

May 27, 2012 9:22 AM

# America's unrequited love of the open road

(CBS News) *To HIT THE ROAD has long been a rite of the American summer. But how did that open highway we dreamed of all winter get so clogged and riddled with potholes? Our Cover Story is reported now by Mark Strassmann:*

Although we may sing praises to purple mountain majesties, to spacious skies and amber waves of grain, the truth is when we drive across America the beautiful, for the most part, the view we see is the highway.

Fact is, roads have defined our landscape even before the first drop of concrete was poured.

"In the very beginning, there were game trails; Buffalo and elk created the original highways that we travel," said author Earl Swift. "The Indians took those as hunting trails. The first settlers moved in and used those for their wagons. Those later became plank roads, the early turnpikes. So really, it's an evolution that began before man was even a big factor on the continent."

Swift has chronicled that evolution in "The Big Roads," reminding us that griping about our roads is nothing new.

"I mean, we complain about congestion now, but it's kid stuff compared to the way it was in the mid-'30s," he said. "During the big boom on car sales in the '20s and '30s, we suddenly had a situation where we were driving roads that were built for wagons. Washington to Richmond would be a two-day trip. New York to Philadelphia would have been a two-day trip."

That's when it became clear that we needed to build something for the auto age . . . the big roads, the interstate highway system.

"If you wanted to find a moment of conception, you'd go back to February of 1938, when FDR called his roads chief into the White House," said Swift, "and the president had laid out a map of the 48 states on his desk, and on it had drawn six lines - three going north-south, three going east-west. And he said, 'I'd like you to research as to whether we can make it pay for itself.'"

Keep that in mind: The notion that roads should pay for themselves. It's something we'll return to.

But back in the 1930s and '40s, the Depression and Second World War put Franklin D. Roosevelt's grand designs on hold.

It wasn't until the prosperity of the 1950s that general-turned-President Dwight D. Eisenhower finally gave the green light.

"So who deserves more credit, FDR or Ike?" asked Strassmann.

"This will provoke some debate, but I'd vote for FDR myself," said Swift. "Because FDR got the ball rolling. It was his oversight that saw the system actually approved by Congress."

By the time Eisenhower took office, plans for the interstates were all but a done-deal.

And so, in 1956 construction began on a network 47,000 miles long, and still growing.

There's a popular misconception that the system mainly had a military purpose, to move troops and civilians in the event of nuclear war. Not so. But the design does have an unusual origin: our interstates are modeled on the autobahns of Adolf Hitler's Germany.

Still, the highways promised a future that had little to do with the dark days of war, and everything to do with the bright tomorrow of the space age.

But when you look back in the rear view mirror today, the picture isn't quite so pretty.

Our reliance on the automobile has created sprawl, pollution, and our dependence on oil.

But even more pressing, it's become clear that our freeways are anything but free.

Remember FDR's idea that the interstates should pay for themselves? Well, that never quite came to pass. We pay to build and maintain our highways mostly through the federal gas tax (currently 18.4 cents a gallon). That tax rate has stayed the same since 1993.

Last year, about \$32 billion in revenue came in; \$37 billion in expenses went out.

You can guess who made up the balance: Every single taxpayer, regardless of how much, or how little, they drive.

"We've been driving on borrowed time, and it's running out - in fact, I'd suggest the clock has stopped," said Catherine Ross, a transportation researcher based at Georgia Tech.

"How urgent is this highway funding crisis?" asked Strassmann.

"The urgency is, oh, 20 years ago. I'm saying that with tongue in cheek, but it's beyond urgent. It's tied to our continued preeminence in the world, and it's certainly tied to our national economic success," she said.

Unfortunately, that's coming at a time when the Department of Transportation says it needs \$100 billion a year for the next twenty years to maintain the current system - to say nothing of expanding it.

"When you look into the future and you begin to look at what our investments will mean when we're competing with China, India, emerging economic powers like Brazil, we better have our infrastructure ready to go, to be able to compete on a global basis," said Victor Mendez, who runs the Federal Highway Administration.

He has overseen more than \$26 billion in spending on bridges and roads as part of President

Obama's stimulus effort.

"When you look at what that investment needs, I know the President gets it. He understands the importance of investing in infrastructure, because otherwise, we're going to concede or fall back, you know, behind the eight ball," said Mendez.

Besides fixing and building roads, the government also wants to get drivers out of their cars and onto busses, trains, or even bikes.

That's a tall order: The Census Bureau reports that 86 percent of us commute by car, and the vast majority of us drive alone.

In Houston, Texas, the oil boom is keeping the economy moving, and the highways jam-packed.

But Jack Whaley is fighting back with a program called TranStar.

"The typical freeway in most parts of the country was designed for about 180,000 cars," Whaley told Strassmann. "In Houston, our freeways are running about 360,000, 320,000 cars every day" - about twice what they were built for.

At TranStar's NASA-inspired mission control center, they monitor cell phone signals from cars to track their progress, or lack of it.

"We know what the speeds are," Whaley said. "We know where most people are congesting the roads. But the individual is anonymous."

TranStar costs about \$26 million a year to operate, but officials claim it saves close to \$300 million a year in fuel and time.

Houston's trying one other solution, something that's being considered in other parts of the country: New toll-roads where - for a price - drivers can buy access to the less-crowded carpool lanes, even if they're driving alone.

"We have those that just hate congestion, and it's worth it to them to pay 50 cents or 60 cents extra to save some of their time," said Whaley. "And then you have others who philosophically just don't like to pay tolls, and they can go down that same route, take 'em a little bit longer. So it's a choice."

That "choice" is a direct challenge to long-held beliefs that the highways represent democracy - that we're all in this together, even if we're all stuck in traffic.

But as the roads keep filling-up, we may no longer be able to afford that sentiment.

"When you ask for that access, if it costs more, you should pay more," said Georgia Tech's Catherine Ross. "Or certainly that's a consideration. So it's democracy for all, but under constrained conditions, it costs more, because it costs more to provide you that ability to travel."

Ross said that we've relied on the legacy of Roosevelt and Eisenhower for about as long as we

possibly can. Whether it's in tolls, taxes or crumbling roads, pretty soon we'll all have to pay the price.

"To those who say 'I've already paid for this,' my answer is, 'Sometimes you have to pay to keep what you have,'" said Ross. "It started off in good repair, it was brand new. That is no longer the case."

**For more info:**

- [houstontranstar.org](http://houstontranstar.org)
- "The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways" by Earl Swift (Houghton Mifflin)

© 2012 CBS Interactive Inc.. All Rights Reserved.