

American Road

The Story of an Epic Transcontinental Journey at the Dawn of the Motor Age

By Pete Davies

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by Paul Duncan

Book Review

On July 7, 1919, a U.S. military convoy ("Truck Train") that included 81 vehicles carrying 37 officers and 258 enlisted men, left Washington D.C. on the Lincoln Highway heading to San Francisco, 3,000 miles away. The pilot car was a Packard Twin Six driven by a civilian Henry C. Ostermann. He had traveled on the Lincoln Highway 19 times and "knew the way." He was a supporter of a future "national road system of highways." Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower had volunteered as an Army observer. He later wrote in his memoir, *At Ease*, "In those days we were not sure it could be accomplished."

"The Motor Transport Corps chief officer, General Charles B. Drake described the convoy's purpose: To Demonstrate the practicability of long-distance motor commercial transportation and the consequent necessity for the expenditure of governmental appropriations to provide necessary highways." By 1919, many Eastern states had formed state highway departments. Of the Western states (Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California) along the Lincoln Highway only California had made a significant pledge of \$18 million to build state roads.

The British author of this book, Pete Davies, introduces the reader to Carl G. Fisher (1874-1939) a significant person in the automotive industry (manufactured acetylene headlights) and who was an early advocate for highway construction. He was responsible for paving the Indianapolis Speedway ("The Brickyard") with bricks to increase driving safety. He also recognized that America's roads at the time were poorly constructed.

In 1912, Fisher proposed constructing a "Coast-to-Coast" highway. One year later in 1913, the Lincoln Memorial Highway Association was incorporated and is still active today. Fisher provided the energy and organizational expertise and Henry Bourne Joy, President of Packard Motor Co., was a major donor.

Fisher estimated that it could cost \$10 million to build The Lincoln Highway running from New York to San Francisco. He believed private donations would finance the road. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. pledged \$300,000 and Joy pledged \$150,000. Henry Ford was approached to make a donation to the highway project but donated no money. Ford believed that road construction was the responsibility of the public sector. By that time, many states were supporting highway construction.

The author makes it clear that the 1919 Motor Train was a military operation that had a mission and ran on a military schedule. Reveille was at 5:45 a.m. The officers

slept in 2-man tents, the enlisted men slept on the trucks, camp beds or on the open ground. Each community along the route had designated a camping place for the troops. Local Welcoming Committees were on hand to greet the convoy. Community celebrations, included dances that lasted late into the night. One soldier described his experience, "Pretty strenuous, up every night until 11 or 12 at banquets and dances and up at 5:30 and on our way. A great life if you didn't weaken." Along the route, they visited 350 communities and were seen by an estimated 3,250,000 people.

The contrast between the quality of the roads east of the Mississippi River and those to the west was striking.

The 90-mile section in Illinois between DeKalb and the Mississippi River crossing into Iowa, was described as being "deplorable." Iowa was described as a "farm 350 miles wide and when it rained, the roads became impassable." Nebraska roads were equally bad.

I read this book with a U.S. Atlas at my side. In Utah, they encountered very difficult conditions on the salt flats west of the Salt Lake. "They reported: had to detour onto the featureless salt; it had a thin, crystallized crust, which every truck broke through and beneath that was a cloying (*disgusting*) silt that held the wheels like glue...one by one they put a rope on each truck and between fifty and a hundred men started pulling each vehicle across the flats by hand."

They completed the trip in 2 months and all but 6 vehicles made it to San Francisco. The trip was considered a

"success" by the military because they learned much about the limits of their military vehicles. Later, the U.S. military had significant input during passage of the 1921 Federal Highway Act that advocated for strong state highway departments, construction of farm to market roads and most importantly, provided ongoing Federal funding for highways.

The 1919 military convoy highway trip accomplished their task under nearly impossible road conditions. The author has done extensive research on the history of the communities that the convoy traveled through and provides informative commentary that keeps the reader engaged. I recommend this book to readers who enjoy reading about the history of America's roads and highways during the Model T era.

