

Editor's Word

By Douglas C. Towne

Map-Made Landscapes

Part of the charm of commercial archeology is its whimsical tendencies; a “wandering” saguaro cactus grows on a Massachusetts steakhouse sign while forested, snow-capped mountains reach toward the heavens on a sign advertising a motel situated in the sundrenched desert sands of Yuma, Arizona. Although the roadside is rife with such geographic errors, there is a subset of the field that we expect to be accurately located: map-made attractions.

One of the most famous is the Four Corners marker which is the only spot in the U.S. where one can simultaneously inhabit four states: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. A surprising number of travelers, including myself, have been lured to this otherwise indistinct arid location to etch the spatial anomaly forever into our memories with a Twister-like pose and a quad-state kiss.

Recently however, the popular tourist attraction was overnight rendered obsolete as a result of satellites. These

orbiting spheres did not attack the site with laser beams or gamma rays but simply transmitted highly accurate spatial data. Based on new digital information, the National Geodetic Survey reported that the Four Corners monument was situated approximately 1,807 feet astray from its intended location. The finding apparently meant that travelers drawn to the remote site on the Colorado Plateau solely by a quirk of geography have been unwittingly missing the mark for many years.

The site was established in 1875 by Chandler Robbins who was contracted by the U.S. General Land Office to survey the boundary between the territories of Arizona and New Mexico. Considering the technological limitations and the logistical difficulties Robbins faced, that his survey was off by the distance of a par-five golf hole was an amazing feat. But an error is still an error...right?

Despite the initial inaccuracy, it turns out the Four Corners marker is correctly located. Once states agree on a border, it becomes legally binding—errors and all. So visitors to the Four Corners attraction can, after all, correctly claim they stood simultaneously in four states.

Another indistinguishable place that has become a minor magnet for tourists solely because of a geographical fluke is located in northwestern Kansas. A few miles north of U.S. Highway 36 near the hamlet of Lebanon, a pyramidal stone monument has claimed the title of being the “Geographic Center of the U.S.” The marker was erected in 1940, but not quite in the correct location.

The geographic center is roughly a half mile away in a field. Understandably, the farmer didn't want hordes of travelers in search of the heart of the nation traipsing through his crops. What is more, the “geographic center” was established by the National Geodetic Survey in 1918 using a cardboard cutout of the U.S. The

agency determined what “exact” location perfectly balanced the country. Lack of precision due to this primitive method became insignificant when those pesky states of Alaska and Hawaii upset the equilibrium in 1959. Their addition moved the country's central point north, near Belle Fourche, South Dakota. Lebanon, Kansas has now been forced to add the unsexy “Lower 48 States” qualifier to its “Geographic Center” title but its fame is still a unique enough selling point to be trumpeted in the names of nearby businesses.

While such capricious points on a map are fertile spawning grounds for tourist attractions, lines on a map are adept at creating highway pit stops too. Some say that life becomes most interesting at its “edges” and along the roadside, a little map-made magic happens at these boundaries as well. There are skid marks along roads where motorists, who otherwise eschew commercial archeology, have risked life and limb swerving to the shoulder to pose next to a sign welcoming them to an optimistic new reality whether it's the “Land of Enchantment” or “The Peach State.” Where else, by traversing of a few feet, can we seemingly ditch our provincial beliefs as we cross into the Big Apple and acquire a “New York state of mind”?

Geographic boundaries appeal to travelers—and roadside enterprises continue to capitalize on our amusement. Even obscure demarcations have been celebrated in dazzling neon displays such as at the iconic Time Zone Motel in Reno, Nevada. Don't try judging the accuracy of the motel's

location by seeing if the time on your cell phone changes as you cruise by. In an all-too-frequent case of roadside misinformation, the motel is curiously nowhere near the transition between Mountain and Pacific zones.

As quaint—and surprisingly powerful—as these roadside oddities created by geography are, lines on a map also produce their own unique business districts. These are enterprises people traditionally only talked about in hushed tones and consist of risqué businesses banned or restricted in one jurisdiction that, to meet demand, crop up just on the other side of the border, whether it be a city, county, Indian, state or national boundary. These enterprises deal with the inflammatory quartet of gambling, alcohol, adult entertainment, and fireworks.

In the not-too-distant past, before most states had a lottery and casinos populated riverboats and reservations across the country, gambling was not only considered a sinful activity but was outlawed in most of the country. Nevada flaunted this puritanical mindset and touted legal gaming, drawing those from near and far who were convinced they had packed Lady Luck in their valise.

Opposite: Four Corners Monument postcard; Pikes Motor Hotel, Yuma, Arizona; and Welcome to Arizona postcard.

Below: Smith Center Motel, U.S. 36, Smith Center, Kansas; the author about to enter the Golden State on I-15, March, 1980.



While Las Vegas, Reno and Tahoe received most of the tourists, little gambling outposts sprang up along highways just past the “Welcome to the Silver State” sign. Although looming large at night with an exciting eruption of sparkling lights, many border communities such as McDermitt along the Oregon border didn’t have much more development than the diminutive “Say When Casino.” The lack of additional infrastructure mattered little to most gamblers. While their wallets were still thick with cash, they quenched their heavy thirst for action at the first chance they could. Ironically, gamblers trying to beat the house failed more often than normal at these isolated casinos. Since they were the first—and only—game in town, the casinos were able to discretely up the gaming odds even more in their favor.

Casinos, as well as bars, dance halls, firework stands, liquor stores and strip clubs are often located outside of town or just across the county line for a reason. Like the iconic “roadhouse” celebrated in blues songs, such sites often have fewer legal restrictions, law enforcement is less noticeable, and the isolated setting helps ensure a bit of anonymity. Outlawing these profitable “vice” businesses in one political area encourages their clustering in another, often more remote location just over the nearest border. Operating costs in these isolated spots are less expensive too. If the customers will go out of their way to visit your establishment, why locate in the high rent district?

Lines on a map may have begun with a surveyor’s transit and appear to demarcate only the physical landscape. The boundaries they form, however, create unique cultural landscapes. Look for these distinctive map-made developments next time you make a run for the border. ●



This page: Time Zone Motel (with neon detail), Reno, Nevada; Lady Luck, Atlantic City, New Jersey; Border Liquor Store, U.S. 89, in Arizona at the Utah state line.



Chuck's Corner Featuring photos from the collection of artist and photographer Chuck Biddle.



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