

The Old Highway Lives On

Decades after the arrival of Interstate-5, Bits and pieces of Highway 99 remain.



The old natatorium lies off Oregon Highway 99, five miles north of Junction City, decaying in the wet weather. Surrounded by a flooded marsh and swaying fir trees, the covered pool is coated with grime and needles. If not for a sign on the side of its sloped walls, the structure easily could be taken for a greenhouse.

People don't swim in the pool anymore, however. Nor do they stop for a night of dancing at the adjacent hall. Instead, they breeze by in cars and afford themselves only quick glimpses of the old structure.

For years the natatorium site was known as the Benton-Lane Auto Park, a place where weary travelers could pull over and rent a cottage or pitch a tent for the night. The dance pavilion and pool were added attractions. So were electric lights, running water and hot plates.

But when Interstate 5 was built in the 1950s, Highway 99 ceased to exist as the main route from Canada to Mexico, and the Benton-Lane Auto Park, like other cottages, eating places and gas stations along the old road, slowly went out of business.

Today, an automobile trip down the old highway reveals little evidence of what once was. Many of the commercial structures have been torn down. Others have simply been moved and now serve as backpasture sheds and chickenshacks. Only here and there does a roadside gas pump or a row of cottages remain.

On the outskirts of Junction City stands Chapman's Grocery. The wood building shows signs of age; its white walls are fading, and potted flowers sit on windowsills above old advertising displays. An empty veranda leads to the front door, where groceries have come and gone since 1933.

Agnes Chapman and her late husband, George, built the store when

there was little else nearby and only two lanes of highway out front. More than 50 years later, she still runs the store.

"When we moved here, why we were the first ones here on this street with the store. There was no motel or anything. There was a little restaurant where Al-K's Viking Inn is, called 109 Lunch. So things have changed quite a lot," Chapman says.

"That was the main artery then you know, but there were not as many cars," she says. "People weren't in so big a hurry. They took things slower."

As more and more people purchased automobiles, Chapman's Grocery found itself surrounded by auto camps, the forerunners of the modern-day motel and a place where motorists could pull over and rest for the night. By 1938, there were four of the camps within three blocks of the store.

"One was called the Maple Leaf Auto Park. It was right down here at the Y (the intersection of Highway 99 West and East)," Chapman says.

"And the Benton-Lane used to be quite a place. They used to have some cabins there once upon a time. There weren't that many, but there was some. Then, of course, there was the swimming pool and the dance hall, parties out there and things like that."

The grocery store was not affected by the arrival of I-5, she says, at least not a great deal. Others, however, had different reactions. "Some people were dissatisfied with it, sure," she says.

Auto camp owners were especially vulnerable to the change. According to the 1947 R.L. Polk Eugene City and Lane County Directory, there were 34 autocamps open for business that year on Highway 99 within Lane County. But by 1965, one year before I-5 was completed from border to border, only 16 remained.

The beginnings of the old highway

date back to the turn of the century. Road conditions were so bad back then that "Get Oregon out of the mud," was a popular slogan at the time. To combat the conditions of roads, a strange mix of cyclists and farmers formed a lobby called the Oregon Good Roads organization. But the group met with little success until the auto arrived a few years later.

In 1911, a group calling itself the Pacific Highway Association began erecting signs along a route down the Willamette Valley and through southern Oregon, informing tourists and locals that they were traveling on the "Pacific Highway." The group became influential in ensuing years in their call for a highway from Canada to Mexico, but Oregon paid little attention. Many people were reluctant to please the few who could afford to own an automobile, while others thought the new-fangled road machine was the work of the devil.

"The route was like so many others in Oregon. It started as some country roads in various pieces," says L.E. George, state traffic engineer for the Highway Division.

Counties expressed varying degrees of interest in improving the highway, though. And some feuded over where the road should pass.

In 1913, the Oregon State Legislature created the State Highway Commission, which technically freed highways from county control. But the move was more symbolic than anything else; the commission had little money to spend, and counties continued to take care of their own roads.

Motorists, of course, continued to suffer when traveling on Highway 99. Typical of the day is an account by Paul Feely in the March 30, 1913, Oregonian.

"When we got about half way through, the rear wheel almost went

out of sight. After robbing the roadside fence of several logs and boards to fill up the holes, we plugged through a few feet at a time," he wrote.

By 1916 several counties began paving sections of the route, and in 1917, Oregon voters finally passed a \$6 million bond issue for the highway. But World War I broke out soon afterward, and all road work was suspended because of wartime cut-backs.

After the war ended, the boom period of Pacific Highway building began. By the end of 1921, 85 percent of the highway had been paved in Oregon, with the only remaining gaps located between Albany and Corvallis.

Traveling was still slow by today's standards. Until the mid-1930s, when the speed limit was raised from the standard 25 mph, it typically took two hours to drive from Portland to Salem and more than four hours from Portland to Eugene. The legendary warning, "Slow — dangerous curves ahead," was a common sight.

When originally paved, the highway had eight-foot-wide lanes — and very little shoulder room.

"Back in the early '30s, they did a widening and a paving project on some long pieces of 99W north and south of Corvallis and up on toward the Portland area where they widened the pavement out from a pretty narrow road to something a little more modern," George says.

"Then, of course, during World War II they rebuilt pieces of it over there by Camp Adair (north of Corvallis) to handle the army traffic and defense traffic that was underway at that time."

According to George, it was the need for military preparedness that ultimately led to the demise of Highway 99 as the principal route from Canada to Mexico.

"The interstate was initiated by

President Eisenhower during his administration. The full title of the congressional act that sent it up was the Interstate System of Defense Highways," George says. "The basic original thrust was to build a transportation system that would do several things, one of which was to serve as a defense network of highways and the other which would replace some of the older parts of the highway system in the United States."

"The interstate route obliterated some big stretches of it, but where it branched off and say, went through Creswell or Dillard or places like that down there, we kept the old designation on it there. So there are bits and pieces of it all the way down," George says.

"After that point, of course, U.S. Highway 99W and 99E never did exist anymore."

Today, the chunks of Oregon Highway 99 that remain show little sign of dying. According to George, an average of 13,000 cars a day travel on the road in Corvallis, 4,000 a day in Monroe and 23,000 a day just north of Eugene.

"We consider it as an Oregon primary-type highway. That's what we designate it as," he says.

Dips, bumps and two-lane driving, of course, still are common features as are bottlenecks in towns such as Corvallis, Junction City and Creswell. Compared to the straightness of I-5, Highway 99 is a meandering coil.

In many ways, the old highway is the typical country road — neon and plastic interspersed with cows and unsteady barns. A broken lonely yellow line. Miles of space.

But in many ways, it's more. For one can almost imagine bouncing around inside an old Ford, the fortunate child of a slower age and simpler times. On old Highway 99.



Story and Photos
By
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When Chapman's Grocery was built in 1933, few businesses were to be found nearby. Although Highway 99 was the main route from Canada to Mexico until the mid-1950s, traffic then was lighter, says long-time store owner Agnes Chapman. The road has been widened over the years and now encroaches upon the weathered building (Above). Auto camps, the forerunner of the modern day motel, were the rage during the heyday of U.S. Highway 99. The old bungalows, (Right), were constructed in 1940 a few miles north of Eugene, and carried the name Tipton Lodge. Today, they're known as Topper Village and reflect the passage of time. Other auto camps along Highway 99 possessed names such as Rest Well Court, Chicken Inn, Gay Way Cottages, Cabin City Auto Camp and Nitezrest Motor Court. "Modern cabins with gas sinks and running water, electric lights and tent room in the shade," were typical attractions for highway travelers. The Highway 99 roadside is littered with the nic nac of previous generations, including an old truck near Goshen (Far right).

