

## Excerpts from "The Lincoln Highway," 1995

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"Eventually we saw ahead of us the superstructure of the bridge over the great river. Because of high waters caused by spring freshets, and melting snows, the abutments began far back on the shore and the bridge was of enormous length beyond the width of the river itself. The floor of the bridge was of wood planking and just wide enough for passing. Altogether its width in proportion to its length look pretty formidable, high above the wide water, and we were glad Mr. Milks' auto preceded us. It was rather scary to contemplate as we approached. What would we do if the engine failed in crossing!

"You could almost feel the tenseness of everyone. Silence reigned. It was a great emotional crisis. . . . I kept reminding my subconscious mind that the bridge had been there for many springs and there was no reason why it should choose this particular time to collapse ... Now at last, we were West!"

- Alice Huyler Ramsey, 1909

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... Our freckle-faced Alice, traveling in her new Maxwell from New York to San Francisco in 1908, saw storm clouds gathering as she, her two sisters-in-law and a woman friend approached Mechanicsville:

Once more a sudden torrent descended upon us. We made quickly for the first shelter we could find. It proved to be the entrance to a livery stable, the door of which stood invitingly open. As we drove inside, there were several buggies standing around, the horse still hitched to them. To say the animals were astonished to be joined by a horse-less carriage from which came the noise of a pulsating engine is putting it mildly. There were a few hectic moments. We turned off the motor hurriedly and the stable gradually resumed its quieter mood. But the downpour went on and on, and we sat and waited for two full hours before we could stir out.

No need for anyone to tell us we could go no further that day! We didn't even consider the question. Unwrapping our cases from the muddy covering and leaving the auto house in the stable for the night, we made for Page Hotel. It was a queer little place, but we were happy to take refuge in it. We ate supper in the City Restaurant with some country lads sitting a couple of nearby tables. Over in one corner stood an ancient-vintage piano. The sights of four women gave the proprietor the inspiration and courage to ask one of us to play it. I could imagine what its tone would be, but felt the urge to relieve the tension of

the day's driving, so I casually tossed off a couple of light numbers. The lads gathered around and seemed to enjoy the "something different" and we went back to the hotel and relaxed by the unexpected levity. It was to be expected that our youthful Hermine would enter into such a situation with fun, but it was always a pleasurable surprise to have my two conservative and almost haughtily reserved sisters-in-law react in similar fashion. But they took all things as they came and, in spite of the vexatious weather, they were beginning to get a certain thrill of adventure in our conquest of the Basin of Mud!

Alice decided to call the Maxwell dealer in Cedar Rapids but couldn't get "central" to understand her. She walked to the telephone office to explain in person that she wanted to make a long distance call. The connection was made and the dealer sent an escort back to show the way to Cedar Rapids via the "Transcontinental" - the "coast-to-coast highway" that had been proclaimed years earlier but never promoted beyond placing a line on a map. The escort arrived in the morning just as another thunderstorm broke.

"Does it always rain like this in Iowa?" Alice asked a Mechanicsville native.

"Oh yes," he responded, "at this time of the year. You got right smack into the rainy season..."

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Alice Ramsey and her Maxwell were still plodding doggedly to the west on the path which five years later would be declared the Lincoln Highway. Rain had soaked the roads so that the mud seemed to be bottomless. The enormous car plowed through the mud in low gear and it was too much for the radiator. Shortly west of the Benton County line it began to boil and Alice stopped the car.

It was imperative that water be added. Unfortunately, there was no water aboard. There was plenty in the ditches next to the road, but no bucket to carry it in. One of the passengers suggested that they form a "bucket brigade," dipping a few ounces of water at a time with their set of cut glass toothbrush holders. It worked, and soon the Maxwell was again plowing ahead through the mud. They had to repeat this process three times before finding a place where they could replenish their supply of water and oil.

As they approached a crossroads they noticed a lone woman in a sunbonnet, sitting in a farm wagon. They stopped to talk, and the woman asked if they were the four people who were traveling from New York to San Francisco.

"Yes, we are," we answered in one voice.

"I'm sure glad," she added. "I read about you in the paper and I've come six miles to see you and I've been waiting a long time. Yes, I'm sure glad I saw you!"

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... “[The creek] was now completely out of bounds. Swollen by the repeated heavy storms,” Alice wrote. She pulled off to the side of the road, pulled on her boots, arranged her bulky clothing and waded into the swollen creek. “I didn’t wade in very far, just far enough to make certain we couldn’t go down at the present.”

The four women drove into the hamper in search of their evening meal. They needed bread and water, so Hermine walked back to the nearest farmhouse to make a purchase. They dined in a patch of tall grass. By nightfall the water had shown no sign of receding, so they piled back in her seat, put her feet up on the dashboard on either side of the steering wheel and, exhausted by a day of herding the heavy car through the mud, had no trouble finding sleep.

They were awakened before dawn by the baying of a pack of hounds which passed their car without noticing it.

As morning dawned about four, we noticed a decided abatement of the water and could distinguish continuous road ahead, furrowed as it still was with countless rivulets.

With our little Sterno outfit we soon prepared a very simple breakfast and started on our way. The road was awful, of course, but we did pull through it and were glad to be in motion once more.

... The town was as excited as any when it was announced that Belle Plaine would be on the Lincoln Highway. In the Belle Plaine Union of September 18, 1913, the headlines stacked up like this:

Belle Plaine Will Be on the Lincoln Road  
Transcontinental Highway is Planned from New York to Frisco  
Fellows Main Traveled Road Thru Iowa  
Will Cost Ten Million Dollars

The story announced that Henry B. Joy had been over the route three times in the past six months, but advised, “Des Moines road boosters, who were desirous of bringing the highway thru the capital city, are somewhat disappointed at the selection of the Transcontinental road for its entire route thru the state.”

Another story in the same paper announced that Belle Plaine would soon have twenty blocks of “first class paving.”

Enter town on 131, now identified as Thirteenth Street. Belle Plaine probably has more colorful reminders of Lincoln Highway days than any other town of its size along the way, and it certainly ought to change the name of its main street from the inane “Thirteenth Street” to “Lincoln Way.”

One of the initial imperatives of the Lincoln Highway Association was to mark the road across the nation with the red, white, and blue logo painted on telegraph poles. The only authoritative

guidebooks available were the Blue Books published by the Automobile Club of America. Since the LHA had announced in the beginning that the Lincoln Highway would generally follow the route of the old Transcontinental Route, the Blue Book editors simply change the word Transcontinental to Lincoln and kept the same routine. However, the Lincoln Highway did in fact differ significantly from the Transcontinental in many places, so the Blue Books were not as accurate as motorists would have liked. In the early days travelers stopped often to ascertain the correct route of the Lincoln Highway.

The two-car caravan of the Louis Round family passed through Belle Plaine on June 23, 1914, heading back to Cleveland. He reported to *The Motorist* magazine, that "The roads so far are beyond my expectation - they are as a general thing well marked. Here and there we are compelled to resort to the blue book by from appearance I would say that within several months - the tourists many depend entire upon the marked road way - a great relief I can assure you, saving many inquired and stops."

Thornton Round remembered Belle Plaine. "This town claimed a great distinction. It has a paved street! but we were not permitted to ride on that street. The police were rerouting traffic onto another detour, as the street was being repaired."

On March 16, 1915, issue of the Belle Plaine newspaper reported that vast traffic was expected on the Lincoln Highway this year, with many expected to drive to the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. The great fair would celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, but Lincoln Highway advocated would be well represented at the gathering.

Proceed west into Belle Plaine. The intersection of Thirteenth and Sixth Avenue is a historic one. On the left is the Lincoln Cafe, identified with a Lincoln Highway-era neon sign. On the right is the Herring Hotel, now an apartment house. It was never very fancy, but after the night on Weasel Creek it looked like the Waldorf Astoria to Alice and her friends:

"Before we arrived in Belle Plaine where we supplemented our santy meal with a real breakfast at a Herring Cottage. My! that was good! When the family learned we had spent the night beside Weasel Creek - if not quite in it - the man sympathetically proffered a bag of delicious cherries - 'to keep the wolf from the door!'"

The "Herring Hotel and Garage with Filling Station" advertised in the 1924 Road Guide: "Half way between Chicago and Omaha. Most congenial spot on the Highway. Opie Read styled it 'A Bright Spot in the Desert'. Most cordially, Will P. Herring & Son; Jim Herring, Mgr." The younger Herring was the local consul for the LHA, and the hotel was the "control," from which distances to and from the towns were measured.

The F.L. Sankot Garage is on the south side of the street two doors east of the Lincoln Cafe. It was opened in 1914 and has stayed in the Sankot family ever since. But the real jewel of Belle Plaine is on to the west, on the near side of Fourth Avenue. There on the right is the famous station of George Preston, its wood siding plaster with an amazing concentration of metal signs, many of them dating back to the earliest days of the Lincoln Highway. Preston began

collecting those artifacts when he started working in the station at the age of thirteen. Two concrete Lincoln Highway markers are in his collection...

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... It is somewhere along here that we hear from Alice Ramsey again:

All of the moisture of the past few days had taken its toll on the ignition system; before long there was a skip in the motor. In a four-cylinder engine there's not much doubt about such a fact! Climbing down, I discovered the offending spark plugs by the simple trick of holding a hammer head against each one and shorting it against the water jacket of the cylinders. [When the engine balked even more, Alice knew that the offending plus was not that one.] Plugs were manufactured then so they could be taken apart, cleaned with fine sandpaper or emery cloth and reassembled, which I did on the spot. It was a dirty job but didn't involve too much time. The girls were interested in watching the process, so the time passed rapidly and we were soon on our way again. I could only wipe off the grime with a rag - no chance for a real clean-up until later. What would I not have given for the facilities of a modern filling station after such business!

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Proceed west on Fifth Street to the heart of town and turn right at the stop sign onto Siegel Street. (Siegel is two blocks past U.S. 63.) A turn to the left on Siegel would take one to the C&NW tracks two short blocks to the south. On the west wall of the building on the right, just north of that tracks is a mural featuring the famous Tama bridge. From Fifth Street drive four blocks (.2 mile) north on Stiegel to a T - turn left there on Ninth Street. About a block and one-half west turn right on Harding Street. Tama has a twin city just to the north called Toledo, and this street was once Toledo Street. About the same size as Tama, Toledo is on U.S. 30; but Tama is on the Lincoln Highway. So proceed north only four blocks (.3 mile) and turn left at a stop sign onto 13th Street. Take an odometer reading.

At 1.6 miles west, pass over the C&NW railroad tracks. Travelers are now in the Mesquakie (formerly Tama) Indian Reservation. Alice Ramesy and her friends marveled at the Indians here: "None of us had ever seen so many Indians before and we were thrilled by the new experience." (This was only nineteen years after the disaster at Wounded Knee, marking the end of the Indian Wars...

There is a hill and a slight curve to the right exactly 2.6 miles west of the Iowa River bridge. It was on this hill, on June 8, 1920, that Henry C. Ostermann died.

Ostermann, the urbane, very popular field secretary of the Lincoln Highway Association, had taken a bridge seven months earlier. The couple had attended a dinner party at the home of the Iowa state consul in Tama that evening. His wife, feeling ill, elected to stay with friends that night while he drove ahead to Marshalltown to confer with the consul there. Mrs. Ostermann would follow on the train the next day.

He settled into the white 1918 Packard Twin Six touring car and headed out on the road he knew so well. Driving the purring, immaculate white phaeton west, he headed toward Montour at what is believed to be a high rate of speed - one account says in excess of 50 mph. A Model T Ford was laboring up this hill and Ostermann pulled over to pass. The tires of the Packard slipped on the wet grass on the left shoulder and the great car pulled on the left, turned over twice and landed on its wheels. Ostermann's head was crushed to an unrecognizable pulp against the steering wheel. He died instantly. He was forty-three years old.

Proceed 1.3 miles toward Montour. On the right is a set of Burma-Shave signs: "Dim Your Lights / Behind A Car / Let Folks See / How Bright / You Are / Burma-Shave."

The last sign is a Montour city limits. Enter town on Lincoln Street. A later route of the Lincoln Highway continued straight through town on Highway E49 and proceeded 3.5 miles west, or one lime past the Marshall County line. (A construction marker is at the county line.)

However, these directions will guide the traveler over the earliest route. In Montour, turn right in the west part of town on South Main Street and drive north. Cross the C&NW tracks a block ahead and continue north about .2 mile to the point where the road veers to the left. It is identified as Lincoln Street also. Follow it to the north-west and notice the height of the fill.

The road twists around and reaches U.S. 30 two miles to the west of Montour and two miles east of Le Grand. Turn left and stay on U.S. 30 through Le Grand, crossing into Marshall County on the east edge of town.