

The Lincoln Highway

BEAVER, Iowa (AP) – The road zigged and zagged past farm fields, snaked in and out of river valleys on steep hills and sliced through the heart of towns as large as Cedar Rapids and as small as Beaver.

Mud gooier than wet concrete swallowed cars to their axles after spring rains. Swirling dust blinded drivers in the summer and ruts ran forever in the frozen dirt of winter.

Traveling the Lincoln Highway, the nation's first coast-to-coast highway, through Iowa and other states at the dawn of the 20th century wasn't merely a trip. It was an expedition.

In the next few days, the National Park Service will release the results of a study, commissioned by Congress in 2000, on how best to showcase what remains of the historic route.

It ran from Times Square in New York to Lincoln Park in San Francisco and passed right through the heart of Iowa, mostly along the corridor for what is now U.S. Highway 30.

Local efforts to save stretches of roadway, bridges, old cafes and tourist courts have been going on for years. Preservationists believe federal involvement would enhance those projects.

"It makes us part of a large group. It makes each individual project part of a great set of sites," said Mike Kelly, president of the Iowa Lincoln Highway Association. "There's strength in numbers, I guess, rather than being kind of isolated."

Today, Route 66 is the best-known historic highway, a trip back in time for lovers of 1940s and '50s kitsch. John Steinbeck called it the "Mother Road" in "Grapes of Wrath." It was immortalized in the Nat King Cole song, "Get your kicks, on Route 66," and served as the backdrop for a 1960s television series featuring two guys in a Corvette.

The Lincoln Highway's claim to TV fame: a 1990 appearance by Belle Plaine garage owner George Preston on "The Tonight Show."

But in its day, the Lincoln Highway was the king of the roads. It, too, had a song: "Hi there stranger, going my way, east and west on the Lincoln Highway." There was a radio show about the Lincoln Highway, a board game, even a cigar. And to this day, numerous city streets still bear the road's imprint – Lincolnway.

"Route 66 played a different role in society. It was more about the populating of California," said Ruth Heikkinen, who coordinated the Park Service study. "The Lincoln was not about emigrating and populating. It was more of a test of what roads can do in

America."

The study will list options for preserving and commemorating the route, laid out 91 years ago.

One possibility is creating a National Lincoln Highway Program that would fund preservation with federal grants. Another is to declare segments of the highway a national heritage area. A third proposal would establish a series of "discovery hubs" along the route to tell the history of the road.

The recommendations, which will include a preferred alternative, will go to Interior Secretary Gale Norton for her review and then on to Congress.

Lawmakers could do nothing, fund one of the recommendations or come up with their own plan.

"It kind of depends on who they're getting lobbied by, the mood they're in and the politics at the time," Heikkinen said.

Heikkinen drew together experts from a variety of fields, including geography, historic preservation, engineering, the environment and highway administration.

The entire route was mapped in detail and public hearings were held in 10 cities. Some local road departments were reluctant to accept any more involvement in their projects, Heikkinen said, but generally, the idea of a coordinated effort to preserve the highway was well received.

"Probably 99 percent of the comments were that they loved the fact that somebody even said the Lincoln Highway," she said.

If nothing else, the Lincoln Highway Association in Iowa hopes the study leads to marking the highway's original route through the state, a project that could bring tourist dollars to communities bypassed by modern roads.

Following U.S. 30 today is easy. It's much harder to find earlier reminders of the highway – the wood-floored bridge that carried traffic over the railroad in Mount Vernon, a concrete corner marker in Boone, the gravel section north of Beaver in Boone County that runs over what is believed to be the only rainbow arch bridge left on the entire 3,400-mile route.

Why bother about a highway that has been abandoned in many areas and little used in others? Those championing the route believe it's a critical piece of history in a country heavily dependent on cars and roads. It was the forerunner of today's interstate system.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, then a young Army officer, rode in a convoy that crossed the country on the highway in 1919. The trip helped Ike understand the need for good roads and, as president in 1956, he signed the Interstate Highway Act.

"The story is how roads were built then and how it's done today," said Bob Ausberger, a Lincoln Highway Association member in Jefferson. "If you don't have examples of how they were built, it's hard to appreciate some of the things we have today."

That contrast is apparent near Ausberger's home.

The old Lincoln Highway bends in a 35 mph curve as it drops into the Raccoon River valley west of Jefferson, crosses the river on a bridge supported by five stylish arches, then runs up an incline known as Danger Hill – it was cut and graded by horse-drawn equipment – before sweeping left in another 35 mph curve.

Burma Shave signs line the old route both east and west of Jefferson. One reads:

Don't pass cars

On curve or hill

If the cops

Don't get you

Morticians will

Burma Shave

Just two miles to the north, the modern highway runs straight and true, less scenic but certainly safer. The original route through Greene County had 32 curves. Modern U.S. 30 has three gentle half curves in the county.

"Iowa has these great, pristine sections," said Kevin Patrick, a geography professor who directed the mapping of the route for the NPS. "If somebody from the 1920s was transported into the future, they'd feel right at home in those areas."