

Ruts, Trails and Superhighways: I-70

The advent of the automobile was one of the most significant changes for the nation. Ira Thompson, an early businessman of Rexford, is credited with the first automobile in Thomas County in 1903. In 1908 Henry Ford produced the reasonably priced, reliable, and efficient Model T. Prior to 1910 there were not many automobiles, however, once the "car fever" began almost every issue of the *Colby Free Press* carried news stories about some prominent citizen purchasing a new automobile. On one occasion John Ackard drove the 20 miles from Brewster to Colby in 45 minutes at the rate of almost 27 miles an hour. This was considered high-speed traveling at the time. In the period following World War 1, automobile advertisements and news items concerning accidents and the need for better roads became commonplace on the pages of the county's newspapers.

It was in the years just before the entrance World War I that road building fever spread across the country. Thomas County businessmen and other interested people played an active part in attempting to get good roads throughout not only Thomas County, but also all of Northwest Kansas. The most significant early highway of the county was the Golden Belt Road, established in 1910. It ran from Oakley to Colby and then west. Another road was the Sunflower Trail, which connected to the Golden Belt Road and ran east to Beloit. There was also the Rock Island Highway (later called the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway) that ran alongside the railroad to Norton. The Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway ran from New York City to Los Angeles and evolved over the years between 1914 and 1926. The Victory Highway, established following WWI as a memorial to veterans, included sections of the Golden Belt Road.

During the 1920's there was a lot of road construction, which had been delayed by the war. The Federal Bureau of Highways was planning three major transcontinental highways across the United States. Colby businessmen hoped the proposed central route, U.S. 40, which was created in 1925 would come through town. For years, the Kansas portion of Highway 40 consisted of roads constructed, supervised, and maintained by the counties. There were two possible routes from Manhattan west through Kansas. One was to follow the Union Pacific Railroad while the other was over the Roosevelt-Midland Trail through Clay Center, Beloit, and Hill City, to Colby. In either case, Colby hoped to secure this roadway, for the people felt the logical route of the former road would come north from Oakley to Colby over the Victory Highway rather than going west from Oakley along the Union Pacific. Many meetings were held, and representatives from Colby attended state gatherings and even a national meeting at Chicago in attempts to secure U.S. 40's passage through Thomas County and Colby. Early in 1926 a decision was reached to run highways over both proposed routes. The Union Pacific route being designated U.S. 40 South and the northern Manhattan through Colby route designated U.S. 40 North. In 1936, U.S. 40 North became U.S. 24 and U.S. 40 South became U.S. 40.

By 1929 all the county roads were recognized as improved earth roads and all were graded. In June, 1929, the Highway Bureau decided to designate the road west from Norton through Decatur, Rawlins, and Cheyenne counties as U.S. 36. The towns from Colby west into Colorado were very unhappy, for it meant that instead of auto traffic flowing down to U.S. 40-N by way of the Rock Island Highway, such traffic would go to Denver by way of Oberlin, Atwood, and St. Francis. The businessmen of the towns along U.S. 40-N in an attempt to change the Highway Bureau's decision presented many arguments. All these efforts were to no avail, however; and U.S. 36 became a reality.

Long before Dwight D. Eisenhower became President he realized the importance of highways. His first realization of the value of good highways occurred in 1919, when he participated in the U.S. Army's first transcontinental motor convoy from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco. On the way west, the convoy experienced an endless series of mechanical difficulties. Vehicles got stuck in mud or fell through wooden bridges. After 62 days on the road, the convoy finally reached San Francisco.

By the late 1930s, the pressure for construction of transcontinental superhighways was building in Washington. President Franklin D. Roosevelt repeatedly expressed interest in construction of a network of toll superhighways as a way of providing more jobs for people out of work. During WWII Gen.

Eisenhower saw the advantages of the Autobahn highway network and the enhanced mobility of the allies when they entered Germany. These experiences shaped Eisenhower's views on highways.

Interstate 70 was formed the day President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act on June 29, 1956. The Kansas State Highway Commission's monthly newsletter, *Highway Highlights*, for the month of June 1956 written before Eisenhower signed the bill laid out the proposed route. "As presently approved the system includes the turnpike from Kansas City to Topeka; west along U.S. 40 to Oakley; north to the vicinity of Colby; and west along U.S. 24 to the Colorado line.

A 1962 *Colby Free Press* article reports that officials state "traffic projections indicate that by 1975 the average daily traffic on the portion of Interstate 70 across Thomas County will be about 8,000 vehicles per day. When completed in 1964 or 65, the Thomas County section will be about 40 miles in length with five interchanges costing an estimated \$11,900,000. I-70 will run from Baltimore to Richfield, Utah and will connect Thomas county citizens with important cities such as Kansas City, Topeka, Denver and St. Louis. The entire route will be four lanes. Dugan pointed out that the new interstate would increase the traffic flow into Colby. The interchange in the Colby area is a full interchange which will be location 1.5 miles south of the city limits where I-70 intersects K-25."

"Officers of the Highway 24 Association gave the latest in highway information concerning Colby to Rotarians at their weekly meeting Tuesday. Topics discussed were Highway 24 and Interstate 70 and proposed improvements on Fourth Street. Matt Hamill, president of the association, told how the tourist dollar is important to the economy of Colby. Hamill said studies have shown tourists spend an estimated three quarter million dollars in Colby each year. He said money from the tourists goes directly to several businesses before the money gradually reaches the rest of the town." *Colby Free Press* 3/7/1963

On December 18, 1965, I-70 opened to traffic at Colby. The dedication was held on Dec. 17, 1965 in subfreezing weather. Gov. William Avery assisted Mrs. Belle Misner, a 101 year old resident of Colby, in opening the combine belt which spanned the highway. Mrs. Misner came to Thomas County with her parents in a covered wagon in 1885 from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. When the State of Kansas was buying right-of-way property, Mrs. Misner sold 39 acres of land for the new I-70 exchange near Mingo. The land she sold was part of her late husband's homestead and timber claim. Merlin Taylor, master of ceremonies introduced Gov. Avery, highway officials, Colby Mayor Don Phillips and Marla Ogier, Miss Colby 1965-1966. Bill Beck led the Colby Community High School Band in several musical numbers including the National Anthem. KXXX carried the half-hour ceremony live from 10:00-10:30 a.m. A convoy of six official cars traveled from Colby to Mingo and back.

In 1990, legislation was signed that changed the name of the highway system to the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

In 1986, Exit 54 was completed, raising the number of interchanges in Thomas County to six. Today, an average of 10,000 cars a day travel I-70 past Colby. The total estimated income from tourism in Colby is almost \$14,000,000. This figure is based on the total guest tax collections in Colby.

It is a myth that the Interstate must have one straight mile in every five to be used as airstrips in times of war or other emergencies.