## Navigating the DLD: the Origins of Hwy 6 in Adams County

Contributed by Tamerra Sears Pauley

Transportation has had a tremendous impact on the economic and cultural development of Adams County in general and Hastings in particular. Many of the nations earliest travelers passed through Adams County along the Oregon Trail, and the short-lived Pony Express had stations in Adams County. Railroads brought growth and prosperity in the late 19th Century and in the early 20th Century the DLD Highway insured the continuing success of Hastings as a hub of transportation and commerce. Spanning a distance of 1700 miles, the DLD passed through six states and connected the population centers of Detroit, Lincoln, and Denver. In Nebraska communities from Omaha to Imperial were enriched by the major thoroughfare. Highly traveled, the portion of the DLD between Omaha and Denver became part of US Highway 6 in 1931.

Adams County was organized in 1871. In 1872 the town of Hastings was platted and by 1879, the Nebraska Legislature granted counties authority to build roads on section lines. Able-bodied men between the ages of 21 and 60 were allowed to "work off their tax levy" by laboring two days a year building and maintaining roads. These were little more than trails used by horse drawn wagons to get back and forth from farms to trade centers. Railroads provided for long distance travel and the import and export of goods.

The production of affordable automobiles in the early 1900s spurred the desire for better roads. In 1901, Charlie Jacobs became the first automobile owner in Adams County. By 1906 Hastings had 30 automobiles-more per capita than any city in Nebraska. Citizens' groups such as the Good Roads Movement and the Transcontinental Automobile Association became visible, pushing for better roads on which to travel.

On August 17, 1911, the Hastings Daily Republican announced that the highway passing through Hastings had been designated by the Transcontinental Highway Association as part of the primary route linking Omaha, Lincoln, and Denver (the OLD Highway): "This, it is believed, will mean much to Hastings in the future." It was a prophetic statement, but hardly a surprise given the fact that the highway ran parallel to the east/west corridor of the Burlington Railroad that went directly through Hastings. A month later, the same newspaper speculated that the number of passengers taking the train to Colorado was declining due to the popularity of the new automobile route.

In 1913, a crew from the B. F. Goodrich Company traveled from Omaha to Denver placing tire-shaped metal signs on top of twelve-foot posts identifying the OLD Highway. Painted black and white, the distances to various towns were printed in the center of each sign. In addition to manufacturing bicycle and automobile tires, the Goodrich Company published one of the most popular travel guidebooks of the time and its sponsorship was considered essential.

While the stretch of the OLD between Omaha and Lincoln was paved, most of the Adams County roadway remained dirt for quite some time. There were vocal complaints about the condition of area roads. The equipment used for grading and dragging was primitive and the manpower hours exhaustive. In 1915, the Adams County Democrat stated, "No, we don't hear anyone discussing little pigs, chickens, or in fact, anything; only talking about the conditions of roads, which are worse than any of our old timers, of about 25 years, have ever seen them."

Progress on roads nationwide was slowed by the involvement of the United States in World War I. Movement of troops and supplies during 1917 and 1918 overwhelmed the railroads, and national attention was drawn not just to the improvement of roads, but to the creation of transcontinental highways. At the end of the war, heavy equipment was passed down to states and counties. Returning troops needed jobs and looked for work on road crews. It was a time of great enthusiasm for highway building. With increased construction came increased costs and conflicts between rural and urban interests evolved. Crop prices were low, and disagreements were intensified because with its sparse population of taxpayers, Nebraska had to build roads across hundreds of miles of prairie. Federal funds helped and extra dollars were raised when Nebraska increased the registration fee for motor vehicles and later passed a gasoline tax. Even with these measures, reluctant taxpayers kept Nebraska roads dirt long after gravel and concrete became the standard in other parts of the country. When other states accumulated large debts because of aggressive highway funding, Nebraska's efficiency in building and maintaining dirt roads became a source of pride. Authorities from other states came to inspect Nebraska's roads, hoping to find ways to reduce their own costs. One advantage to road building in Nebraska, they were told, was the flat terrain. Another was drought-like weather conditions that dominated the region. But most important was the consistency and condition of the soil. Earth that had once held heavy sod for building dwellings also worked well for building roads.

Since its inception in 1911, the OLD had been considered a state highway of great distinction. After much discussion,

and with some reluctance on the part of the OLD Highway Association to give up its identity, in 1920 it consolidated with other highways forming a continuous route from Detroit to Denver. It became the Detroit-Lincoln-Denver (DLD) Highway, a designated federal route. A progressive notion, federal highways were expected to be limited in number, with state highways becoming less important as time passed. This was an attractive proposition for communities along the OLD which sought sustained growth and recognition. Beginning in Detroit, which was considered a gateway for tourists from Canada and the New England states, the highway would pass through Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, and Colorado. An obvious accomplishment for the OLD Highway Association, the merger was tinged with sadness for members who had created one of the best highway organizations in the country. On May 13, 1920, the Hastings Daily Tribune declared it a "painful operation," but one made in the best interests of the community and the state. Spanning a distance of 1700 miles, the DLD became one of the most established and highly traveled highways in the country.

Adventurous motorists who navigated highways in the 1920s were directed by an assortment of road signs, some fashioned from scrap lumber with primitive arrows pointing in the direction of towns. A 1997 edition of the SCA Journal, a publication of the Society of Commercial Archeology, pictures a concrete obelisk-shaped pillar with the initials DLD deeply engraved in one side. It was found in Lancaster County. A common marker of the DLD was a 14-inch white band painted around a fence post or telephone pole. Three-inch black borders trimmed the edges of the band and the initials DLD were boldly stenciled in black across the center. Sometimes painted by service organizations, these were placed at regular intervals and were readily identified by motorists as they traveled from state to state. An undated guide map by the Lincoln [Nebraska] Automobile Club claimed the DLD was the "Best Marked Highway In the Middle West" and included the slogan "follow the poles." One of the original fence posts used to mark the DLD is on display at Pioneer Village in Minden, Nebraska.

The route of the DLD in Adams County did not change when it became a national highway. From the east, it passed by Harvard and Inland in Clay County over what is now Highway 6 until it reached Elm Avenue in Hastings. At Elm Avenue it turned directly north until it reached Second Street and followed Second Street west through the downtown district. Jogging to the south to by-pass the Asylum for the Chronically Insane (today's Hastings Regional Center), the DLD then continued west along the south edge of Juniata. Five miles west of Juniata, it turned south for one mile and then resumed its westward path to Heartwell and Minden in Kearney County.

Area merchants appreciated the traffic along Second Street through downtown Hastings. Notable businesses on the DLD in the 1920s included Stein Brothers, American House Hotel, Kernan Shoes, Mattieson Drug Store, Gaston Music Company, and Zinn's Jewelers. Roth Manufacturing, Dutton & Sons, Hastings Cream and Brewery Factory, Borley Transfer, Topaz Dairy, and Kipp Cigar Factory also had Second Street addresses. Automobile dealerships thrived in Hastings. Nine were identified in the city directory in 1920, eleven in 1926. Ford, Chevrolet, Cadillac, and Buick were among the brands that would remain well known for many decades. Models less familiar to today's drivers included Auburn, Chandler, Essex, Cleveland, Oakland, Hudson, Willys-Knight, Packard, Studebaker, and Saxon. Automobile-related businesses also did well. Brandes Garage, S & G Tire Shop, and the Willard Battery Service Station were mentioned in the Nebraska Highway Association Handbook in 1922. The OLD Garage was located in the 300 block of West Second Street in 1920. In 1924, it became the DLD Garage and housed a Maxwell Automobile Dealership. Although the addition of a second story and a new stucco exterior make recognition difficult, the building remains a fixture in downtown Hastings. It is currently known as the Big G Auto Service Center.

The popularity of automobile travel in the 1920s was reflected in traffic patterns in Adams County. An estimated 75,000 tourists passed along the DLD in 1919 and 100,000 were expected in 1921. Area hotels could not accommodate all visitors and families rented rooms to tourists for short stays in the city. As was the custom among automobile travelers, tents were pitched in local campgrounds. Prospect Park had the largest number of campers. Having hosted many Chautauquas in the previous decade, its reputation was well established. An estimated 10,000 tourists camped there in 1923. The Hastings Daily Tribune reported that some nights as many as ten different states were represented. Shower facilities and outdoor stoves were among the amenities offered to motorists who wanted a place to gather, exchange stories, and prepare for the next day's journey.

In addition to camping facilities, other local attractions were promoted. Heartwell Park, Hastings Amusement Park (Lib's Park), and the Warren Peony Gardens were frequented by tourists. A roadside cafe, La Camina, opened in 1924 on the corner of the DLD and Laird Avenue. Also on the DLD was the Hastings Baseball Park at 1425 West Second Street. Crystal Lake, south of Hastings, offered music and dancing during summer months, and visitors were welcomed at the Adams County Fair.

Addison E. Sheldon, director of the Nebraska State Historical Society, was an early traveler of the DLD. He spent a night in Hastings en route to the hunting grounds of the Pawnee in southwest Nebraska. Sheldon captured the spirit of many

motorists in his account of the adventure in the October, 1921 issue of Nebraska History. "Early the next morning we were going thirty-five miles an hour over the Detroit-Lincoln-Denver highway, headed for the Republican valley .... Like a lake bed ahead lies the great wide bowl of corn and wheat - heart of Phelps and Kearney counties. Across this our auto sped."

Although sections of the DLD in downtown Hastings were paved with locally made brick as early as 1890, graveling of the entire 28-mile length of the DLD through Adams County was not completed until 1924. The cost was \$60,000. An article in the Hastings Daily Tribune dated July 15, 1924 discussed heavy rains, the new gravel, and speculation that some travelers were re-routing their trips from other highways to the DLD because of better driving conditions: "As the gravel is being worked in to the roadbed, the DLD is becoming a superb highway." Also in 1924 came the opportunity to associate with a memorial highway in honor of the late President Warren G. Harding, who died in office in 1923. Starting in Washington, D.C., the Harding Memorial Highway passed through Marion, Ohio (Hardings' hometown), Chicago, and Council Bluffs. The Harding Memorial Highway Association wanted to join the DLD at Omaha and continue through Nebraska to Denver.

Nationwide, the highly traveled Lincoln Highway (US Highway 30) had bypassed many historic and scenic routes in favor of the most direct route from coast to coast. In Nebraska, it took a route north of the DLD through Grand Island, Kearney, and North Platte. The Harding group hoped to include points of interest to the public that had been omitted by the Lincoln Highway. Affiliation with the Harding Highway would not change the route, name, or identity of the DLD in Nebraska, but it would increase its prominence. Members of the DLD Highway Association advocated the adoption of the DLD by the Harding Memorial Highway. With little difficulty, communities in Colorado and Nebraska raised \$20,000 by selling memberships to individuals and businesses. The money was used to promote the Harding Memorial Highway nationwide. In addition to the placement of road markers along the route, a two-reel motion picture was made depicting the scenic beauty of western states. Filming for the Midwest portion began in Hastings and featured waving fields of corn and alfalfa as well as modern methods of irrigation. Still photographs were also taken for publication in travel magazines. What eventually happened to the Harding Highway is unclear. It did make it as far as Denver and the Harding Memorial Highway Association can be traced to 1951, but little mention of it is made in Adams County histories. The Harding Memorial Highway Museum opened in Galion, Ohio in 2001. The Adams County Historical Society provided relivant materials for exhibits -- articles from 1924 editions of the Adams County Democrat and the Hastings Daily Tribune and a 1976 Historical News titled "The Motoring Public". Promotional materials used by the Harding group in 1924 have not been located.

With progress came a proliferation of named highways across the country. State and federal governments had little control over how highways were marked or how frequently names changed. A map published by the Hastings Chamber of Commerce in 1925 demonstrates the growing confusion that plagued motorists and threatened the rapidly developing trucking industry. Second Street is identified as the DLD, Harding Highway, and Columbia Highway. In addition, the Oregon Trail Highway is shown overlapping the DLD through part of downtown.

As the nation became more mobile, a consistent method of identifying automobile routes was needed. Founded in 1924, the AASHO (American Association of State Highway Officials) responded by adopting a numbering system for highways from coast to coast in 1928. The DLD Highway became officially known as US Highway 38 from Omaha to Fort Morgan, Colorado, but continued to be called the DLD by most locals and many travelers.

The crash of the stock market in 1929 ushered in a decade of uncertainty for Adams County residents. City dwellers developed an acute awareness of the economic depression that had affected farm families throughout the 1920s. Among the concerns was the diminishing amount of traffic passing through Hastings. To remain competitive with the Lincoln Highway and others, the DLD/Highway 38 needed a paved surface. With the cost of concrete estimated at \$14,500 per mile, communities along the highway sought help from government sources. From a military point of view, the federal government had an interest in improving highways, but congested downtown streets were viewed as an impediment to transport of troops and supplies in the event of war. Federal funding was available only if the DLD was re-routed to bypass downtown Hastings. This was in obvious conflict with the interests of downtown businesses who had grown accustomed to the exposure offered by a major thoroughfare passing by their doors. A lively debate involved officials on local, state, and national levels and delayed highway improvements in Adams County for three years.

In 1930 a face-saving compromise was reached. The highway would be diverted around Hastings, but an alternative business route through downtown would be identified. G.A. Roth of Roth Manufacturing led the Chamber of Commerce in a 57 to 5 vote. On September 11, 1930, The Hastings Democrat declared, "...[the downtown merchants'] public service and their desire to co-operate in every way in making Hastings a bigger and better city was never better evidenced than when they agreed to sacrifice something in order to insure better roads..." Adams County residents have since become

accustomed to the familiar curve to the left when approaching Hastings from the east. Avoiding downtown altogether, the DLD was re-routed south one mile beginning just east of the Elm Avenue intersection. Making its way to the southern edge of Hastings, it then curved to the west and continued until it met the old DLD at a point five miles west and one mile south of Juniata.

The alternative business route, as promised, was marked to direct motorists downtown. Retail stores, office buildings, theaters, and several gas stations retained Second Street addresses. In 1932, the city council voted to build twenty-foot high brick-flanked gateways at the east and west entrances of Hastings. They held signs with neon arrows pointing toward the center of town. Within a year after the re-routing project was approved, the DLD/Highway 38 was designated US Highway 6, and over the years, businesses and roadside attractions developed that symbolized a new era of highways in America. Two whimsically fashioned motels, the Showboat and the DLD Teepee Cabins, found homes on the eastern edge of Hastings. A landscaped picnic ground, the DLD Recreation Area, was built and is currently maintained by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. A drive-in theatre opened in 1949 and attracted visitors from several communities.

As for the DLD, the section west of Hastings remains intact. In the 1990s, to make it easier for emergency squads to find residences, Adams County placed markers at intersections of country roads. Homes that once had Rural Route addresses were given street addresses. To the surprise of some, the east/west gravel road located halfway between Highway 6 and Twelfth Street was designated West DLD Road. At Highland Drive, immediately south of Hastings Regional Center, West DLD Road takes a course directly west. It travels eight miles over the original path of the DLD Highway passing the recently named intersections of Adams Central, Osage, Reprisal, Alda, Juniata, Liberty, Conestoga, Roseland, and Prosser Avenues. The DLD of the 1920s turned south for one mile at what is now at the corner of Bladen Avenue before continuing westward to Heartwell and Minden.

Huebinger's Map and Guide for the Omaha-Denver Transcontinental Route, published in 1911, mades careful notation of intersections, farmsteads, ponds, creek beds, and bridges. Most of the farmsteads are gone. Some have been replaced with newer homes and outbuildings, others simply leveled for more efficient use of farm gound. The streets in the village of Juniata adjacent to the DLD are the same as they were in 1911.

Glen Uden resides on DLD Road several miles west of Juniata. His grandparents, William and Elizabeth Finnigsmier, purchased the land in 1905. Known for its Duroc hogs and Barred Rock chickens, it was called the DLD Grain and Stock Farm for many years. Glen's mother, Mary Finnigsmier Uden, grew up on the property and frequently related a childhood memory of the first automobiles traveling down the DLD in about 1908: "The kids all lined up along the fence to watch." Glen Uden was born in 1923 and has no recollection of traffic along the DLD, but remembers stories his grandfather told. One involved a new automobile owner boasting that his vehicle could travel 25 miles per hour. There were also stories of his grandfather locking the formidable gate to their property every night to keep livestock in and unwanted intruders out. Transients from both the DLD and the nearby railroad tracks were common during the Depression. His grandmother "fed more than her share." A photo album found among the family keepsakes shows Glen, his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles enjoying road trips that were so fashionable in the 1920s. Picnics at Crystal Lake, afternoons at Prospect Park, and Peony Gardens in full bloom were captured on film for future generations to ponder. In other photos, vintage automobiles are parked in front of the farmhouse during meetings of the Ladies Aid Society. Estes Park, Colorado was one destination of the group - arrived at, no doubt, by way of the DLD.

Across the road from Glen Uden's property is the site of a farmstead once owned by a prominent Hastings businessman, A. H. Jones. Said to have been one of the largest farms in the county, it was also one of the most modern and served as the site of early experiments with irrigation. In the 1930s it was farmed by John Hueske. His son, Dale, spent his formative years on the farm and remembers the old highway. His most vivid memory of the DLD was the time he and his dog crossed the road. Dale made it. His dog didn't. He was about four at the time and was returning from the Finnigsmier place where he'd spent the afternoon playing.

Although few artifacts of the DLD remain, there are two concrete bridges on West DLD Road that appear to have been built prior to 1930 when the Nebraska Department of Roads began tracking them for maintenance and repair. The first is located between the section lines of Osage Avenue and Alda Avenue, the second between Prosser Avenue and Bladen Avenue. They are currently cared for by Adams County's Highway and Public Works Department. An unmarked Pony Express station, Muddy Station, was located about a quarter of a mile east of the Bladen corner near Muddy Creek (known today as Thirty-two Mile Creek). It was in operation from 1864-65. An Indian raid was reported to have occurred here and destroyed corn and hay being stored for horses. The foundations of two buildings could be seen at one time, but no evidence of this historic site exists today. The original DLD turned south at the corner of Bladen Avenue where it crossed the path of the Oregon Trail. Traveling at speeds of 10-20 miles a day, 40,000 to 50,000 people a year passed

over the Oregon Trail in the mid-1800s. The Fort Kearney and Fort Leavenworth Military Road followed the Oregon Trail and was significant in the 1860s. Even with this rich tradition of transportation history, the spot remains unmarked. Five miles west and one mile south of Juniata, at the intersection where the old DLD and Highway 6 meet, a one-room schoolhouse once stood. District 66 was formed in 1880 and closed in 1941. Surrounding land has been leveled for crops, leaving a grove of cottonwood trees growing awkwardly from a draw where children once played. Because it was once a major highway, West DLD Road is wider than most gravel roads in Adams County. Generally well maintained, it leads travelers past typical Nebraska scenery. Fields of corn and soybeans demonstrate fertile soil conditions and are evidence of the endurance of several generations of farmers. Irrigation has changed a great deal since the Harding Memorial Highway Association included it in their promotional film in 1924. Today, pipes for gravity irrigation are laid in geometric patterns in some fields, while center pivots rotate in others. Both are reminders of the effects of technology on agriculture.

It is not known how many remnants of the original DLD exist between Detroit and Denver, but the one in Adams County is highly traveled, particularly by youth in the rural area who are often issued permits to drive to and from school at age 14. Stories of mishap and adventure abound as the romantic allure of the DLD grasps first time drivers. Few of them know that DLD is an abbreviation for the historically significant Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway, much less that they are part of a legendary heritage of automobile travel in the United States that spans nearly a century. back to top