

Introduction to the Yellowstone Trail

The Yellowstone Trail was the first transcontinental automobile highway in the United States through the northern tier of states from Washington through Massachusetts. Yet too few people are aware of its existence or its social, political and economic effects on either the local communities or the nation.

This transcontinental route was conceived by J.W. Parmley of Ipswich, SD, in 1912. The automobile was just becoming popular but intercity roads were plagued with sand, potholes and mud. Bicyclists of the previous decade, organized as the Wheelmen and counting thousands as members, had been pushing state and federal governments for years for roads. Yet, in 1912, there were few good, all weather roads, no useful long distant roads and no government marked routes. Railroads had been the dominant, almost sole, method of travel. But railroads were losing their allure because of their monopolistic freight rate-setting and the inconvenience of their schedules.

The privacy and autonomy of the automobile was not to be denied.

The Yellowstone Trail developed in parallel with the nationwide effort to improve roads. The burden of financing roads gradually moved from the local landowner and township up the levels of government until the federal government, the states, the counties and the townships shared the cost. The burgeoning number of autos resulted in a demand for roads to drive them on, first for pleasure and then for crucial societal purposes: for doctors to get to patients, for farm products to get to the railroads, and for military purposes.

Parmley and his business colleagues wanted a good road from Ipswich to Aberdeen, SD, 25 miles away. The "can do" pioneer spirit of the time immediately emerged and in a few weeks time the intent had expanded to include a good road to Mobridge, SD, then to Hettinger ND, then to the great tourist destination, Yellowstone National Park. Soon, it was understood that under their leadership there was to be "a good road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound."

The Yellowstone Trail Association was formed in October 1912 and was active until 1930. The creation of the Yellowstone Trail was a grassroots effort, not a governmental effort, and not the effort of a few wealthy business leaders, as was the Lincoln Highway through the Lincoln Highway Association, which was formed the next year. A headquarters for the Yellowstone Trail Association was established in Minneapolis, although meetings were held across the country with local representatives. Membership was offered to delegates from towns all along the route. These people raised money locally, through a system of "assessments" and often headed local volunteer groups to mark the route with either yellow stones or the official yellow circle and arrow of the Association. State or regional meetings were held in communities along the route each year to provide coordination for the Association and inspiration to attract tourists through their towns.

The Yellowstone Trail Association did not build roads. It lobbied for "good roads" in every level of government, it provided instructions to local people for the construction and maintenance of roads, it promoted cross-country tourist traffic, it marked the route of the Trail, it provided the first maps of the Trail, and generally raised the interest in using the automobile for other than local travel. It was an organization composed of businessmen/Chamber of Commerce people in little towns who wished to boost their town's economy by being on a well-used road. So they would improve local roads, but not build them.

Trail Days were held with picnics, etc. to make the work of "dragging" the dirt road more fun. Stores would close so all would go out to participate. The Yellowstone Trail Association had local chapters in towns and state chapters to oversee routing. Local "routing committee men" went out into their counties to find the best roads available and then talk county governments into spending tax dollars on that route. They then persuaded little towns to join the organization and to pay a small fee to be included on the route publicity. Usually, roads near railways were selected, and frequently were routed through towns on the street adjacent to the railroad station. The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in particular, was selected because it went where the founders of the Trail wanted the Trail to go. The railroads had already selected the most efficient routes and local roads already existed near the railways, so as one reads the history of the Yellowstone Trail, one reads the history of the Milwaukee Road.

Montana residents immediately grasped the potential of the Trail. Many people and locations along the Trail in Montana provide interesting tales. J. E. Prindle of the little, but ambitious, cattle shipping town of Ismay became a force in the Association. Billings was the seat of regional meetings of the Yellowstone Trail Association. Old original sections of the Trail still exist in travelable condition in several locations: between Ismay and Fallon, between Livingston and Gardiner near Yankee Jim's toll road north of the entrance to the Yellowstone National Park, between Three Forks and Butte, between Hunter's Hot Springs and Billings, along the Camel's Hump near Superior, and on the Randolph Creek/Mullan Pass road over the Bitterroots.

In 1918 Wisconsin became the first state to number its highways and in 1926 the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) established and numbered interstate routes (US route numbers), selecting the best roads in each state which could be connected to provide a rational network of "federal" highways. With the numbering of roads, the need for names decreased. And the need for colored markers to mark the named roads ceased. Then came the Depression. Merchants could no longer afford to pay dues to a road association. State maps replaced the need for associations. The Yellowstone Trail and all other named trails lost their allure to the modern Highway 12, or 29, or 10. Its major influence died in 1929-30 with the original Yellowstone Trail Association. A replacement organization, Yellowstone Highway Association, operated marginally until about 1939.

Through all of this, the Yellowstone Trail Association persisted, acting much as the AAA does today. They published maps and brochures and set up tents along busy places on the Trail to hand out these materials. People telephoned the Trail Association before they planned a trip to see what roads were passable. This route is truly a piece of history and a national treasure.