

House of Plenty: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Luby's Cafeterias

by Carol Dawson and Carol Johnston
Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2006
288 pages, 6 x 9 inches, 48 B & W photos, \$21 hardcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

Growing up in Denver in a family that still considered dining out a rare treat, there was a triumvirate of restaurants we patronized: Henry's Hamburgers, a red and white-checked architectural clone of the Golden Arches that featured "15 Cent Hamburgers" on Wednesday nights, the Denver Drumstick which was famous for its cardboard "boxcar" loaded with chicken and the Lionel train set that chugged around the restaurant's interior and—our favorite—Furr's Cafeteria.

Blissfully unaware of the nutritional implications, I filled my cafeteria tray with lime-green jello, macaroni and cheese, breaded shrimp, and Boston cream pie—and carefully avoided selections such as ambrosia salad and liver and onions that were a tad too exotic for my young palate. Despite these wonderful culinary memories, dining at non-institutional cafeterias—like playing tether ball—was a habit largely abandoned by junior high. Nostalgia for these early cafeteria experiences drew me to *House of Plenty*, a history of Luby's Cafeterias. I was curious as to what had imploded the Luby's empire which, as recently as the 1980s, was second only to McDonalds in profitability among restaurants. More importantly, how had cafeterias in general been transformed from a popular form of dining to an endangered species on roadsides festooned with fast food franchises?

If your gourmet taste buds consider cafeteria food a trifle bland and you feel this book might be an effective nighttime remedy for insomnia—think again. The book starts like a suspenseful mystery, with on the day before the Luby's annual board meeting in 1997, the discovery of its CEO dead in a motel room. Stabbed 19 times, obviously he'd been murdered—or had he? The clues shockingly add up to suicide—a tragedy apparently triggered because of the impending bankruptcy largely triggered by Luby's rapid expansion to 224 outlets.

Luby's demise had been shrewdly predicted years earlier in stock market advice provided by board member,

Charles Johnston to his daughter, Carol, one of the book's coauthors. "When the fourth accountant or nonfood person gets appointed to the board, bail out" Johnston said, correctly predicting that at that point, Luby's would become more worried about its stock performance than food quality.

The origin of this cafeteria is much more uplifting reading, with the book detailing the 1911 business trip to Chicago made by founder Harry Luby, then a rather unexceptional haberdasher in Springfield, Missouri. Dining at a restaurant called The Dairy Lunch, instead of ordering from a menu, he selected his meal from a variety of dishes that were displayed on a counter, thereby eliminating any middle-person wait-staff. He loved that there was no need for tips and that the food could be seen, likening the dining process to the recent invention of the Ford auto

assembly line. At that time, there were two common choices for dining out: the very expensive formal dining room of a hotel, or the rough-and-tumble, greasy-spoon atmosphere of a saloon.

Harry returned to Springfield and soon opened up a cafeteria called the New England Dairy Lunch, with his wife, Julia, the head chef and menu planner. Her signature recipe was the New England Boiled Dinner, a slow-cooked dish similar to a pot roast but more complex, rich with peppery beef brisket, potatoes, carrots, beets, onions, cabbage, green beans, and rutabagas, all united by an appetizing sauce. The excellence of the food and the thrifty prices made their restaurant an instant success.

Eventually changing the name to Luby's Cafeteria, Harry followed the oil boom. By 1927, he had opened 10 other

restaurants in Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana. This expansion occurred by putting all his latest advances into the new cafeteria location, selling the previous cafeteria to one of his relatives while retaining partial ownership, making Luby's the very first franchised restaurants of their type in America. All the restaurants flourished with the exception of the Muskogee, Oklahoma cafeteria which he closed because of threats from the Ku Klux Klan when he refused to join their organization.

The book brims with such socially conscious policies. Harry's cafeterias became a great equalizing place which the rich and poor alike patronized. Employees could eat free of charge (until the 1960s), and the public ate whether they could pay for their meals or not during the Great

Depression. In the 1930s, Harry instructed his managers, "If you can't afford it, then feed them and send me the bill." Also unique was Luby's business model of allowing store managers to keep 40 percent of net profits and giving stock to all employees. This system created more millionaires per capita than any other corporation of its size and was based on Harry Luby's catchphrase: "Share the work, share the risks, share the profits."

House of Plenty is an interesting tale, though it could be improved by focusing more on how the cafeteria fits into American restaurant history and less on the often dysfunctional Luby family dynamics. While the publication gamely tries to paint a bright future for the restaurant chain, noting that Luby's has emerged from bankruptcy, the reality is that this distinctively American form of dining has become a dying breed. Changing tastes and an aging customer population relegate the cafeteria to a bit player in today's food industry though its offspring, the all-you-can-eat buffet, flourishes in our nation of expanding waist lines. However, irrelevant of culinary tastes and trends, Luby's most important contribution may have been proving—counter intuitively—that not watching the bottom line could pay big dividends for a company.

Douglas Towne's floating montage, "Maybe Christmas Wasn't Meant To Last Forever: The Rise and Fall of Santa Claus, Arizona" was recently featured at the Holiday in the Park exhibit at the Tohono Chul Park Gallery in Tucson, Arizona. He's still waiting for the "revival" of this shuttered roadside attraction that's presently a bizarre amalgamation of fading holiday good cheer and recent spray-painted graffiti.

The Playground Trail: The National Park-to-Park Highway: To and Through the National Parks of the West in 1920

by Lee Whiteley
Johnson Printing Co., 2003
216 pages, 8.5 x 11 inches, maps, B & W photos, \$19.95 paper

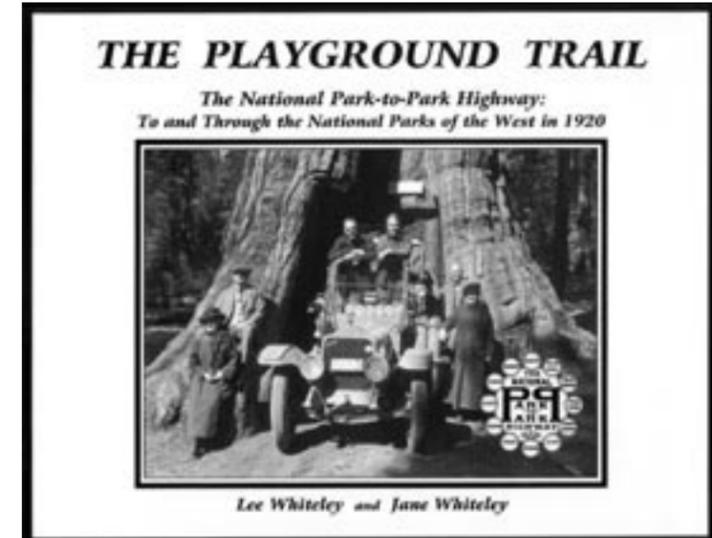
Reviewed by Brian Butko

There are better-known highways, but after reading this well-researched and beautifully-illustrated book, you'll wonder why so few of us have heard of the National Park-to-Park Highway. Starting in 1920, the 5,600 mile road linked 12 of the recently-designated national parks in nine western states. National monuments (such as Bryce Canyon in Utah) and forests (such as Shoshone in Wyoming) were also part of the loop made from joining together some 31 already-named auto routes (such as the Midland Trail). It also incorporated

historic paths of earlier migrations such as the Oregon-California, Nez Perce, and Old Spanish trails.

The authors start by introducing the Good Roads movement and the themes that play a part in the highway's history. Highlights range from from early auto history to the AAA to the trails that would become part of the Park-to-Park. The idea for such a highway arose in 1915, as the Park Service was being established. The National Park-to-Park Highway Association was created in 1916, but the next few years were consumed by war.

In 1919, representatives from the 12 states met to discuss the plans for such a road, and the next year, the National Park-to-Park Highway Association was incorporated with headquarters in Denver. In August 1920, a Dedication Tour departed Denver's Overland Park to promote the route. The authors uncovered a trove of 45 images from this event at the John



Taggart Hinkley Library at Northwest College in Powell, Wyoming. The pictures were taken by Albert "Pa" Lucier, photographer of the tour.

The middle section, the focus of the book, covers the 12 parks, their histories, and the roads that led to them. Clockwise from the Grand Canyon, the parks were Zion, Sequoia, General Grant, Yosemite, Lassen Volcanic, Crater Lake, Mt Rainier, Glacier, Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain, and Mesa Verde. Smaller sections cover the drive such as "Glacier to Mount Rainier Park" or "Needles, California, to Grand Canyon National Park." Each part includes a route summary, "quick" and "slower" paths to take for those retracing the route, maps, images from Blue Books, news clippings, park entrance stickers, and Lucier's tour photographs.

The final section recounts what happened in the years that followed. A guidebook to the route was published in 1921, and the park service continued to improve the road, praising it in annual reports, but the association ceased active operations in 1926. Like most named trails, the Park-to-Park faded with the establishment of numbered federal routes that year. Still, the 1931 report had a map and mention of an eastern equivalent road. Some of the federal routes that would later overlay it range from U.S. 66 to 89.

Lee Whiteley has written books on The Cherokee Trail and The Yellowstone Highway (a road to the park through Colorado, not the more famous Yellowstone Trail). With his wife Jane, they continue to research transportation history, most recently in anticipation of the 2007 Lincoln Highway

Association annual conference in Colorado. They are among those at the forefront of automobile highway history.

Brian Butko is author of *Greetings from the Lincoln Highway* and co-author of the forthcoming *Roadside Attractions*. He has served on SCA's board and is the designer of this magazine.

Camino del Norte: How a Series of Watering Holes, Fords, and Dirt Trails Evolved into Interstate 35 in Texas

by Howard J. Erlichman
College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006
284 pp. 15 maps, \$29.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Keith A. Sculle

The author's personal experience lies at the heart of any good book, fiction or fact. Author Howard J. Erlichman engaged his topic, Interstate 35 (I-35) through central Texas, first by driving it frequently since moving to Austin in 1998, then by archival research. "The subject matter of this book started out as an interest. Then it developed into a hobby. Eventually the historical puzzle of Interstate 35 in Texas became nearly an obsession." His lived experience on the landscape beckoned Erlichman to an appreciation of I-35 in Texas that defies the customary rejection about interstates by "blue highway" disciples, commercial archeologists, and scholars. Fast and maybe safe, but boring, most contend. Timothy Davis' encyclopedic and well reasoned Ph. D. dissertation, "Mount Vernon Memorial Highway and the Evolution of the American Parkway" (1997) can claim the foundation for future treatments, not merely of the Mount Vernon highway, but also the American parkway. But who has been willing to embrace the interstates and Interstate system in all dimensions, good, bad, and functional alike?

Most current treatments of the Interstate do not warm readers to the subject. Like cultural sentries, the strong literary stylists and photographers, who have signaled appreciation and opened dialogue about various aspects of the automobile road and roadside—James Agee's "The Great American Roadside" in a 1934 *Fortune* magazine article and Edward Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) come ready to mind—have not yet performed. In their *Highway: America's Endless Dream* (1997), photographer Jeff Brouws and writers Bernd Polster and Phil Patton see the Interstate darkly, a reinforcement of a national tendency to isolation in which yet another technological fetish diminishes face-to-face communication. The suggestion of the Interstate as a form of cultural neurosis hovers unspoken behind their splendid exploration combining images and somber, yet sonorous, writing.

Readers, brace yourselves! Although Erlichman's subject is I-35 and highway appendages in Texas alone, his steely-

eyed appraisal of that interstate as a system has powerful implications for thinking in general about the Interstate. Erlichman asserts that most Texans accepted Interstates as a necessity. Without them, Texas would not be competitive, the cost of business exceeding that in other states. By 1967, eleven years after passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956 on which the Interstate system was founded, eighty percent of Texas' 3,033-mile part of the system was complete and I-35 was the part nearest completion in Texas. With the most interstate mileage of any state, "the five hundred miles of I-35 between the Rio Grande and Red River represent a towering engineering achievement."

Construction delays, cost overruns, and threatened destruction of neighborhoods and natural amenities produced backlashes ranging from public skepticism to organized legal resistance. The San Antonio Conservation Society wrestled the hardest with the road's entrepreneurial, engineering, and bureaucratic juggernaut, not on behalf of low-income residents along the North Expressway's alignment around the city but because it threatened parklands. In Laredo, an I-35 extension route did displace residents and cause homes, small businesses, and a school to be razed. "Black residents of East Dallas and East Austin were simply powerless to save their neighborhoods, which were segregated, relocated, or simply destroyed." The Interstate system surely has not left all neighborhoods intact, but Texas cities have never harbored "dense urban neighborhoods of the eastern variety." In short, Texas cities did not suffer as badly as did cities elsewhere. The impact on smaller towns was admittedly mixed.

"Smart growth" planning and light-rail transit alternatives to the destructive and costly Interstate construction have been seen as more of a benefit to urban real estate owners and developers and, consequently, have been voted down in Austin and San Antonio. If some mass transit had been in place before the Interstate started, it could have set the pattern for the future. Summing up Erlichman's accounting on the Texas Interstate balance sheet, it can be asserted that the Interstate is a relatively good thing for Texas: popular, profitable, and—in engineering terms—marvelous.

That is not all. Erlichman first guides the reader over historical grounds to hammer home his point. In chapter one, he explains, the great Mexican civilizations created a foundation of economic development, including trade routes and roads that were adopted and extended by the Spanish and French and that were utilized by the first Anglo-American colonists. I would submit that the roots of I-35 actually started in La Venta in around 1000 B. C.

In the next three chapters, he elaborates on the germination from those roots, especially emphasizing the transformative years between 1860 and 1900. During that 40-year span,

emancipated slaves, privatized public lands, tenant farming, and low-cost railroad construction laid the basis of Texas' present economy and furthered the coming of I-35. "Following twenty years of feverish railway expansion in Texas, most of the right-of-way segments of future Interstate 35 had been staked out by two major rail lines and a portion of a third." Under state administration and taxation, Texas developed an auto highway grid by 1917, including US 81 and US 77, "predecessor highways to I-35." By then "the foundations for interstate highway development including Interstate 35 were now in place...."

Chapters Seven and Eight, despite tracing the influence of federal funding and construction standards as we know them on Texas's highways today, do not significantly augment our understanding of I-35 except to say that the federal-state funded highway system was a segue to the Interstate. Were any Texans in the trucking and motorist lobbies that finally brought about the Interstate? Now, here it comes readers, I-35 is both justified and pronounced virtually inevitable:

Good or bad, I-35 and its frontage roads, interchanges, feeder roads, traffic congestion, and sprawl are facts of daily life. They are also part of a long-running continuum driven by migration, trade, warfare, technology, entrepreneurship, and ample doses of government funding. The roots of I-35 were introduced thousands of years ago with the earliest stone age peoples of Central Texas, including the first rockshelters, waterside settlements, and trails.

Commercial archeologists and tourists alike have rightly enjoyed "road trips." Traveling carefree in reliable vehicles to search for the authentic America off the Interstate rightly has its place. Coming to grips with how to "carry out projects of documentation, education, advocacy, and conservation to encourage public awareness and understanding of these significant elements [the impact of the automobile and the commercial process]"—to quote SCA's Statement of Purpose—does mean that someday, we will have to consider preserving parts of the Interstate, its off-ramps, cloverleafs, and dependencies—the constellation of services and big box stores, the suburban sprawl, and the traffic gluts—in orbit around them?

Jack Nicholson, portraying a steely-eyed realist in the movie "A Few Good Men," counters a military attorney in a defining scene with blunt assertion, "You can't handle the truth!" Could we, if the Interstate was on trial? Erlichman's inquisitiveness about I-35 in Texas may provoke readers' own inquisitiveness. He's worth reading.

A long-time member and former director of the Society for Commercial Archeology, Keith A. Sculle has co-authored five books about the automobile road and roadside in American geography and history and is the Head of Research and Education for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in Springfield, Illinois.

A Road for Canada: The Illustrated Story of the Trans-Canada Highway

By Daniel Francis
North Vancouver, British Columbia: Stanton Atkins & Dosit Publishers, 2006
186 pp., \$39.95

Canada's "New Main Street": The Trans-Canada Highway as Idea and Reality 1912-1956

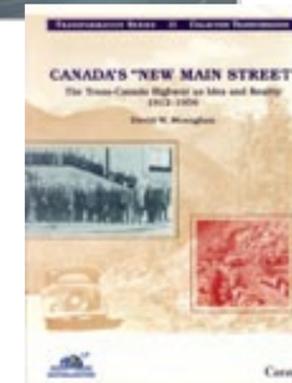
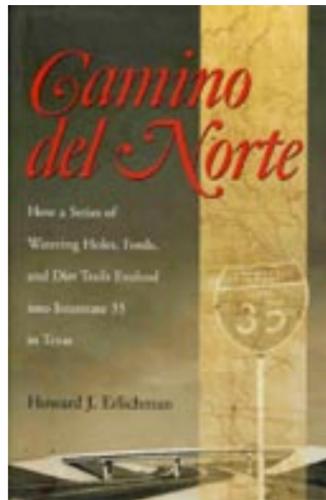
(Transformation Series 11)
By David W. Monaghan
Ottawa, Ontario: Canada Science & Technology Museum, 2002
90 pp., \$20.00

Reviewed by Peter Glaser

On a dreary day in May 1912, a group of automobile enthusiasts gathered in Port Alberni, a small town situated on the western side of Vancouver Island, to unveil a "zero mile" signpost for a trans-continental highway that had yet to be built. As a publicity stunt, the group offered a gold medal to the first motorist who could drive an all-Canadian route from Halifax, Nova Scotia (Newfoundland was yet to be a part of Canada) to the Pacific. The intent of the medal was to encourage some bold motorists into attempting a crossing and, in so doing, generate public interest in the need for better roads. Some attempts were made, most notably Thomas Wilby and Jack Haney's 1912 "all-Red route" adventure—red referring, of course, to how members of the British Empire were colored on maps at the time. This endeavor and others like it failed because of the inability of motorists to complete their trips entirely by road. Parts of northern Ontario and British Columbia proved impassable so travelers resorted to using flanged wheels for daring railway passage, or were forced to ship their automobiles by train or lake boat in order to bridge the gaps in the existing road network. Astoundingly, it would take until 1946 for the gold medal to be claimed by a pair of motorists.

A Road for Canada is a popular history of the trans-Canada highway which, at 4,860 miles, is the longest continuous highway in the world. This book provides a decent overview of the challenges realized in accomplishing this massive engineering feat, but its value lies in providing a rich tapestry of social and cultural conditions of the times. For a country that seems largely incognizant

of its 20th-century commercial architectural heritage, it is nice to embrace a book that devotes some—albeit brief—attention to the evolution and commerce of roadside food and lodging. Recognition is also given to the oversized roadside monuments that dot the highway, such as the giant



Canada goose at Wawa, Ontario. Had the author delved a little deeper, however, he would have said “geese” as there are in fact three such oversized monuments in the vicinity of Wawa.

Francis, a historical researcher and writer, has created a book that is a visual delight for readers. Aside from a wonderful selection of archival photographs, this tome contains a rich collection of road-related ephemera: maps, brochures, pennants, badges, and other artifacts of the highway. I could have done without the contemporary “coffee table book” landscape spreads, inclusions presumably meant to interest a wider audience of readers.

Those looking for more in the way of transportation history will want to turn to David Monaghan’s Canada’s “New Main Street,” a well-researched examination of the political milieu through which the highway evolved—a complicated chronicle that ebbed and flowed as partisan politics, government policies, and regional interests played out through the years. Monaghan, Curator of the Land Transportation section of the Canada Museum of Science and Technology, has provided road scholars with a compelling narrative on a topic that has had scant attention from historians over the years.

The origins of federal government involvement in the highway date back to 1919 when the Canada Highways Act was passed. Interestingly, as Monaghan points out, this act was based on the U.S. Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1916, a project of the Lincoln Highway Association. Indeed, much of the highway’s construction would ultimately rely on U.S. expertise in the areas of engineering and construction standards. While the Canada Highways Act offered the roots of a trans-Canada highway, the road remained for many years the “idea” of Monaghan’s title. It was not until the passage of the Trans-Canada Highway Act of 1949 that the project proceeded with any certainty, and even then the “reality” was ploddingly slow. Officially opened with much fanfare in 1962, it took until 1965 before the last sections of highway were paved.

The silver lining in this tale for SCA enthusiasts is that because the highway took so long to complete, when it was finished it “had specifications which had become the norm for a paved rural route.” (p. 80). While some sections have been upgraded over the years, little of it resembles the character of a U.S. Interstate, and for this reason, many treasures of the commercial roadside remain along its course. It was certainly not Monaghan’s intention to address such matters; yet reading his engaging book, I could not help but think how reassuring this reality is.

Peter Glaser hopes to someday bike the highway—a pace which will enable him to truly appreciate and, more importantly, partake of its roadside pleasures.

Erratum: Arthur Krim’s *Route 66* reviewed in the Fall 2006 SCA Journal incorrectly listed the book’s distributor, the University of Chicago Press, as the publisher. The Center for American Places is the book’s publisher. ●

¹⁸ “Throngs Visited Fort Rosalie on Opening Sunday,” *Natchez Democrat* (18 February 1941), 8; “Fort Rosalie Restored by Jeff Dickson Will Be Formally Opened to Public Today”; advertisement, *Natchez Democrat* (16 February 1941).

¹⁹ “Fort Rosalie,” *Natchez Democrat* (23 March 1941), 5.

²⁰ “Jeff Dickson Is Missing In Aerial Action: American Who Promoted Paris Sports Is Captain in Bombardier Squadron,” *New York Herald Tribune* (25 July 1943), 7; “Jeff Dickson Missing: Former Sports Promoter in Paris Was Air Force Captain,” *New York Times* (25 July 1943), L-27; “Captain Jeff Dickson, Artist Barclay Lost: Noted Promoter of Sports Was In Europe Area,” *Philadelphia Enquirer* (25 July 1943), A-1, 10; Adams County Chancery Court Records, Box 360, Case No. 11685, referencing Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Will Book 73 [or 75], 427.

²¹ Marianne Berger Woods, “Viewing Colonial America through the Lens of Wallace Nutting,” *American Art* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 69-70; William B. Rhoads, “Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age, 1900-1940,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 21, nos. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1986): 137-40.

²² “The National Park Service and Preservation,” *Public Historian* special issue 9, no. 2 (Spring 1987); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), chap. 7; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 164-80; Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), part 3, especially 465-73.

