



Dixie Highway brought Tennessee odd publicity

Today, highways have numbers. In the old days, they had names. There was a time, for instance, when two of the state's most important roads were known as the western and eastern legs of the Dixie Highway.

Since the Dixie Highway was the first major thoroughfare connecting North and South, its emergence was rather important. Prior to its development, people who tried to drive from North to South were in for an adventure — never certain if the road would be paved or what road would lead from one small town to another along the way.

Around 1914, industrialist and auto enthusiast Carl Fisher came up with the idea for a single, marked road that would lead all the way from Mackinaw City, Mich., to Miami. In April of that year a group of governors from seven states met in Chattanooga and mapped out the course. It would be known as the Dixie Highway, and it would have a west route and an east route.

The west route, which had more traffic, went through Chicago, Indianapolis, Louisville, Ky., and Nashville. The east route passed through Toledo, Ohio, Cincinnati, Lexington, Ky., and Knoxville. Both highways met in Chattanooga and were linked through much of Georgia before splitting up again and heading to different parts of Florida. Chattanooga and Atlanta were the only two notable cities located on both east and west routes of the Dixie Highway.

To a nation used to rail travel, the freedom of such a highway was exciting. Chicago officials were so anxious to dedicate the road that they organized a motorcade that left the Windy City on Oct. 9, 1915.

Things started off all right, with the dignitaries making speeches in towns along the way. But it was an ill-advised trip. After the motorcade crossed the Ohio River, the roads deteriorated. After tolling 12 hours to drive the 164-mile leg from Elizabethtown, Ky., to Nashville, Fisher sent the following message back to the Chicago Tribune: "We don't want tourists to make this trip for a year," said Fisher, who later organized the Indianapolis 500. "If they came now, they would regret it."

For the next few years, northern newspapers kept tabs on the state of the Dixie Highway. It was, for a while, paved, smooth and well-marked in some areas while impassable in others. And it was quite an adventure to leave Chicago for Florida with no road map and no assurance of where you could find

services along the way. Since hotels were scarce, boarding often had to be obtained at random farmhouses.

One article advised that everyone who braved the journey take with them an extra long tow rope, a spade and a lantern. Gas prices went up the further south you went. "If the price in Chicago is 12 cents a gallon, it will be about 15 cents in Kentucky, 18 cents in Tennessee, 20 cents in Georgia and 22 cents in Florida," the Tribune said.

But the biggest hazards were mud and treacherous roads. And nowhere were the roads as bad as they were in the Volunteer State. "Tennessee's showing is the worst of any of the southern states on the highway," the Tribune reported about that time.

A few months later, the Chicago paper advised tourists to drive to Nashville and board the train rather than brave the drive. "In heavy weather ... he (the tourist) would be advised to ship his car between Nashville and Chattanooga, with the assurance that he is over the worst of his troubles," it reported.

Warnings aside, drivers still tried to make it from Nashville to Chattanooga, and they often had quite a tale to tell when they came home. "For 15 miles we wound up hill on a road that was more like a rocky creek bed out of place," one driver wrote, talking about the trek near Monteagle. "Recent rains had completely washed away the surface, leaving an interminable stretch of ruts and chuck holes where only fool's luck kept the car from hanging up."

A few months later, the Tribune reported that 50 percent of the tourists who braved the Nashville-to-Chattanooga route had to be pulled out of ditches along the way, and their mileage was limited to 50 miles a day or less.

The American entry into World War I brought development of the Dixie Highway to a halt. But it picked up again after the war, and eventually engineers and construction workers won the battle against erosion and Mother Nature. By the 1920s, the Dixie Highway became a symbol of progress — something that even Tennessee could be proud of.

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