confusion and waste unavoidable in a piecemeal approach."

INNOVATIVE FINANCING

Eisenhower was aware that a public works project of this magnitude would be costly, yet he insisted that the cost be borne in a fiscally responsible way. He told Congress and the country that "the pressing nature of this problem must not lead us to solutions outside the bounds of sound fiscal management." To pay for the program, he created an innovative financing plan with the beneficiaries of the program bearing most of its cost.

Through a nominal national tax on gasoline and petroleum products, the users of the nation's highways would provide the monies to cover the costs without adding to the national debt. With revenues raised from the gasoline tax, states were reimbursed 90% of construction costs for building interstate highways through their lands, making it possible for systematic and

simultaneous construction of the nation's strategic roadways. On June 29, 1956, from a hospital bed in Walter Reed Army Hospital, where he was recovering from surgery for ileitis, Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act.

On November 14, 1956, in the Flint Hills just west of Topeka, those first eight miles of interstate highway were opened. The roadway followed the route of old U.S. Highway 40 between Valencia Road and Maple Hill Road.

CHANGING THE NATION

Eisenhower said of the interstate system, "More than any single action by the government since the war [World War II], this one would change the face of America." And it did.

Interstates connected the country to make moving goods and services quicker and easier than ever before. They expanded economic opportunities and provided jobs that led to continued postwar prosperity. They paved the way for the development of a growing middle class, which had the

disposable income to buy houses and consumer goods only imagined by previous generations.

The new interstates connected homes and workplaces like never before, helping to spawn the nation's car culture, youth culture and suburban lifestyle, which became the foundation of the American dream.

Creation of the interstate system also pointed politics in a new direction, suggesting that it was possible to both finance large public programs and have fiscally responsible federal budgets. It demonstrated that federal and state governments could work together in common cause, achieving solutions to national problems that benefitted all.

From eight miles of Flint Hills roadway grew a road network that testified to a bigger, grander, more prosperous America. The interstate highway system became the backbone of America's transportation network and helped the nation in the postwar era to deliver on the promise of the American dream.

Jim Ginther currently serves as the supervisory archivist at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas. He holds a doctorate in military history with a minor in archival science from Texas Tech University and a Master of Arts in American history with a minor in public history from Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. He served as an archivist with the Vietnam Archive and Southwest Collection at Texas Tech, as well as with the Archives Branch of the Marine Corps Historical Division at Quantico, Virginia. His mother's family has deep roots in Kansas. He currently lives in Salina with his wife, Vicky, and their cat, Scrappy.