

PAPER TRAILS

The Michigan Highway Map

by Le Roy Barnett

The first collection of road maps for the United States was compiled in 1789. Given the condition of this country's transportation network at the time, use of this work was mainly for informational purposes and not as an actual field guide to travel.

Nineteenth-century cartographers, like John Farmer of Detroit, later produced general maps of certain states or regions to aid settlers in their treks to new lands in the West. These cartographic productions were usually folded into a small compass to fit easily in a migrating pioneer's coat pocket.

Portable travel aids that would be recognized today as road maps appeared late in the last century as a result of the great bicycling craze. A league of these "Wheelmen" was formed in 1880, and by 1894 the association was publishing detailed plans of routes that were favorable for those participating in the popular sport.

After 1905, few if any bicycle maps were printed because a new wheeled contraption had captured the interest of the American public. This conveyance was, of course, the self-propelled vehicle, and it was the genesis of one of the most treasured documents in any contemporary automobile, the highway map or atlas.

The initial map specifically created to show a motorcar route appeared in the *Chicago Times-Herald* in November 1895. This diagram plotted the course of America's first organized road race, a fifty-five-mile run from Chicago to Waukegon and back.



By 1899, as the production and ownership of horseless carriages increased, the Automobile Club of America (AAA) was formed in Chicago and two years later it issued the first guidebook for motorists. This and successive publications were quite bulky, with some editions containing more than a thousand pages, including some maps of roads plus helpful information on where to find service garages, gas pumps and tire-repair facilities.

The ultimate successor to the unwieldy volume of text and route plans was the creation known today as the folded highway map. The legendary printing house of Rand McNally released the first one in 1904, followed two years later by a map from the equally well-known Hammond Company.

Initially, all types of route charts for early road warriors had to be purchased. In 1913, the Gulf Refining Company departed from this custom and began distributing free highway maps at some of its gasoline service stations. This practice proved so popular as a promotional gimmick that within five years Gulf customers had taken away sixteen million copies.

By the end of World War I, Gulf's competitors were forced to follow suit or lose business. Other oil companies began employing free maps in their marketing strategies to build goodwill and sell petroleum products. The result was an uniquely North

American tradition, which allowed anyone to stop at nearly any gas station on the continent and acquire a free, first-rate map.

The public response to this corporate generosity was so great that oil-company maps received more use than those sold by cartographic firms, given away by states or distributed by organizations like AAA. This largess reached its peak in 1972 when gas stations gave away 250 million highway maps.

Seemingly overnight, this munificence came to an end.

The 1973 OPEC oil embargo put service stations in the position of having far more customers than they could supply with gas. With no need to entice people to buy their products, most petroleum companies ceased handing out free maps.

Although the supply of fuel eventually rose to meet demand, gasoline retailers did not return to their generous ways with the motoring public. Printing costs had risen tremendously in the interim, leaving oil firms little choice but



- 1912**
First map published by the Highway Department shows roads receiving state aid.
- 1919**
Public Act 410 directs Highway Department to publish and sell a road map of the state.
- 1924**
Highway map begins showing detailed insets of major Michigan towns. Upper and Lower Peninsulas appear for the first time on a single sheet; cost is twenty-five cents.
- 1926**
Mileage table introduced showing distances between selected cities.
- 1928**
Road map is issued free; includes Lake Michigan steamboat routes.

to begin charging for a commodity that had almost become viewed as an American birthright. Increasingly, service centers began putting their maps in vending machines, and by 1980 the free highway map had disappeared from filling stations across the land.

Fortunately, one source of complimentary maps remains. Most states, through their tourism or transportation departments, offer free maps of their jurisdictions. These helpful gifts are felt to recover their costs to resident taxpayers by promoting economic development, showing good will to travelers, and attracting visitors on vacation.

Michigan has been offering free highway maps for seventy years. As early as 1912 the Michigan Highway Department (now the Michigan Department of Transportation or MDOT) issued maps that showed roads receiving state or federal aid. These sheets primarily depicted the status of road-building activity across the state; they were not the kind of route map known today.

The appearance of a publication useful to travelers had to wait until 1919, when Public Act 410 declared that “the State Highway Commissioner shall cause to be published a map of the State of Michigan showing thereon the state and county road systems . . . and other main highways as may be desirable to indicate. Such maps shall be sold to the public at a price . . . not [to] be less than ten cents per copy.”

The first maps issued in compliance with this law showed little more than state trunklines, their respective numbers and some main connecting highways. But what these releases lacked in information they made up in frequency. A postwar boom in road construction resulted in the release of updated official highway maps every two weeks during the main driving season from late spring through late fall.

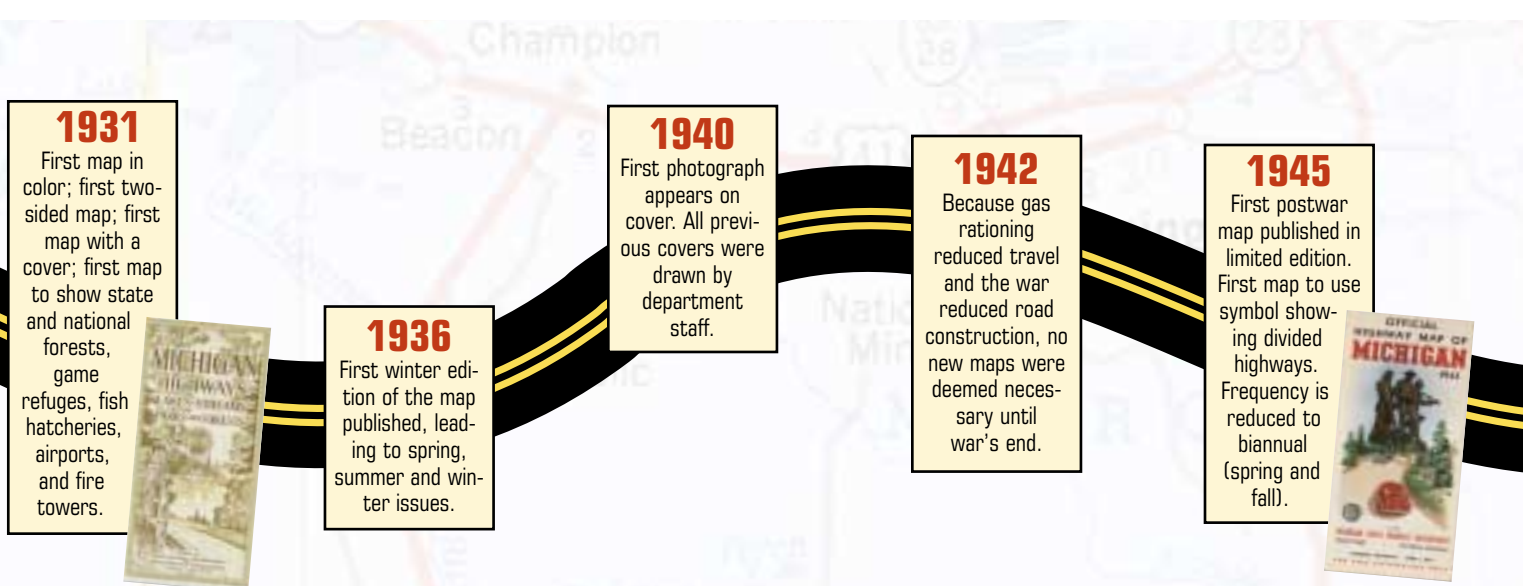
These bare-bones creations originally depicted Michigan’s road network on two maps. The Upper Peninsula version sold for ten cents while the larger Lower Peninsula version sold for



fifteen. Before long, however, economic reality entered the picture and the entire state was soon represented on a single sheet. This also made the map easier to use.

Also changing was the practice of charging for the maps. Michigan’s highway commissioner, an elected official, soon saw opportunity in being able to give away a popular item bearing his name. Within a decade, the state was distributing free maps as a public service.

The consumer benefitted from this evolutionary process, for although the price of the state road map dropped to nothing, the quality of the product continued to rise. Michigan often led in the development of highway cartography and almost yearly the state added some new map feature.





In 1978 State Highway Commission chairman Peter Fletcher (right) secretly inserted two fictitious town names into the official road map. To the surprise of MDOT mapmakers, “goblu” and “beatosu” appeared in northern Ohio. Despite only a limited number of maps being printed before the joke was caught, it must have been effective; the Wolverines beat Ohio State 14-3 that year.

State Archives of Michigan



improvements to the transportation network not be revealed in publicly available releases. As a result Michigan did not publish a state highway map in 1943 or 1944. Even the petroleum companies ceased distributing maps. This absence of updated maps did not greatly affect motorists, as the wartime economy left little manpower or money to build new roads.

Following the end of World War II, Michigan resumed its issuing and improving its annual route guide for the state. In 1957 a political spat led to the second disruption in publishing an official road map.

The ruckus started in May 1957 when Republican senator John Smeekens of Coldwater obtained twenty-five thousand free maps from the Highway Department, printed his name, photo and a political message on them and gave them to his constituents as campaign material. Democratic Highway Commissioner John Mackie declared that henceforth every legislator would be limited to one thousand maps per year.

This steady improvement in the character of the state’s road map was temporarily stalled by World War II. Among the first casualties of the conflict were documents produced for casual travelers and printed materials that could somehow benefit the enemy. Gasoline rationing greatly reduced recreational driving and the federal government ordered that

The Republican-led legislature decided to remove all funds for maps from the highway department’s 1958-59 budget. After months of stalemate over the matter, in 1960 a law was finally passed restoring appropriations for the map “providing no public official’s name or picture” appeared on it.

1958

To save money, department begins publishing just one map per year. State copyrights its highway map for the first time and allows commercial reproduction if royalty fee is paid.



1959

Michigan becomes only state other than New York not to issue an official highway map.

1960

The legislature allows Michigan to resume publishing an annual highway map but with prohibition against including the name or picture of any public official.

1962

Pictures used on front and back cover for first time since 1935.

1967

Map covers honor the University of Michigan’s sesquicentennial and the anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge, creating first in a long line of thematic maps. First single-year map to have a press run of one million.

This restriction on personal promotion was honored until 1974, when the names of the governor and the transportation commissioners were put on the state highway map. The following year, Governor William G. Milliken's photo was added, and in 1978, Helen Milliken became the first governor's wife to grace the state map cover. The 1985 edition featured a portrait of Michigan's First Family—Governor James J. Blanchard, his wife and son. Since 1991, no governor's image has been placed on the map—the result of a 1990 campaign pledge by then-candidate John Engler not to use the map as a promotional tool.

Over the past eight decades, the state's glove-box companion has included some errors—inadvertently leaving off a short highway, forgetting to label a small town, misspelling a place name or putting a boundary line in the wrong location. Mistakes and misprints were rare but possible. Before the advent of desktop computers up to eighty-four sheets of plastic had to be carefully aligned to print the map. This complex process made it possible to conceal or overlook a minute defect in a composition that contains tens of thousands of geographic facts. Jim Hough—for many years a columnist with the *Lansing State Journal*—ran a contest to see how many errors readers could find in each new map.

Some inaccuracies on the Michigan highway map were not oversights, but mischievous pranks. Peter Fletcher, a University of Michigan alumnus and then chairman of the State Highway Commission, secretly ordered the 1978 edition to include two fictitious towns in northern Ohio, "Goblu" and "Beatosu." This poke at Ohio State University might have been a charm, for the Wolverines beat the Buckeyes that year, 14-3.

In 1981, a retiring MDOT mapping and graphics supervisor secretly directed the map printer to show the Finnish word



Sisu (guts or courage) as a water feature in a blank area in southeastern Baraga County. Half a million copies of the state's official road map were printed before the term was discovered and deleted.

For eighty years car owners have pored over Michigan's official state highway maps, trying to determine which travel opportunities to pursue. They have charted vacation dreams and planned adventure on the open road, secure in the knowledge that the trusty route guides would direct them in their wanderings.

But the official road map is more than just a means by which people find their way. It is also one of the most widely distributed document issued by Michigan state government, one of the finest freebies available from any source and—for its size—the most informative publication funded by taxpayer dollars. With so much to recommend it, anyone using Michigan's highway map is certain to have happy trails. ■



Le Roy Barnett is a *Michigan History Magazine* contributing editor.

1974
Name changes from "Highway Map" to "Transportation Map."

1976
Frequency changes from annual to biennial to save money. Begins showing exit numbers along freeways.

1992
Map begins showing Great Lakes Circle Tour routes. Highest point in Michigan changed from Mount Curwood to Mount Arvon.

1999
First map to list all existing Michigan lighthouses.