

Oregonian history columnist 'wrong in every aspect' about Capitol Highway

By Don Snedecor
The Southwest Portland Post

OLD MULTNOMAH

In John Terry's history column, "First wagons easier to pin than the last," (The Oregonian, November 30, 2008) Tim Lyman wondered about Southwest Portland's Capitol Highway.

Lyman: "Seems to me that it was named Capitol Highway because it was the road that went to the Capitol (Salem)," he wrote. "Am I correct in this idea? I have also heard that portions of Capitol Highway were some of the first concrete roads in the USA."

According to Terry, Capitol Highway got its name from Capitol Hill, which, according to Eugene Snyder's "Portland Names and Neighborhoods," was "a small hill in southwest Portland developed with residential property. There was a 'Capitol Hill' subdivision in 1907." So far, so good.

But that doesn't explain Capitol Highway, and Snyder doesn't take us down that road. Other sources I checked are even less satisfactory. My guess is the subdivision developers wanted a name suggesting easy access to their tract and came up with the name to convince potential buyers that 1907 Hupmobiles could easily make the grade. Over time the thoroughfare grew to somewhat warrant its appellation.

As for its being the route to the state "Capitol," that doesn't fly because, at least for Portland's west side, that was Boones Ferry Road, which wound its way south to the Willamette crossing

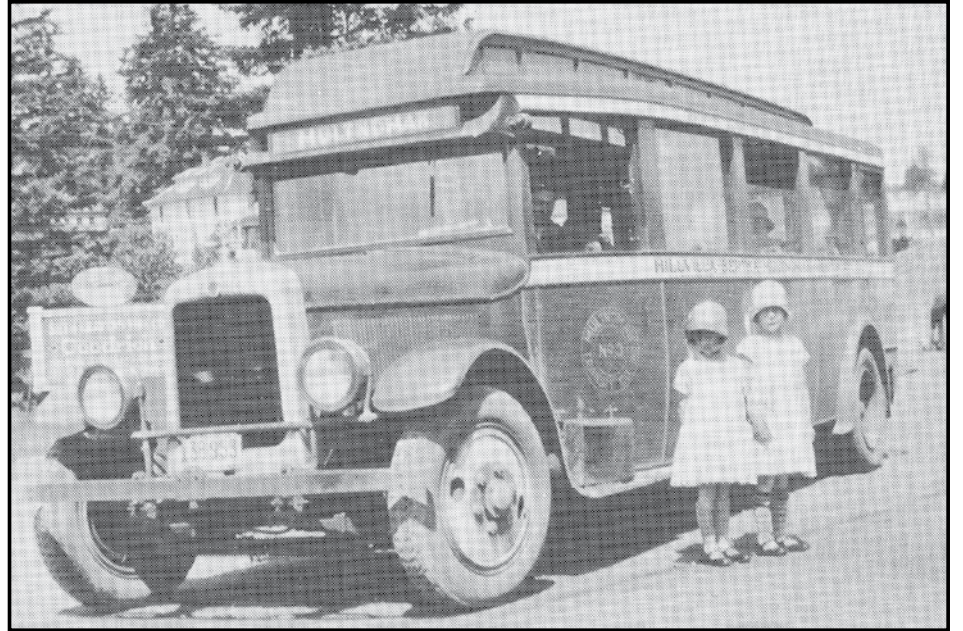
at Wilsonville and on to Salem and predates Capitol Highway by a good half-century.

I'm also somewhat doubtful Capitol Highway can lay claim to being among the first concrete-paved highways in the nation, but it's possible. This much is for sure, courtesy of the Portland Cement Association: "The first concrete highway constructed in the United States was a 24 mile (38.6 km) long, 9 ft (2.7m) wide, 5 in. (12.7 cm) thick strip of concrete pavement built near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1913 -- five years after the introduction of the Model T Ford. By 1914, portland cement concrete had been used to pave 2,348 miles (3778 km) of roadway."

If Capitol Highway's builders used it, did that put it among that first year's 2,348 miles? Who knows? Before 1913 there was no Oregon Highway Commission, no state highways, and county road departments were notoriously lax in both construction and record keeping.

In a letter to John Terry, copied to The Post, Lyman replied: I don't know what your sources are, or if you even bothered to check any, but you are wrong in every respect about Capitol Highway. It was a highway, it did go the state capitol, and that's why it was named Capitol Highway.

Capitol Highway was a segment of the original Pacific Highway, predecessor to US99 and later I5, which was laid out in 1912-1913. Capitol Highway was purpose built



A jitney stops along Capitol Highway near Bertha Station circa 1930. (Post file photo)

for automobile traffic and was one of the first paved automobile highways in the country.

Paving started in 1914, Capitol Highway was completely paved by 1915 and the entire Pacific Highway from Canada to Mexico was completely paved by 1922. Boone's Ferry road did precede Capitol Highway, but it was never part of any highway system.

Attached are the frontispiece from the *State of Oregon First Annual Report of the Highway Engineer Period Ending November 30, 1914* and the page that references Capitol Highway as going to Salem.

Also attached are two pages from the *Automobile Blue Book of 1919, Vol. 9*. There is a map of roads around NW Oregon and a passage

outlining the route from Portland to Salem via the Capitol Highway. The Blue Book is not a government publication, but was considered to be the most authoritative source of road information in the early days of motoring.

A simple search "capitol highway" on Google books would have yielded you the same results. Even a simple search for "Capitol Highway" on Wikipedia would have yielded the correct answer.

The book *That ribbon of highway III: Highway 99 through the Pacific Northwest*, available at the Multnomah County Library also describes Capitol Highway. The Multnomah County Library also has a fine selection of early twentieth century Oregon road maps.

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