

Father of Route 66, the Story of Cy Avery

By Susan Croce Kelly

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272 pages: includes B & W Photos, Notes, Bibliography & Index

by Paul Duncan

Book Review

Remember the lyrics of the Bobby Troup song (1946) “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66”?“ *If you ever plan to motor west, travel my way, take the highway that’s the best, Get your kicks on Route 66. It runs 2000 miles from Chicago to LA and St. Louis, Oklahoma City and Gallup New Mexico are on the way.*”

This book takes you through the story of Oklahoma native Cyrus Avery (1871-1963), who is considered the **“Father of Route 66.”** The author, Susan Croce Kelly, previously published *Route 66: The Highway and its People (1988)*, a photo essay book that stimulated national and international interest in retracing Route 66.

Tulsa’s Cyrus Avery Centennial Plaza is situated adjacent to the original Route 66 bridge over the Arkansas River. In the park there is a huge “East meets West” bronze sculpture (2012) depicting Cy Avery and his family and their cat in a Model T touring trying to cross the river and meeting a pair of terrified horses pulling a wagon.

The author has carefully researched the historical development of our national highway system. This has been labeled the “Do-it-Yourself Highway Movement”.

Mr. Avery was a successful Tulsa business man who served two terms (1913-16) on the Tulsa County Commission. He became a leader in both Oklahoma state and regional highway construction. As president of the Oklahoma “Good Roads Association” he was involved in many local road building projects and was a proponent of a strong federal presence due to the cost of building highways. In 1916 Congress passed the “Federal Aid Road Act” that provided matching funds for state highway construction.

By 1920, there were 8 million cars on US highways and half of these were Model T Fords. Drivers wanted roads to improve. Many of these citizens were farmers who depended on getting their produce in to population centers and the railroads. The Federal Government formed a “Bureau of Public Roads” that began to set

highway standards. In 1924, the Oklahoma governor appointed Mr. Avery as the Oklahoma Commissioner of Highways. Cy also became a member of the American Association of State Highway Officials. The Federal

Secretary of Agriculture appointed Cy to a 21-person Board of State Highway Commissioners and Highway Engineers. Board members were appointed to oversee roads that had Federal aid designations from the Federal Aid Road Act and to develop a national highway numbering system.

By early 1926, the board had developed a national road numbering map. East-West highways ended in zero and were numbered from North to South. North-South highways ended in 1 or 5 and were numbered from East to West. Oklahoma and Missouri representatives including Cy were very involved and designated Highway 60 as running from Los Angeles to Chicago, through Tulsa. Kentucky objected as they believed 60 logically should come through Kentucky and on to Virginia Beach, VA. Tempers flared and ultimately cool heads prevailed. Cy suggested an alternative numbered Highway 66 to run from Chicago to St. Louis,

Springfield, Joplin, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Amarillo, Albuquerque and on west to Los Angeles. They allowed that Highway 60 would continue through Kentucky.

In late 1926 Cy proposed forming a U.S. 66 Highway Association that was established in April 1927. The goal of the organization was to promote the early completion and secure permanent maintenance of U.S. Highway 66 between Chicago and Los Angeles, commonly called the Main Street of America.

This book is well researched and brings out the details in how our national highway system evolved. Highway 66 was the most known of the early trans-continental highways. Cy Avery a talented Oklahoma businessman and citizen servant was an important person in the development of Highway 66 and our national highway system.

