

America the Beautiful

Land of Scenic Byways

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In the 1962 book *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck described his circumnavigation of the United States in Rocinante, his jury-rigged camper. He dawdled for the most part, avoiding the superhighways that were sprouting around the country. Finally he took I-90, "a wide gash of a super-highway" across parts of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. It was an unnerving experience for Steinbeck—buffeting winds, trucks roaring by, warning signs everywhere, automobiles all around, and a "minimum speed . . . greater than any [he] had previously driven."

Most people who grew up in pre-Interstate days can remember the first time they tried to merge with Interstate traffic and can identify with Steinbeck's shock. To his credit, Steinbeck understood the need for superhighways, although he may not have liked them: "When we get these thruways across the



Wisconsin's 57 Rustic Roads routes highlight beauty of lightly traveled byways.

whole country, as we will and must, it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing," he wrote.

Steinbeck's comment was an early recognition that the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways (as it is now called) was not designed for dawdling, for relaxing, or for stopping to smell the roses. The Interstate highways are our

main arteries, our economic and social lifelines, and a major contributor to our international competitiveness and military strength. Accordingly, as Steinbeck found, signs along the Interstates warn motorists, "Do Not Stop" and "Maintain Speed."

A more recent traveler, Charles Kuralt of CBS News, shares Steinbeck's fascination with life off the main highways. With the Interstate system essentially complete, Kuralt summed up as well as anyone why the scenic byways movement has grown in recent years. "I keep thinking I will find something wonderful just around the next bend."

Something wonderful can be found on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Seaway Trail, the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the Beartooth Highway, California's Highway 1, the Great River Road, or countless others. Perhaps it will be discovered on one of the Interstates—not all are strictly for business—taking I-70 across the Rockies or I-15 through the Virgin River Gorge. Take your pick of these and a hundred more

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scenic roads that yield memorable sights and sounds for the leisurely traveler

Early Scenic Highway Development

The idea of a scenic byway is a creation of the 20th century. For centuries travelers found poor roads to be the chief obstacle to their journeys. The tourist was too busy extricating himself from mud, trying to cross unbridged rivers, and surviving the elements to enjoy the scenery. One French traveler to the United States complained in 1832 after a tiring day of travel near Louisville, Kentucky, that "America is still nothing but a forest."

The Good Roads Movement that began with the Bicycle Craze of the late 19th century and continued with the coming of the automobile finally made it possible for the road to be part of the pleasure of travel. The earliest long-distance autocampers preferred the freedom of the open road to the rigid schedules, crowded cars, and high speeds of the railroads. In an article published in 1900, a writer commented that, "many people will prefer to travel from place to place more slowly than at present, . . . rather than to rush blindly along iron rails. And if the automobile does that for us, if it makes us see more of our own country, out of beaten lines, and see it more quietly and sanely, it will have rendered a splendid service to our American life and character" (1).

Construction began in 1913 on the Bronx River Parkway in Westchester County, New York, and on the Columbia River Highway in Oregon, two of the earliest examples of highways designed to complement the natural beauty of the scenery. At a time when most automobile travel was still an ordeal (the Lincoln Highway Association described travel on its New York City-to-San Francisco route as "something of a sporting proposition"), these early routes were masterpieces that, in many ways, set

a pattern for scenic byways in years to come.

At the same time, interest in historic routes was growing. Ezra Meeker, for example, who had traveled to Oregon by covered wagon in 1852, began tirelessly promoting the marking of the Oregon Trail, and chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution marked the Santa Fe Trail, El Camino Real, and others. The National Old Trails Road, encompassing the National Road, the Santa Fe Trail, and other historic trails was one of the main transcontinental roads of the early automobile era.

Throughout the 20th century, the federal government, the states, and counties built scenic byways and promoted historic routes, but without national coordination. During the 1960s, efforts to create a national program began and included a White House Conference on Natural Beauty in May 1965. Efforts later faltered because of budgetary and policy demands.

Enthusiasm for such a program continued, however, resulting in Scenic Byways '88, a National Conference To Map the Future of America's Scenic Roads. This suc-



San Juan Skyway, Colorado, a 236-mile stretch of scenic byways.

cessful conference was sponsored not only by the Federal Highway Administration, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service but by groups as diverse as the American Automobile Association, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the American Recreation Coalition, the Coalition for Scenic Beauty, the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association,

the Highway Users Federation, the National Tour Association, and the Society of American Travel Writers, among 18 others.

National Scenic Byways Study

A strong coalition of groups emerged from the conference, backing a national program for scenic and historic byways. With their support, Congress included a provision in the U.S. Department of Transportation's 1990 appropriations act directing the Secretary of Transportation to conduct a national scenic byways study. The provision called for a nationwide inventory of scenic byways, guidelines for a national program, case studies of the economic impacts of scenic byways on tourism, and analysis of the potential safety consequences and environmental impacts associated with a scenic byways designation.

FHWA took the lead on the study by contacting individuals, groups, states, local governments, national associations, and anyone else who could help mold a national program for a diverse nation. A

National Scenic Byways Workshop in July 1990 brought together representatives of a variety of interests, including recreation, conservation, environment, transportation, tourism, and preservation. They helped identify objectives on which everyone could agree and propose a common plan of attack with roles for each interested party.

One point to be made about a national scenic byways program is that although the details may be debated, the idea has widespread support.

One reason is that the benefits of a national scenic byways program are clear. It would encourage more Americans to discover their nation's superb scenic, natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources. It would provide economic benefits through tourist expenditures. It would protect and enhance the many assets of scenic byway corridors. It would encourage foreign travelers to visit the United States more often. It

would also divert from crowded main highways those travelers who just wish to enjoy the countryside.

Scenic Byways Defined

Scenic byways are known by many names, including byways, backways, highways, historic routes, leisure ways, loops, parkways, rustic roads, and trails. All are appropriate because they reflect the various functions of a road, and all fall within the broad definition of scenic byways. The scenic road is included, along with roads that are of primarily cultural or historic significance. Included, too, are the non-Interstate roads that take us back to another era—the roads that William Least Heat-Moon described in a 1982 book, *Blue Highways*. A scenic byway, in short, is in the eye of the beholder.

Based on a national survey by FHWA as of May 4, 1990, the United States, including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, had 51,518 miles of designated or potential scenic byways. Of those miles, about 67 percent are already designated under a state, local, or federal program, but mostly under state programs (about 75 percent). Only 10 states do not yet have some form of a scenic byways designation program. Two of those states, however, are Alaska and Hawaii, where officials believe that all their roads are scenic. For those who have seen the beauty of both states, it is hard to disagree.

Most state scenic byways are two-lane paved roads, passable by all types of vehicles. A total of about 800 miles is seasonally restricted—in the summer because of too much traffic and in the winter because of heavy snowfalls. Much of the states' mileage, about 20,000 miles, includes such complementary facilities as rest stops, pull-outs, campgrounds, lodging, restaurants, and service stations. Some 13,000 miles include parallel hiking trails, and 8,000 miles include marked bikeways.

Common Concerns

The study also revealed several common concerns. Scenic byways proponents recognize that a successful scenic byways program will attract an increasing number of users. Without adequate land-use controls, the values that contributed to the popularity of the scenic byway route could be destroyed or diminished. Safety is often a concern because the features that make a road scenic (trees next to the road, for example) and keep it scenic (lanes too narrow for the type and mix of traffic) may also make it unsafe.

One of the biggest fears is that federal standards for scenic byways will kill the golden goose. Most states, however, have included land-use protection and safety as part of their scenic byway designation criteria without experiencing problems as a result. Further, the experience of FHWA and the National Park Service in upgrading park roads and parkways without destroying their scenic or historic character offers good reason to believe that safety and scenic byways are not mutually exclusive concepts.



Wyoming's Seminoe-Alcova BLM Back Country Byway provides access to Seminoe and Bennett mountains and section of Platte River.

Another concern is that a federally directed program would be too restrictive. Red tape, in short, can entangle scenic byways. State and local officials, national associations, and groups with interest in only one scenic byway agree—they want maximum flexibility to develop programs using their own criteria to meet their own unique needs, and FHWA supports this view.

Scenic byways cannot be standardized. As the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors puts it, "Americans seek a variety of sights as they drive: glimpses of mountains, lakes and rushing streams, small towns and farms, wildlife, covered bridges, and first-hand insights into lifestyles of rural Americans."

Economic Benefits

Any discussion of scenic byways that concentrates only on what can be seen from the inside of a vehicle is incomplete. What is less visible—the economics of scenic byways—is also important. Travel and tourism is a \$350-billion-a-year industry that ranks as the first, second, or third largest employer in 37 states. It produces 6.7 percent of the gross national product and 13 percent of the service sector's total product. On the basis of a U.S. Travel Data Center's estimate of 1988 expenditures by domestic travelers, scenic byways contribute approximately \$1.5 billion to the GNP for the total miles of designated and potential scenic byways.

International tourists will contribute significantly to that total. The U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration reports that in 1989, 39 percent of foreign visitors used a rented automobile for vacations, and 31 percent used a motor vehicle of their own. Approximately 69 percent of Canadian arrivals were by motor vehicle. The trend, according to the agency, is for an increasing number of foreign visitors to tour rural America by automobile. In 1989, international tourists spent an average of \$1,602 each in the United States, generating 570,000 jobs and more than \$4 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues.

Coordinated National Program

Although some federal agencies have built and improved scenic roads for most of the

20th century, the idea of a coordinated national program is a recent one. Two units of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for example, have launched their own programs, both of which have grown. As of May 4, 1990, the Forest Service had designated 56 National Forest Scenic Byway routes totaling 2,786 miles; by September 1991 the total had grown to 100 routes and some 4,000 miles. The Bureau of Land Management initially designated 34 back country scenic byways or backways (1,636 miles) and has increased the total to almost 50 routes and some 2,000 miles. This growth suggests the potential for a nationally coordinated program combining the strengths of federal, state, local, and private resources.

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Samuel K. Skinner transmitted a report, the *National Scenic Byways Study*, to Congress on February 19, 1991. The report is 1 of 29 publications prepared for the study. The study's resource document, *An Analysis and Summary of the 1990 National Scenic Byways Study Inventory*, contains extensive data on scenic byways, designation criteria, and agencies involved, as well as information on environmental, safety, and tourism concerns. A third publication, *Proceedings of the National Scenic Byways Workshop*, covers the July 1990 workshop in Washington, D.C. The proceedings reveal the thinking of many individuals, agencies, and groups concerning a national program, as well as the pros and cons of its elements.

In addition, FHWA published 26 case studies providing in-depth analyses of a broad range of matters that must be considered in connection with any national, state, or local program. The studies cover general issues (bicycling, safety, economic impacts, landscape design, protection of scenic features, etc.), specific routes (e.g., the San Juan Skyway in Colorado and the Kancamagus Highway in New Hampshire) and specific programs (e.g., the Rustic Roads Program in Wisconsin), private initiatives (including the American

Automobile Association's designation program), and scenic byways outside the United States. The publications are the foundation of an effort to provide information and share ideas as part of a nationally coordinated program.

In transmitting the report on the National Scenic Byways Study to Congress, Secretary Skinner noted that a plan for a coordinated national program is being developed. The plan includes three elements. First, an interagency coordination program would formalize the working relationships among key federal and state agencies. Second, a technical assistance and information exchange program, operated by FHWA, would help federal, state, local, and private groups develop and enhance scenic byways programs. Third, work would begin with a broad spectrum of groups to determine the best ways of identifying America's finest scenic byways for an all-American roads recognition program.

At the same time, U.S. DOT has pursued legislative options. In proposals submitted in February 1991 for authorization of surface transportation programs (highways

plays, aesthetic roadside features, see-through guardrails on bridges, and turn-around bays for larger recreation vehicles. Although these enhancements might not be considered standard road improvements on most Federal-Aid projects, they can add immeasurably to the safety and enjoyment of pleasure driving.

U.S. DOT also recommended a grants program for states that initiate or expand planning or development of scenic byways. The funding would allow states to create scenic byways offices and establish planning and marketing programs or, in some cases, to provide the type of road-user amenities already mentioned.

The future for scenic byways is bright. A nationally coordinated federal, state, local, and private initiative offers promise that motorists will have greater opportunities to discover the wonders "just around the next bend."

As part of the *National Scenic Byways Study*, FHWA has issued 29 publications containing facts, findings, program experiences, and options for national, state, and local program activities. All are available without charge. For information, contact Environmental Quality Branch, HEP-42, Federal Highway Administration, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590 (telephone 202-366-9173).

Reference

1. W. J. Belasco. *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979.



Byways in Virginia and other states offer bicyclists relief from busy highways.

and mass transit), U.S. DOT recommended broadened eligibility in the use of Federal-Aid highway funds for scenic byway development, protection, and enhancement. This proposal could also foster innovative design features that are essential to scenic byways but that might otherwise be considered ineligible for funding. Scenic byway enhancement could include parking areas, visitor centers, audiovisual interpretive dis-