

Where do we go
from here: A historical look
at transportation in Mt. Vernon

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Introduction

I decided to do my project on the historical aspects of transportation in Mount Vernon. After gathering information from books and speaking with my grandparents, who have lived in Mt. Vernon most of their lives, I realized what a huge topic I had chosen. Therefore, I decided to limit my report to an overview of the Interurban, the Lincoln Highway and quick reflections of my grandparents and what types of transportation they used to travel.

Interurban

The Interurban of Mt. Vernon was built in 1913, a year before the Lincoln Highway. The Interurban was part of the 2nd largest Interurban route in our state. It consisted of Waterloo, Cedar Falls and "Cedar Valley Road" or the Northern and the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City Railways called the "Crandic"- developed from combining the initials. The Dow's family incorporated the southern route of the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City Railway, in 1903. The Dow family members functioned as the company's presidents throughout its history. These two roads, Cedar Valley Road and Crandic operated independently, inter changing passengers at a station built jointly on 4th Street in Cedar Rapids. This railway system took many years to develop; between 1901 and 1909 the route between Waterloo to Waverly was built. The Cedar Rapids construction to the south didn't start until 1912, reaching Urbana in 1913, and Center Point in 1914. Then the southern section of this big train/Interurban Railway, which had been incorporated in 1903 by the Dow family, began service; In 1904 making the trip from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City in 75 minutes. This high-speed line which was made for passenger service found the passengers swinging and swaying down the tracks. This motion created the label "Vomit Comet" by its riders.

In 1913 the line extended to Mt. Vernon. This extension to MT. Vernon got much attention for its citizens. They now had a cheap and easy way to get to Cedar Rapids. They would just go to the station, East of the present Middle School, get on the Interurban go to Cedar Rapids and could go do their shopping in a short time. They could also go get on another train and go to Waterloo, Iowa City or somewhere in between. It was especially popular with Cornell College students, traveling to various

places on semester breaks. The Interurban proved so popular at football game times for Cornell, Coe, and Iowa, that trains were borrowed from Waterloo for those occasions.

The quick and popular method of transportation for the citizens of Mt. Vernon began a competition with the car, especially after the completion of the Lincoln Highway. While it continued to remain an efficient way to travel to Cedar Rapids or Iowa City, especially in wet weather, when the highway proved almost impassable. As more citizens got automobiles the number of passengers decreased. With declining numbers in passengers and the fact that the Mt. Vernon/Lisbon line was not built for freight service the Crandic abandoned the line on July 27, 1928.

Currently portion of the abandoned route, which is owned by Alliant Electric, can still be viewed in the Mt. Vernon and Lisbon area. The route from Mt. Vernon to Lisbon, which came out where the Middle School parking lot exists today, runs through the Candlestick housing addition. In the late 1980's, there was an attempt to turn that route into a walking and biking nature trail. It received great opposition from those living in the Candlestick addition and was eventually voted down. The route from the Middle School went up the current 1st street and out Bryant Road, then west to Cedar Rapids. Attempts to turn that route in a bike trail continue to cause great controversy. Who would have imagined that the route of the "Vomit Comet" is still causing upset stomachs more than seventy years later.

Lincoln Highway

By the year 1912 close to 200,000 motor vehicles were registered in the United States. There was over 2 ½ million miles of road, but most of it was just plain dirt. A man by the name of Carl Fisher, founder of a company that made car headlights, proposed an idea to build a coast to coast highway. While attempting to raise over 10 million dollars to fund the proposed "Lincoln Highway" (given a patriotic name to appeal to people for donations), Fisher selected Henry Joy, president of Packard, to choose the route.

The route chosen was based on the most direct route from New York to San Francisco. Henry Joy also looked for a route that would follow natural paths with easy terrain. He also thought it was important to bypass larger cities, which would avoid congested roads. Joy had a difficult time selecting the route from Chicago to Omaha. He settled on the route that in 1908 had become called the Iowa Official Trans-Continental Route. The route included the town of Mount Vernon.

The Lincoln Highway was built in 1914. This was an exciting time for the United States, for the first time there was a road that connects the East and West Coast. Not only that, but, the road went right through our little town, Mt. Vernon. The local businesses would prosper from the increasing number of people coming into Mt. Vernon and people could travel distances in their automobiles.

There were problems even with the highway. One of the main problems was the deep "muck" after a rainstorm. The plowed roads were not paved so often after a heavy rainstorm the roads were very soft. Travel on these soft roads led to deep ruts and many

cars getting stuck. The people in the cars would have to get a farmer to pull him with his team of horses. It was often suggested not to go out on the highway for at least five hours after a rainstorm. This was a problem throughout the country and Henry Joy proposed a plan called the "Seedling Mile" to introduce concrete roads across the United States. His plan was to build mile stretches of concrete road to show people how much better travel, wear, and durability is on a concrete road.

In 1918 there was a proposition between the Linn County Board of Supervisors and the Lincoln Highway Association. The proposition was if the Lincoln Highway Association would give 3000 barrels of cement then the Linn Co. Board of Supervisors would build a concrete mile. The association agreed and the board decided on the section to pave. This spot would be midway between Mt. Vernon and Cedar Rapids and after pouring of concrete, in 1919, Iowa had its first "seedling mile". Edward Killian was the man who asked the board to do this. He tried to spread the word to have every town on the Lincoln Highway create seedling miles, so all of the Lincoln Highway would be paved. Killian's idea never became popular.

In 1922 only about five percent of Iowa's roads were paved. Even with the Federal Highway Act of 1921, which matched state funds for a completion of a connected highway system, there were large negative feelings about paved roads. The farmer carried a large uneven burden for property taxes due to adjacent taxation in the state and opposed the idea of these expensive paved roads. Finally, by 1932, with the repeal of most of the unfair tax laws and farmers owning and more cars and recognizing the need for an interstate highway system, Iowa began to catch up with the rest of the country on paving the "Lincoln Highway."

Its hard to believe that Mt. Vernon's "seedling mile", which can be seen even today traveling from Mt. Vernon Road to Cedar Rapids, was so ahead of its time in terms of paved road. Although the Lincoln Highway is no longer the most direct route from New York to San Francisco, it was for many years. Portion of the Lincoln Highway are still well traveled today. The route which includes the first "seedling mile" in Iowa is one that my mother has traveled to go to and from work for the over twenty-two years.

Memories: Jean and Virgil Stoner

My grandfather, Virgil Stoner, moved to Mt. Vernon in 1918 when he was 2 ½ years old. He lived on a farm north of town with his parents, two older sisters and a younger brother. His travels were by horse and buggy to school, which was a country school a mile down the road and to town (7 miles) for supplies that were needed, his parents did have a car also. When his sisters started attending High School they had to travel into town and would take the horse and buggy during good weather. They would stable their horse for the day at a barn which was located on what is now Highway 1 about one block west from the high school (now the middle school). When it was winter or raining, they would “board” in town. This meant they paid to stay with a family in town so they could attend school. My grandfather still has the third seat they needed for room to sit in the buggy when all three would travel to town. He also said he remembers traveling on the “seedling mile” going from gravel road to paved road back to gravel. Although he was only 2 years old when it was poured, he does remember when the Lincoln Highway was paved which he thinks was the late twenties of early thirties.

My grandfather told me that when they paved the Lincoln Highway, the traffic was detoured by his house on what is now called Linn Ridge Road. “It was a dirt road that turned to mud when it rained.” He told me cars were always getting stuck and had to be pulled out by farmers, who were often rewarded by the driver of the car, grateful to be unstuck. He told me of one farmer near Lisbon that often watered down the detour route if there wasn’t enough rain in hopes of getting some extra income. He even told me of a man driving from Chicago late one night that got stuck and spent the night in his home. That man was Mr. Katz, who later started the Katz salvage business in Marion Iowa.

My grandmother moved to Mt. Vernon in 1932 when she was 12 years old. She also lived in the county and had to travel into town to attend high school. She traveled by both horse and buggy, and car, sitting in the rumble seat. She also "boarded" in town with a family during bad weather, so she could go to school. The payment given to the families usually was not money but eggs, milk, meat, or other products from the farm. I think it is amazing that education was so important to my great grandparents that they did whatever they needed to make sure my grandmother got to school. My grandmother even attend Cornell College and graduated in 1941.

Both of my grandparents lived in Mount Vernon during a time when there were many changes in transportation. They experienced travel on horse back, horse and buggy, early automobiles, equipped with rumble seats, and by train. My grandfather traveled on the Interurban once, although his sisters used it several times and he remembers it closing. He also remembers the Lincoln Highway before and after it was all paved. Both my grandparents told me many stories of life in Mount Vernon. I discovered in talking with my grandparents, that they are a great source of Mt. Vernon history. I hope I can remember it all and pass it along to my children.

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