ON THE ROAD

The 1919 Transcontinental Expedition

By Jeremy W. Kilar

Today, a drive from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, California, requires approximately 42 hours of driving over 2,808 miles of roadway. But, 100 years ago, in the summer of 1919, an extraordinary motor expedition conducted by the U.S. Army Motor Transport Corps and including some of Michigan's top automobile industrialists made that journey in 62 days over 3,251 miles—all in the name of improving the system of roads across the United States.

The first Transcontinental Motor Convoy of the U.S. Army Motor Transport Corps assembled near the White House on July 7, 1919, to begin a trip from Washington, D.C., to California in an effort to promote the need for better roads across the country. The undertaking had a remarkable outcome because one of its young officers, Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower, would years later as president of the United States sign legislation for an interstate highway system.

Equally important was that men from Detroit had the vision, energy, and persistence to promote and guide the convoy that spurred the highways we depend on today. Captain William C. Greany of Detroit, who served as statistical officer for the convoy, later emphasized that the undertaking "inaugurated a new epoch in long distance operation of heavy motor transport…was the first motor convoy to cross the continent…and is comparable to the first ox-team, prairie-schooner trek across desolate wilderness."

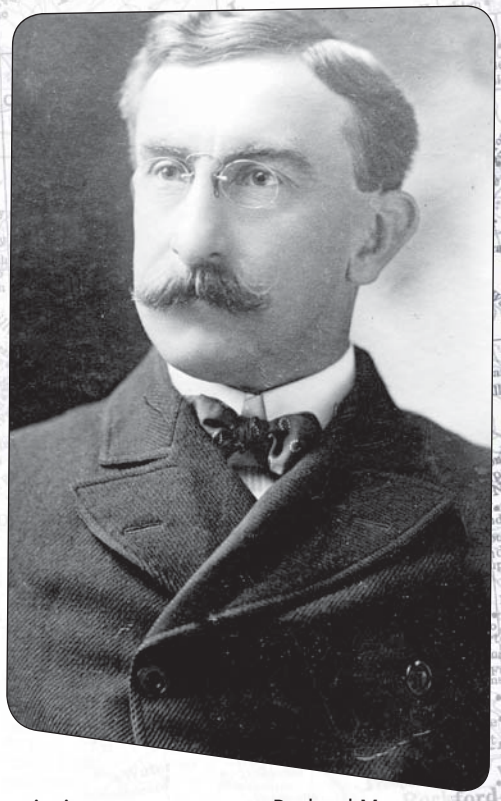
While Greany noted that the 1919 Transcontinental Expedition was one of "historic significance," one historian later pointed out that it also meant that "the men of Detroit had gotten their way" by increasing the breadth of the auto industry's reach across the country.

Forming the Lincoln Highway Association

The age of the automobile had arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century—and Detroit sat at the very summit of the new industrial order. Thousands of people were drawn to the city to build automobiles, and thousands more were employed constructing the roads on which those cars would drive.

Henry B. Joy, president of Detroit's Packard Motor Company, realized early on that the need for good roads was crucial for the auto industry to thrive. He was determined to prove the practicality of automobile transportation and the need for national highways. In 1911, Joy and his chief engineer drove a new Packard touring car toward California, but they only got as far as Omaha, Nebraska. Joy asked a local Packard dealer where the road heading west was. "There isn't any," the man said. There were just ruts left over from the wagon trains of the last century.

Joy became convinced that he, along with national business and civic leaders, could build cement roads that would help get the country out of those impassable, muddy ruts. In 1913, Joy and several other businessmen from the auto, tire, and cement industries chartered the Lincoln Highway Association, headquartered in Detroit's Dime Savings Bank Building. Their goal was to construct the first modern transcontinental highway from New York City to San Francisco.

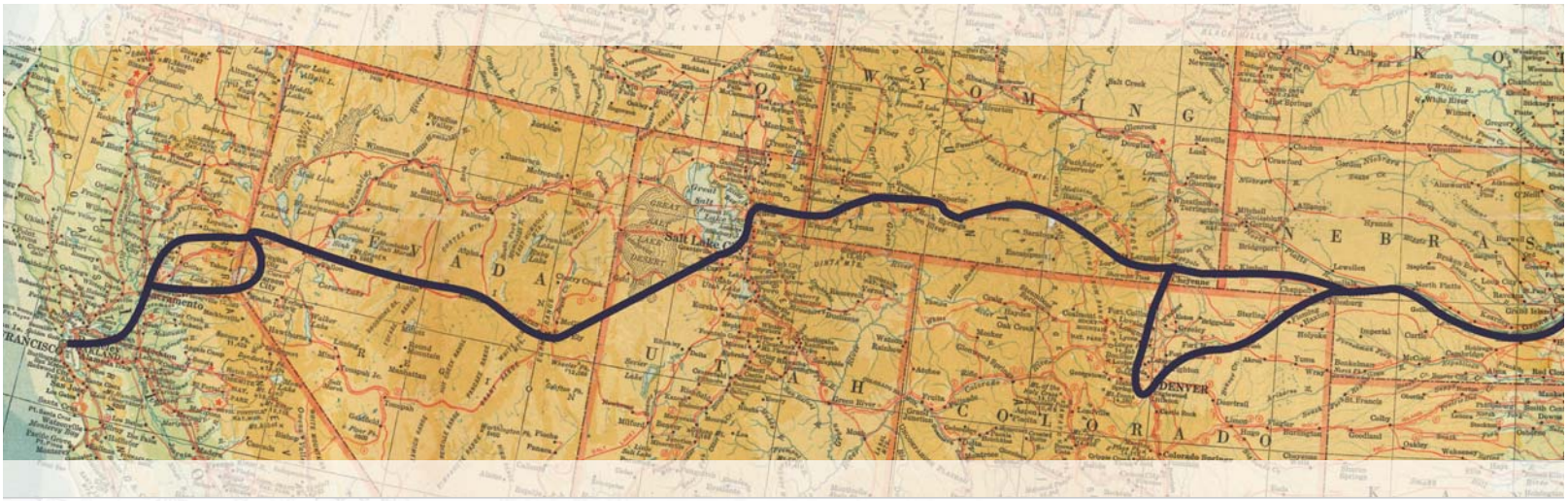


Packard Motor Company President Henry B. Joy of Detroit helped charter the Lincoln Highway Association in 1913. *(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-B2-2841-12.)*

By 1919, the Lincoln Highway Association had accomplished several of its objectives. A route had been drawn through 11 states. The Portland Cement Company paid for "Seed Miles," which were one-mile stretches of paved roadway in cities along the route that were built as far west as Iowa. A Lincoln Highway Association guidebook was published. The association had also hired Henry Ostermann, who proved extraordinarily good at promoting those roads all along the route west.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Packard and other Michigan auto manufacturers were commissioned by the federal government to build Liberty trucks for the Allied armies. A new truck could be built in 40 minutes, but moving it from Detroit to Baltimore for shipment to Europe took weeks. The U.S. Council of National Defense appointed Roy Chapin, president of the Hudson Motor Car Company and a director of the Lincoln Highway Association, to organize truck convoys from the country's industrial cities to its seaports.

Henry Ostermann led the first convoy along the eastern section of the Lincoln Highway from Detroit to Baltimore. It was while piloting those wartime truck convoys that he conceived the idea of sending a military convoy along the entire length of the



The above map traces the route of the Lincoln Highway, which the Transcontinental Motor Convoy traveled on in 1919. *(Photo courtesy of the Michigan State University Maps Library.)*

planned Lincoln Highway. After he discussed it with military officials, and once World War I ended in November 1918, the U.S. Army indicated that it was willing to participate.

Setting Out From Washington, D.C.

The federal government's decision to undertake a transcontinental truck convoy was front-page news in Detroit. The Lincoln Highway Association would lead the convoy along its planned transcontinental route, promoting the need for better roads in the United States and giving Detroit truck manufacturers an ideal opportunity to promote their models across the country.

The official goals of the exercise were set forth in detailed press releases that were sent nationwide and almost always written in Detroit. The goal of the U.S. Army was to test its military vehicles, study the terrain and driving conditions across the United States, encourage men along the route to enlist for service, and convince the federal government to contribute financially to building better roads. Captain Greany saw its purpose as a less-complex military exercise: "The expedition was assumed to be marching through enemy country and therefore to be self-sustaining throughout."

Before the assembled convoy could get on the road from Washington, D.C., to California, it first had to dedicate a "zero milestone," which was located south of the ellipse behind the White House. Although the initial milestone was temporary, a permanent stone pillar now stands about waist-high with a bronze compass on top. Inscribed as the "Starting Point of the First Transcontinental Motor Convoy Over the Lincoln Highway," it was originally the starting point from which all U.S. road distances were reckoned from Washington, D.C.

Dedication speeches lasted an hour. As the convoy at last began to pull away, a host of automobile magnates from White Motors, Packard, Dodge, General Motors, Mack Trucks, Ricker/Locomobile, and other firms rode alongside it. The pilot car was a gleaming white Packard "Twin Six." Prominently in the driver's seat was Henry Ostermann of the Lincoln Highway Association. Because he had driven across the country numerous times promoting the highway, it was said that he was the only one who knew the way.

The U.S. Army had assigned 24 officers and 258 enlisted men to participate in the expedition, all falling under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. McClure. Captain Greany served as both statistical officer and McClure's adjutant, while Lieutenant Elwell Jackson kept a log of the convoy's progress and Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower served as a U.S. Army Tank Corps observer. McClure's daily reports, Greany's statistical observations, Jackson's log, and Eisenhower's "Reports to the Tank Corps"—along with the work of an Army film crew—provided a thorough account of the expedition.

As Ostermann cranked his Twin Six and headed out of Washington, D.C., a deafening clamor of engines rolled behind for two miles. Greeny reported that "a total of 79 specialized military vehicles were included: 34 heavy cargo trucks, 4 light trucks, a machine shop [truck], blacksmith shop [truck], 2 water tank trucks, 2 ambulances, a

searchlight [truck], 4 kitchen trucks, 8 touring cars, and 1 heavy-duty [Militor] wrecking truck." Trailing behind Ostermann were nine Harley-Davidson and Indian motorcycles ridden by Army scouts.

"A Great Patriotic Work"

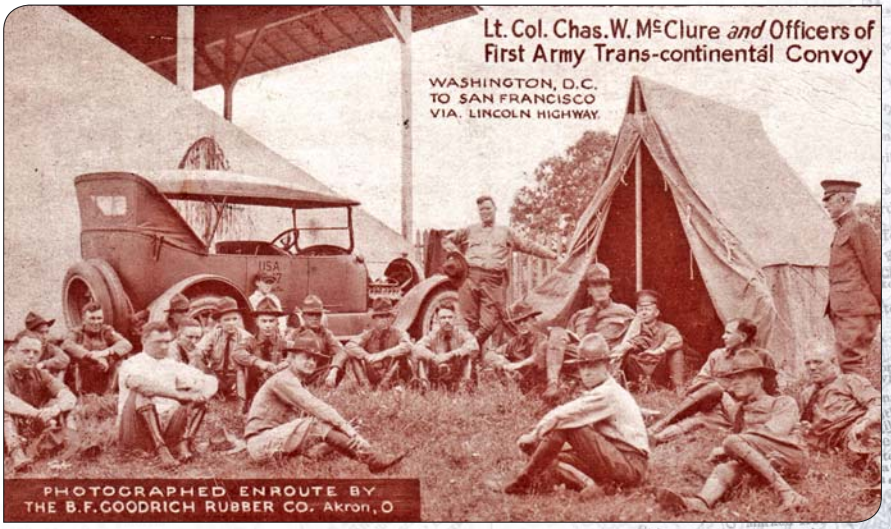
Before the convoy arrived at its first overnight stop in Frederick, Maryland, it had already experienced its first breakdowns—a kitchen trailer broke away, a staff car's fan belt broke, and the Militor had to tow a broken-down cargo truck. Eisenhower noted that one of the early problems was that many of the young Army recruits driving the trucks "had a longer association with teams of horses than with internal combustion engines."

In the age before power steering, power brakes, and automatic transmissions, it was slow, filthy, and arduous work to manage one of the Army's two- to five-ton trucks. Frequent problems with equipment, inexperienced mechanics and drivers, and poor roads and bridges prevented the convoy from making significant progress. On the first day, it took more than seven hours to cover 46 miles.

As the convoy continued westward, it rolled onto the Lincoln Highway, coming from New York City, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. From there, the expedition would follow the route of the highway to the Pacific coast. On the eastern part of the highway, road conditions were generally good, although maintenance crews were kept busy repairing vehicles and engineers had to shore up bridges and occasionally lay plank road beds.

In spite of Greany's assumption that the convoy had to be self-sustaining, people in almost every community came out in large numbers to welcome the doughboys. Mayors proclaimed holidays, lunches were served, and auto-related industrialists extended hospitality. Near Akron, Ohio, Harvey Firestone, a highway backer, treated the entire party to a lavish banquet at his country home. He also sent his son, Harvey Jr., along with the convoy to promote Firestone tires. The expedition pushed on through eastern Ohio, where the Lincoln Highway was paved with brick, and central Ohio, where the gravel roads were eight to ten inches deep in mud after a heavy rain.

Once through Ohio, the closest the Lincoln Highway came to Michigan was in South Bend, Indiana. There, Firestone and the Republic Truck Company of Alma, Michigan, had sandwiches and cigarettes waiting for the men. The big news was that Studebaker was planning to move its automobile production from Detroit to South Bend in 1920 and was promising as many as 20,000 jobs. Goodyear sent a 15-piece



A group photograph of many of the U.S. Army officers who participated in the transcontinental convoy. *(Photo courtesy of Russell Ryan.)*

The convoy's "Militor" wrecking truck pulls a truck out of a ditch while on route in Nebraska. *(Photo courtesy of the University of Michigan Library.)*

band to South Bend. While the band played, the soldiers ate in the city park, and the officers were entertained at a lavish dinner given by Studebaker at the Chain-O-Lakes Country Club. The band remained with the convoy through to California, traveling in a large, five-ton Packard truck equipped with Goodyear's new pneumatic tires.

Henry Joy called the trek "a great patriotic work." As the convoy moved westward, flags and banners were unfurled, courthouse bells rang, and local dignitaries lined up to greet the officers. Greany estimated that, "approximately 3,250,000 persons were afforded an opportunity to personally see a unit of a motorized army and to understand the vast importance of motor transport and good roads for national defense."

Westward Bound

Arriving in Chicago Heights, Illinois, where the Dixie Highway and the Lincoln Highway intersect, the doughboys were rewarded with a weekend's rest. The Goodyear band led the convoy into the city, while gas, auto, tire, and oil men sought out Lieutenant Colonel McClure and Lincoln Highway Association officials.

Meanwhile, the men showered at the American Steel Company's baths and then "promenaded the streets filled with curious young women." Eighteen-year-old Mabel Ruth Kelley had come south from Muskegon, Michigan, to visit her aunt in Chicago and had been following the troop train since the previous Tuesday, when she met Private Philip Gollick. It was love at first sight. Gollick borrowed $5 and asked McClure if he could marry Kelley that Sunday. An Episcopalian minister was found, and a ceremony was performed.

Lieutenant Jackson wrote that, west of Chicago Heights, "the dirt roads began and there was practically no more pavement until we reached California." Iowa's roads were impassable "gumbo" in wet weather or "grit and dust" when dry. Fortunately for the convoy, the trek through Iowa was mostly dry, but clouds of dust clogged radiators and ball bearings, blocked gas lines, and stalled a dozen trucks at a time.

When the expedition reached the Plains States, conditions rapidly deteriorated. Once past Omaha, Nebraska, where Henry Joy had lost the trail eight years earlier, the men saw that little progress had been made improving the roadway. Eisenhower noted that rain in Nebraska made roads slippery, causing 25 trucks to skid into a roadside ditch west of North Platte. In August, they drove onto a 200-yard stretch of road that McClure described as "crusted watersoaked quicksand." Greany wrote that "trucks sank to depths of several feet and had to be rescued by timber, rope and chain tackle and jacks." It took more than seven hours to traverse 200 yards.

While road conditions in Nebraska were difficult, the dirt roads in Wyoming and Utah were nearly impassable. Greany's report noted that "a period of forty-two hours were spent in rescuing the entire convoy from near disaster on the quicksands of the Salt Lake Desert in Utah and the [Fallon] Sink Region in Nevada." That stretch of roadway was later paved and paid for by General Motors and other Detroit auto manufacturers.

On top of poor road conditions, water became scarce in the desert and had to be rationed to two cups a day. Freeing vehicles required "almost continuous and excessive work," wrote Greany, "in temperatures that were 130 degrees in the sun of Utah and a minimum of 30 degrees in the Sierra Nevada Mountains."

Crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains was another part of the trip that tested the mettle of the doughboys. On King's Grade pass, each truck was pushed or pulled and then blocked to prevent it from rolling backward. Every vehicle was provided with

Major Greany—Soldier and Scoutmaster

Shortly after his return from San Francisco to Detroit at the end of the 1919 Transcontinental Expedition, Captain William C. Greany's young son died. Greany then decided to undertake a second career as a father to all boys. In 1923, while working at the Packard Motor Company, he took over as scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop 194 in Detroit, a role in which he served for 48 years. By the time Greany died in 1971, more than 2,000 boys and young men had passed through the ranks of Troop 194. They became doctors, lawyers, teachers, soldiers, priests, and policemen—and one, Jerome P. Cavanagh, even became mayor of Detroit.

By the mid-1960s, Troop 194 was the largest Boy Scout troop in Detroit with more than 110 boys and a staff of 25 senior leaders. Unheard of today, there was a waiting list for 11-year-olds anticipating membership. At every weekly scout meeting, Greany spoke to his young scouts about decency, patriotism, and the wonders of exploring the American landscape that he had seen up close while traveling across the country.

In 1938, Greany was appointed an Eagle Scout commissioner and developed a summer program at the Mackinac Island Service Camp, where Eagle Scout and future politician Gerald R. Ford proudly served. During World War II, Greany was promoted to the rank of major in the U.S. Army Reserve and placed in charge of 300 armed men providing plant protection for Packard's war production.

Greany also remained in touch with Dwight D. Eisenhower, and whenever Eisenhower came to Detroit, he invariably contacted Greany to revisit old times. "I got to be very close to him," recalled Greany. "I still called him 'Ike.'" When Greany retired from Packard in 1953, President Eisenhower sent well wishes: "News such as this reminds me that it is thirty-four years since you and I went off on a jaunt across the United States." Whether it was at a scout meeting or around a campfire, Major Greany often reflected on Eisenhower's organizational skills, congenial temperament, and personality.

Scoutmaster William C. Greany (center), a veteran of the 1919 Transcontinental Expedition, greets Michigan Governor John B. Swainson on Mackinac Island in 1961. *(Photo courtesy of Robert E. Benjamin.)*

tow ropes, wheel blocks, oil, gas, and water. The pace was so slow that men walked alongside the vehicles in order to anchor any truck backsliding. With gears grinding and wheels spitting stones, the trucks moved over the mountain pass, often driving inches from the edge of dizzying drop-offs. After six long, nerve-wracking hours, the men could see California, 57 days after leaving Washington, D.C.

Once the convoy got out of the mountains, California was a land of good roads. By September 3, the convoy had reached Sacramento, where the Willys Overland Company sponsored a dinner. Both McClure and Jackson detailed the elaborate menu and emphasized that it was a respite the men truly deserved. Two days later, two ferries took the men from Oakland to San Francisco. At Lincoln Park, looking out over the Pacific Ocean, several speeches were made and a milestone matching the one behind the White House was dedicated to mark the western terminus of the Lincoln Highway. Gold medals were awarded to the convoy's leaders, while bronze medals were given to each soldier who made the trip.

A Dream Come True

Henry Joy, Henry Ostermann, Lieutenant Colonel McClure, Captain Greany, and Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower could all look back on the 1919 Transcontinental Expedition as a successful adventure. For

The author (right) and fellow Eagle Scout Gary Wismer pose at the zero milestone marker outside the White House in Washington, D.C., in 1965. *(Photo courtesy of Ronald Jagner.)*

Detroit auto manufacturers, Eisenhower's final report to the U.S. Army Motor Transport Corps was music to their ears: "The performance of the three Packard trucks is remarkable, the White trucks were also very good, and this also applies to the G.M.C. type." While Gafford trucks were "not at all recommended because of frequent breakdowns," Cadillac and Packard touring cars had "very little difficulty."

As a public relations event, Greany wrote, the expedition enabled the Lincoln Highway Association and the U.S. Army to bring the issue of roads in the United States "to the attention of 33,000,000 persons." The directors of the Lincoln Highway Association were convinced that the convoy was a vital affirmation of the need for federal assistance in building a transcontinental road.

When the convoy disbanded, U.S. Senator Charles E. Townsend of Michigan pushed legislation to create a federal highway system. Henry Joy expressed his unbridled enthusiasm: "A dream…thought to be impossible is coming true." In November 1921, President Warren G. Harding signed the Townsend Highway Act into law. It promised $75 million for each of the next five years for America's roads. "It was exactly what the Highway Association always wanted," wrote one historian, "and Detroit exulted."

Once the Townsend bill was passed, the Lincoln Highway Association's founders sought other pursuits. In 1927, amid several locational disputes in Utah and Nevada and due to the Federal Bureau of Public Roads deciding to designate state roads by numbers, the association was officially disbanded. Henry Joy resisted its demise, but he was preoccupied by battling national prohibition and guiding Packard through the oncoming economic depression.

Henry Ostermann drove back to Detroit after the convoy disbanded. A year later, while promoting "good roads" in Iowa, he drove his Packard Twin-Six off the side of a road near Tama, where it skidded and rolled over twice. The Packard sustained little damage, but Ostermann was killed instantly.

Both Charles McClure and William Greany soon left the Army, returned to Detroit, and went to work for Joy at Packard. Greany worked there in various managerial positions until he retired in 1953.

The 1919 Transcontinental Expedition is perhaps best remembered today because Dwight D. Eisenhower was a participant. His experiences while on that cross-country trek left him with insights into the logistics of moving an army across vast stretches of land. All of that came into clearer focus after seeing the German autobahns during World War II. "The old convoy had started me thinking about good two-lane highways," Eisenhower reflected, "but Germany made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land."

In 1956, President Eisenhower signed legislation that authorized the construction of 41,000 miles of the nation's interstate highway system. He often mentioned that the interstate system was one of the most important accomplishments of his administration, and he frequently cited the 1919 convoy as a crucial experience in supporting the building of good roads across the nation. That expedition resulted in the greatest infrastructure project in the history of the United States—largely because of the entrepreneurial activity of a few farsighted Detroiters.

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