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## FEDERAL HIGHWAY 20: THE LAST TRANSCONTINENTAL

*US 20 was completed in 1940-41 as a coast-to-coast hard-surfaced highway from Boston MA to Newport OR, via Chicago and Yellowstone National Park, whence it earned the nickname 'Yellowstone Highway'. US 20 is now the only essentially intact example of a transcontinental Federal Highway dating from the pre-Interstate era. Completed just prior to American embroilment in World War II, US 20 did not fulfill its promoters' hopes as a great tourist highway from Chicago and the northeastern states. Nonetheless, the flurry of promotional activity following the formation of the National Highway 20 Association in 1939 is an instructive perspective on the successes and trials of boosterism in the attenuated setting of over 3,000 miles of road. The Association's early efforts were centered in Lusk WY; its ambitious plans to run a Chicago-based transcontinental operation appear, like the road, to have been stillborn by the War. But, as a backwater highway over much of its length, US 20 has bequeathed an impressive legacy of early highway engineering and roadside structures, many now closed, some recycled. And the road's identity has been rekindled by another Highway 20 Association, already active from the Midwest to Wyoming, with no traceable linear descent from its 1939 precursor. As yet, the Association has not fully capitalized on US 20's historical importance. This paper provides compelling visual evidence for the road as a living museum of the second and relatively mature phase of the automobile era in the United States and as one slender lifeline in America's wide expanse of rural, nonmetropolitan, barely viable settlements.*

### THE LAST TRANSCONTINENTAL

US Highway 20 was among the last of the great transcontinental Federal Highways to be completed, and it is the last survivor of its kind. Highway 20 was completed coast-to-coast in 1940 after more than a decade of slow improvement (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Along its length from its East Coast origin at Boston, the road passed from one identity and symbolic name to another as it was cobbled together in Depression-era road improvements that combined grand projects and State pride with the more modest and piecemeal work of highway crews who oiled, hard-surfaced, and signposted stretches of the road in seasonal spurts.

By the late 1930s US 20 was best known as the Yellowstone Highway, linking as it did Yellowstone National Park's eastern entrance with Chicago and -- thence -- Toledo, Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo, Albany, and Boston. The long-distance traffic to the park faced indiffer-

ent or outright bad road conditions in Iowa, Nebraska and Wyoming, and some uncertainty too as the road took abrupt 90 degree turns in many towns and villages. A stopgap but appealing directional device was to mark the roadside with small boulders painted with bright yellow stripes. One of these yellow stones is now a museum exhibit in Lusk, Wyoming. The annual pilgrimage of park visitors was the catalyst for the creation of the National Highway 20 Association in 1939. Such associations of roadside businesses and chambers of commerce were a commonplace medium to coordinate advertising, promotion, and lobbying for road improvements.

The National Highway 20 Association's creation seemed -- at first -- fortuitously timed. The Association held its first annual convention in April 1940.<sup>2</sup> Four months later Highway 20 took on transcontinental stature as the Federal Bureau of Roads redesignated an assortment of improved roads from Yellow-

stone's western entrance to Albany, Oregon, south of Portland, and soon extended US 20 to the Pacific Coast at Newport.<sup>3</sup> Also in 1940, the Bureau validated its new transcontinental highway with metal markers over the 3349 mile span of the road. And in June 1941 an eight mile dirt-road stretch of the highway near Harrison, Nebraska, was upgraded, eliminating the last unimproved segment of US 20 between Boston and Yellowstone Park.<sup>4</sup> From the latter came glowing reports of increased visitor traffic, and at nearby Thermopolis, Wyoming, the Chamber of commerce sheep wagon visitor center also reported more arrivals from eastern states.<sup>5</sup> In 1940-41 Highway 20 seemed to come of age.

Like the highway, the National Highway 20 Association seemed energized and forward-looking in 1940-41. The Association's organizing genius was Roy Chamberlain, a Wyoming oil-man who in 1935 had taken over the struggling Ranger Hotel in Lusk.<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain hired Bert Bell, an experienced road booster, who as the new Association's Secretary spearheaded its ambitious development plans. In 1940 new members were actively recruited up and down the road. The Association announced a plan to establish a half dozen US 20 offices between Boston and Wyoming. A half million promotional maps

were to be printed.<sup>7</sup> Early in 1941 Bert Bell outlined a five year development plan, suggested that US 20 might be promoted as 'The Covered Wagon Trail,' and described US 20 radio spots on seven stations from Illinois to Wyoming.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the Association's most memorable accomplishment was to organize a promotional caravan along US 20. The caravan drew representatives from sixty towns and cities. Close to 225 cars with 800 on board mustered for the caravan's grand entrance into Sioux City, Iowa, in late October, 1940.<sup>9</sup> At the parade's head pranced the Arabian mounts of the Abu Beku Shrine White Horse Patrol. Close to 350 musicians marched. One account even promised that the parade would feature 30 to 50 truckloads of Nebraska cattle, but if the cattle tracks showed up they certainly passed unnoticed by Sioux City's press.

The Caravan, The Association's first big success, was also its last. A projected national meeting in Chicago fell through. So did plans to attract an East Coast delegation. An Idaho Falls meeting in April 1942 was supposed to spotlight two more promotional caravans, including one eastbound from the Pacific coast.<sup>10</sup> Plans for these caravans were shelved when war intervened and put paid to needless tire wear and gasoline consumption.

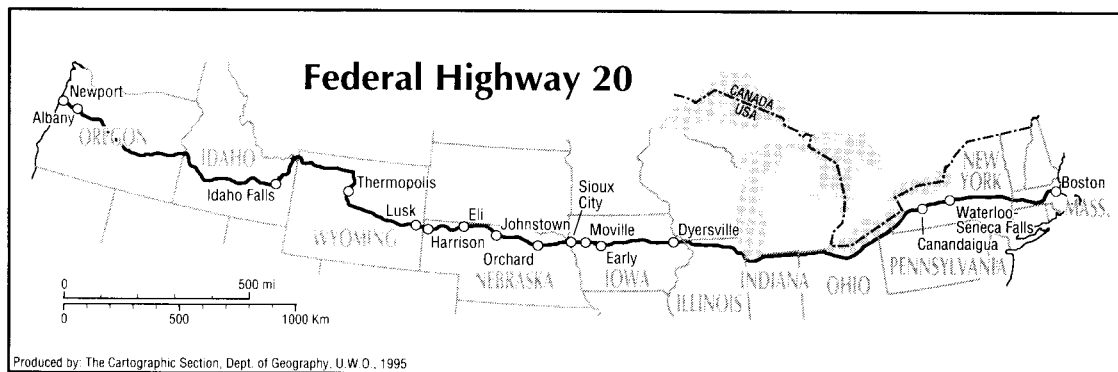


Figure 1: Federal Highway 20

Highway 20 lost its most tireless booster, for Roy Chamberlain turned his attention to Wyoming State politics. After a fashion the National Highway 20 Association struggled on until the mid-1960s, when membership still stood at only 400 spread over 43 communities in 4 states.<sup>11</sup> Between 1965 and 1968 most of US 20's long-distance traffic forsook the road as the last gaps in Interstate 80's route were mostly filled. 190 had dealt the same blow to the road a decade earlier in the eastern states.

## SURVIVAL

By the 1970s Highway 20 was comatose and anonymous, but it was still intact from coast to coast. Other roads were better known but fared less well when the Interstates were built. For example, US 40, The Lincoln Highway, linked Atlantic City's glitz with San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. It was hero in Stewart's US 40, metaphor in his *Earth Abides*, and often archaeological challenge in the Vales' retrospective *US 40 Today*.<sup>12</sup> In the late 1980s *American Demographics* magazine began a monthly feature devoted to the road. But out West US 40 had become a fiction, for its right-of-way and roadside architecture were simply swept away by Interstate construction. This fate was shared by other east-west transcontinental blacktops and by much of Route 66's length from Chicago to Los Angeles. Extinct though they mostly became, these famous roads continue to excite, just as dinosaurs captivate children.<sup>13</sup>

Highway 20 had no writer of Steinbeck's stature to immortalize it -- no Joads and no Charlie either. Route 20 had no Nat King Cole to sing of it, no photographer to document it, and no television series to feature it. Instead, the road simply survived. The key was probably Newport, Oregon, which has never aspired to metropolitan greatness and today boasts little more than charm and one of the country's handful of Ripley's 'Believe-it-or-not' Muse-

ums. Highway 20's West Coast terminus was no match for Portland (US 30) or San Francisco (US 40). Newport had simply been an expedient afterthought. With not a lot to pass through and nothing much to aim for, Highway 20's route was left stranded and untouched by the new Interstate grid. In the mountain west, US 20 straddled Yellowstone National Park, off limits to Interstate highway planners. On the High Plains, Omaha's priority over Sioux City left the latter unserved and US 20 untouched by Interstate construction all the way back to Chicago. East of Chicago, the Interstate system incorporated older toll highways which had generally paralleled rather than obliterated the old Federal roads they had replaced. This saved Highway 20 in Indiana, Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts. Locals still recall the eerie silence on Highway 20 when the New York State Thruway was finally completed in 1956.

Highway 20's early years as a transcontinental road coincided with wartime austerity, gasoline rationing, and discontinued passenger car production. Its heyday really began in the late 1940s. By the late 1950s it had been superseded in the East. A decade later much the same had happened in the West. Granted, Highway 20 is no lively; it has been dormant for close to thirty years. But it is alive, and -- as such, it is a unique living museum of the automobile age. Roadside commercial architecture that was swept aside elsewhere by widening and replacement has survived on US 20 in a remarkable warp of time and space. Its boosters never envisaged a time capsule, but that is what Highway 20 has become. Its future lies in its past.

## SURVEY

In one sense US 20 is only as 'real' as the Federal whim and thousands of highway markers which designated the route out of an assortment of pre-existing roads. Moreover,

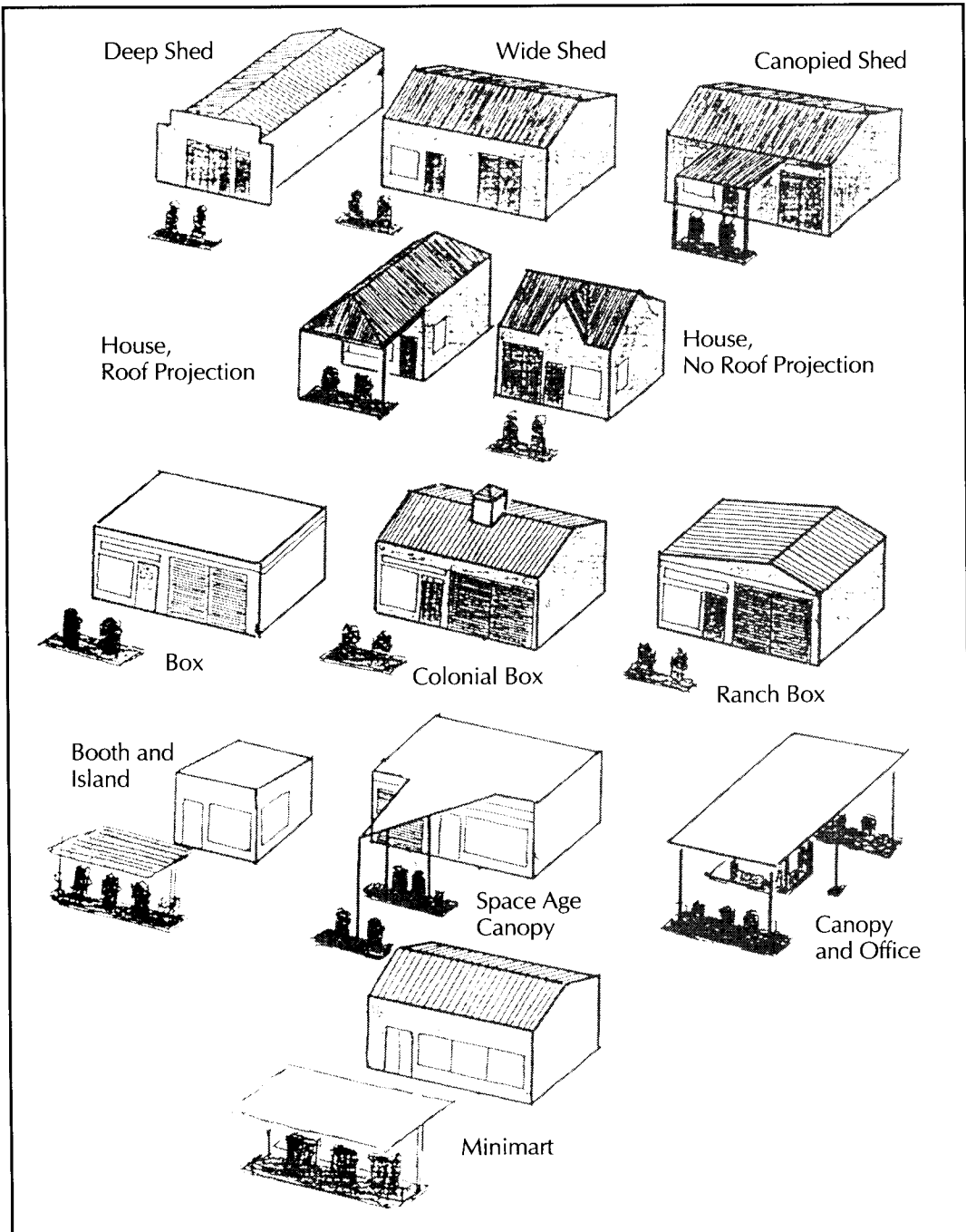


Figure 2: Service station structural types

like alibis of the guilty, the actual line of US 20 has changed from time to time through bypass construction and other realignments. It is less a line than an intricate braid of paths, a feature it shares with America's great nineteenth century trails. Surveying much of US 20 two years ago, I was fortunate to have a copy of that tourist map printed by the National Highway 20 Association in 1941.<sup>14</sup> The map's reverse side listed every community served by the road and the exact mileage between each center. This detailed itinerary made it possible to find and survey the line of US 20 at the time it was linked coast to coast. As yet the survey is incomplete; I have not systematically researched US 20 in Idaho and Oregon, and plan to do so in 1995. But already the results from Boston to Yellowstone convey the sheer richness of Highway 20's roadside legacy.

## COMMUNITIES

Many of the communities served by US 20 in 1941 are now or soon will be ghost towns, for what little traffic remained after the Interstates were finished was quite often diverted by subsequent improvements to US 20 itself. These stretches of new road realigned places out of sustenance and -- eventually -- existence. US 20 is no picture-perfect calendar. Much of it, like much of rural America, is in a hell of a mess. Over a lot of the road it is already the end of the road.

The problem is that although American farm production needs can readily be met by 1 or 2 percent of its population, that same 1 or 2 percent, spread thinly across Farm Belt states, is hard-pressed to support even the most basic local services. Americans made a small country, then made it large, then made it seem smaller by degrees in the railway age, automobile era, and air age. Now we are promised the information age and its binding super-highway. Whether enough quality and variety of life can ever be restored to America's rural

backwaters seems doubtful. Now there are far too few people there, and they are mostly far too old. Highway 20 is a reminder that, long ago, American rural communities could feel a much stronger and more palpable sense of daily contact with the outside world. Ironically, airports and interstates took that sense away.

At the village of Early, Iowa, two Federal Highways cross. One -- US 20 -- runs coast-to-coast; the second runs from Canada to Mexico. Early Iowa commits no hyperbole in proclaiming itself a national crossroads. Yet traffic is so quiet one could quite safely pause for lunch in the middle of the intersection.

Johnstown, Nebraska, boasts a population of 48. If you watched the Hallmark Hall of Fame drama 'O Pioneers' you saw Johnstown, NE. The businesses have long gone. The boom-town fronts and a new Federal post office remain. And so do those 48 people. Their average age is 72.<sup>15</sup>

Ely, Nebraska, was bypassed entirely by a realignment of US 20. There the population is down to 7 inhabitants and one survivor dreams of sole ownership of the mostly vacant properties.

Lost Springs, Wyoming, took pride in being America's smallest bicentennial community. Two decades ago there were 7 inhabitants. Now there are 4. Lost Springs roadside come-on was its town park and the lure of free water. The park and the water are still there to enjoy. In fact I watched 25 percent of Lost Springs' population tend the park one morning.

In other communities along Highway 20 prospects seem much brighter. The most common catalysts for survival have been regional tourism, as in Waterloo-Seneca Falls, NY, or the impact of nearby metropolitan centers, as in Lima or Avon, NY. Near major tourist attractions the immediate landscape impacts may have been more profound, as at Sturbridge, MA, or subdued by time and passing memory, as in the once-thriving spas of

Form	Number	% of Total	Estimated Construction Period (Percent)		
			Pre-194	1940-80	Post-1980
Deep Shed	67	8.1	83	17	-
Wide Shed	93	11.3	71	29	-
Canopied Shed	17	2.1	88	12	-
House, roof projection	15	1.8	89	11	-
House, no roof projection	29	3.5	95	5	-
Box	295	35.8	22	77	1
Colonial box	28	3.4	-	100	-
Ranch box	23	2.8	-	100	-
Booth and island	11	1.3	9	82	9
Space age canopy	12	1.5	-	100	-
Canopy and office	26	3.2	-	55	45
Minimart	198	24.0	-	13	87
Other and unknown	10	1.2			
TOTAL	824	100.0	23	53	24

**Table 1:** Gasoline Station Forms, Incidence, and Estimated Age Distribution

New York's northern tier Finger Lakes communities.

Luck helps too: In Nebraska, north of Orchard, a world-class archaeological find in 1977 has evolved into the Ashfall Fossil Beds State Park. Visitor numbers mount annually now and, on US 20, an old dead Orchard will bloom anew. Perhaps Dyersville, Iowa, has the best good luck story along Highway 20. If you saw 'Field of Dreams,' you saw Dyersville, which now happily and steadily capitalizes on the fleeting magic of Kinsella's diamond in the corn. To Dyersville, for the foreseeable future, they will come. Ghosts do not go on strike and dreams never miss post-season play.

Vision helps too if the highway has fallen on hard times. Bouckville, NY, for example, became a Mecca for devotees of antiques and collectibles. And ailing Valentine, Nebraska, put new heart and vitality into itself with not much more than a name to promote and

honeymooners to attract.

Sioux City's White Horse Patrol pranced into history long ago, and Highway 20 boosterism faded. But at the local level the ingredients for recovery lay untapped in a way matched by no other great American road. Intact and trans-continental, US 20 is blessed with a host of natural and historic attractions, and remains an artery for hundreds of communities lacking good Interstate Highway access. In the Eastern United States, recognition of Highway 20's historic significance began with work on its roadside cabin courts by Tanya Werbitzky at Cornell University.<sup>16</sup> In 1990 the Cooperstown History-Museum Studies graduate program mounted an exhibit devoted to Highway 20. Out West a Nebraska Highway 20 Association of roadside merchants was established in the 1980s, attracted four hundred members by 1991, and 'went national' a year later. Another US 20 Association flourishes in Iowa. In

Illinois the Rochford to Galena stretch of 20 is a popular scenic route. It would be foolish to assume that these modest gains promise more to come. They are simply grounds for hope.

### FUEL FOR THOUGHT

Roadside commercial architectural forms seem to have followed a design cycle. Each form eventually echoes or even repeats its

turn-of-the-century roots. Thus America rediscovered the lunch-cart, the small theater, the hotel, and assorted versions of Main Street.<sup>17</sup> The most common roadside form is the gasoline station,<sup>18</sup> and the gasoline station now routinely mimics its ancestor 90 years ago; it is simply an exceptionally flammable general store. Along Highway 20, more than one half of all currently operating gasoline stations are minimarts, virtually all built or rehabilitated since 1980, many since 1990.

Form	% closed by 1992	Location (percent)				Percent Corner Lot	% of closed stations reused
		Rural	Small Town	Strip	Urban		
Deep Shed	84	27	45	25	3	49	64
Wide Shed	83	44	29	23	4	52	55
Canopied Shed	59	6	58	24	12	47	70
House, roof projection	80	33	47	13	7	60	25
House, no roof projection	86	21	55	17	7	72	56
Box	68	10	41	35	14	66	71
Colonial box	43	7	36	39	18	75	75
Ranch box	52	-	35	61	4	74	100
Booth and island	18	27	18	55	-	9	-
Space age canopy	50	-	33	42	25	92	67
Canopy and office	46	15	15	58	12	58	91
Minimart	2	10	34	46	10	70	n/a
Other and unknown	89	-	56	22	22	78	38
ALL STATIONS	53	16	38	36	10	64	63

Source: Field survey, the authors, July 1992, nonmetropolitan stretches of US 20 from Dunkirk NY to Worland NY.

**Table 2:** US 20 Gasoline Stations: A Profile

Nationwide, close to one half the gasoline stations operating in 1972 had closed a decade later.<sup>19</sup> These were mostly victims of narrowed profit margins, self-serve competition, the inroads of specialized muffler and lubrication chains, and altered traffic flow.<sup>20</sup> Two summers ago, our survey of the middle 1500 miles of Highway 20 identified 824 operating or former gasoline stations. Of these more than half had closed. Of the closed stations, close to two thirds had been converted to other uses. That figure deserves emphasis: two thirds of these specialized structures had been recycled, a remarkable record of adaptive reuse.

Along Highway 20, gasoline station architecture includes simple shed designs from the 1920s and 30s, as well as contemporary forms which gave the gas station the 'look' of a modest cottage, with or without a roof projection (Figure 2). In keeping with US 20's 'golden age' in the decade following World War Two, simple streamlined 'box' designs are common, as are successors to the simple box which echo a colonial barn or suburban ranch. And US 20 exhibits a sprinkling of canopy designs built in the 1960s or later (Table 1).

Attrition of the earliest shed forms exceeds 80 percent, and close to 70 percent of the moderne boxes on US 20 no longer pump gas (Table 2). Even the forms typical of the sixties or seventies have suffered a 50 percent attrition. The minimart has evidently exacerbated the plight of the 'traditional' gasoline service station and has even eroded the market niche of the 'high pumper' self-service establishments. The oldest forms were typically built in

Use	Pre-War Shed House Forms (n=104)	Post-War Box Forms (n=152)
	percent of total	
Vehicle-related services	20.2	36.8
Vehicle-related sales	11.5	17.8
Non-food retail goods	20.2	13.2
Retail food and beverages	6.7	5.3
Retail services	9.6	12.5
Professional offices, services	4.8	2.6
Roadside eating establishments	10.6	6.6
Other uses (industrial, institutional, public, worship, homes)	17.3	5.3

Source: Field Survey, the authors

Table 3: Re-use of Closed Gasoline Stations

rural and (especially) small town settings -- a factor which undoubtedly contributed to their demise in the face of competition from post-war 'miracle mile' commercial strips. Overall, isolation and competition put paid to almost 70 percent of the 626 non-minimart sites we surveyed two years ago. Some of these abandoned sites are rare survivals worthy of historic preservation, such as a charming chessboard tiled specimen in Correctionville, Iowa. A few are unique gems, such as the now tragically desecrated 'Flying Saucer' gasoline station in Ashtaboula, Ohio, stripped of its fittings two years ago.<sup>21</sup>

It is clearly unrealistic to hope that even national recognition of US 20's special significance would confer much protection on even the finest examples of gasoline station architecture. As yet, neither public attitudes nor the public purse are up to such a preservation challenge. So for the foreseeable future survival will mostly depend on benign neglect and sympathetic reuse. It is therefore no



small consolation that along much of US 20 business conditions are slow enough to preclude demolition and expensive replacement. And, of all the highway's closed stations, fully 63 percent have been put to new uses.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, some architectural forms have proved more or less adaptable to particular kinds of reuse. Abandoned post-war boxes have been most commonly reprieved in auto-sales and service roles (Table 3). The pre-war shed and house forms have proved to be more credibly adaptable to use as stores, offices, restaurants, visitor centers, and even homes or churches.

### HOME FROM HOME

The highway's cabin courts and motels are a current research project. Suffice to say for now that by far the most impressive assemblage of pre-war cabin camps and courts flanks the stretch of US 20 between Albany and Avon, especially along the Cherry Valley Turnpike when it was the end of a long day's drive from New York or Boston. These precious miles of the Highway also embrace the Tepee Gift Shop, the Petrified Creatures Museum -- a classic roadside attraction -- East Avon's politically incorrect Indian statue,<sup>23</sup> one of few 'early' miniature golf courses, and one of very few surviving drive-in movie theaters. 'Pre-Psycho' motels are also commonplace along the Finger Lakes stretch of US 20. Some are now abandoned, most are decaying, and a few have found new use as long-term room or efficiency rentals. Time will tell whether the next century will come to cherish some of these structures as an 'authentic' means of communing with America's past. Fine candidates for such a reprieve include the Otsego Motel in East Springfield, north of Cooperstown, and the Miami Motel just east of Canandaigua. The latter is the only motel I have seen on US 20 which preserves drive-in car-ports.

### THE ROAD

And, in the end, as at the beginning, there is the road itself. I especially like the bypassed stretches of US 20, because they convey with such power the atmosphere of the highway as it once was -- a narrow ribbon of tarmac or concrete linking nowhere to somewhere. East of Merville, Iowa, there is a bypassed stretch of US 20 that remains exactly as it was built more than 50 years ago. Unused, it is also undamaged. Even the scalloped concrete curbs survive to persuade the drowsy driver back to consciousness and the roadbed.

Highway 20 is a very special living museum of American culture. The automobile era is too central to American cultural history to neglect, and the last transcontinental far too important to ignore.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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### Notes

1. *Lusk Herald*, Wyoming, September 19, 1940.
2. *Lusk Herald*, April 25, 1940
3. *Lusk Herald*, August 29, 1940. Reprinted from the *Cody WY Enterprise*
4. *Thermopolis Independent Record*, Wyoming, July 3, 1941.
5. *ibid.*
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7. *Lusk Herald*, August 22, 1940
8. *Lusk Herald*, March 27, 1941.
9. *Lusk Herald*, March 27, 1941.
10. *Lusk Herald*, April 9, 1942
11. 'What is the Highway 20 Association?,' *Sioux City Sue*, Sioux City Chamber of Commerce, July 1964, pp. 13-14.
12. George R. Stewart, *US 40* (1953) and *Earth Abides* (1956); Thomas R. and Geraldine R. Vale, *US 40*

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- Today* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).
13. Susan Croce Kelly, Route 66 (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); 'Route 66 Resources Directory,' *Society for Commercial Archaeology News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Fall 1994, p. 7.
  14. A copy of the map was discovered and sent to me by John Jakle, to whom I owe a lasting debt of thanks.
  15. Personal communication, the Postmaster, Johnstown, Nebraska.
  16. Unpublished masters thesis, 1992, based on field research undertaken in the 1980s.
  17. The commercial roadside's architectural design cycle is briefly touched on by Chester H. Liebs in his seminal *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., New York Graphic Society, 1985), pp. 114-115.
  18. Bruce A. Lohof, 'Gasoline Station: the Evolution of a Vernacular Form,' in his *American Commonplace* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982), pp. 35-59; John A. Jakle, 'The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970,' *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1978), pp. 520-542.
  19. Their passing pleased some, for whom the gasoline service station epitomized roadside blight. See for example John Kenneth Galbraith 'To My New Friends in the Affluent Society, Greetings,' *Life*, March 27, 1970, page 20.
  20. Richard Koenig, 'Goodbye Gasoline Alley,' *The Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, June 29, 1984.
  21. Featured intact in John Margolies, *The End of the Road: Vanishing Highway Architecture in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).
  22. Corroborated along several other Federal Highways by field research reported in Darrell A. Norris, Brian Coffey, and Mark Froelich, *The American Landscape* (Department of Geography, SUNY Geneseo, 1986).
  23. Purporting to represent Chief Pontiac, 18 feet tall, and relocated to a US 20 Garden Center from a Rochester, NY, Pontiac dealership in the 1970s.