Rick Campbell

Highway 52: The Highway with No Name

Perhaps your country is where you think you will find it.
— A. S. J. Tessimond

Below you will find the prologue to my travel memoir. Three sections of it have already run in previous issues of the *ALR*. But before the prologue, I have to include a confession, an elegy perhaps. In 2014 I was on sabbatical when I began this project, the research, and then the driving, I intended to drive the entire length of US 52. However, for some rather unforeseen reasons, I began the journey at a midpoint, Huntington, West Virginia. I thought, no big deal. Since I would, in a few months be heading back to Florida, I could drive from Huntington south through West Virginia, then through North and South Carolina to Charleston. I believed that this southern portion of the highway would be less interesting than the journey across the Midwest to North Dakota, but I fully intended to finish the project and the drive. But, as we know, things happen.

By the time I was back in West Virginia, taking a return route following the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio Rivers, family issues and maybe fatigue caused me to postpone the 52 drive and figure I could do it the following summer. That summer came and went, and I did not drive my highway. Then, around Christmas of 2015, my spine collapsed. I had a couple of surgeries, went through rehab and was in no shape for a long drive. Time kept passing. I kept getting older and slower and my car kept aging too. The longer I waited the less interested I was in finishing my project. Now, in 2023, I think I am admitting, conceding, that I am not going to drive from West Virginia to Charleston. As I often concluded in my narrative about following 52 to Portal, the highway just wasn't very interesting and I figured, maybe feared, that it would be even less interesting crossing North Carolina and South Carolina. This is probably the end, a retirement, a death knell, of sorts. Maybe, like Tom Brady, I will come back to the game, but I really doubt it. If someone wants to finish the drive, I will readily pass on the rights to US 52.

Prologue: Birth of the U.S. Highway System

In the 1920s there was considerable debate and conflict concerning the establishment of a U.S. highway system, particularly about where the highways would go. Some states wanted more highways, some wanted fewer. Highway planners and politicians even fought about numbers. Many thought highways ending in zero sounded more important than those ending in other digits.

There was more esoteric debate too focused on the choice of numbers to designate the highways, rather than names. Some felt that a numbered highway system was cold and heartless compared to the colorful names of the old Auto Trail systems such as the Dixie Overland Highway (Savannah, Georgia, to San Diego); the Lee Highway (Washington, D.C., to San Diego); the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego), the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway (New York City to Los Angeles); the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway (Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, with a Canadian stretch through Ontario), and the Yellowstone Trail (Boston to Seattle).

North-south routes included the Atlantic Highway and the Pacific Highway along the coasts and the Evergreen Highway (Portland, Oregon, to El Paso); the Jackson Highway (Chicago to New Orleans); the Jefferson Highway (Winnipeg to New Orleans); the King of Trails Highway (Winnipeg to Brownsville, Texas), and the Meridian Highway (Winnipeg to Houston).

Why so many from Winnipeg?

The New York Times wrote, "The traveler may shed tears as he drives the Lincoln Highway or dream dreams as he speeds over the Jefferson Highway, but how can he get a 'kick' out of 46, 55 or 33 or 21?" Obviously, "Route 66" had not been written yet. However, a cursory study comparing the names of these highways with where they went shows that often there was little accurate relationship between the two. How could one know that the Pikes Peak Highway went to New York? And one does not think of evergreens and El Paso in the same thought.

The Atlantic Highway became US 1 after the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials ASHTO numbering system took effect. It's one of few highways that might have become more famous by having a number than a name. While a number does not signify geographical location, at least it's as inaccurate as the old name of Atlantic. US 1 travels inland, far from the Atlantic coast as it wends its way from New Jersey to Georgia. It's a coastal highway from New Jersey north and also in Florida. Though in Florida its sister offspring A-1-A is more often within sight of the ocean.

The highway system created in 1926 birthed an interstate highway system, but not the one we know now, the one that Charles Kuralt maligned when he wrote, "thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything. From the Interstate, America is all steel guardrails and plastic signs, and every place looks and feels and sounds and smells like every other place."

The consistent, drab, homogenous nature of the current system was not a characteristic of the US highway system. Each highway had as many individual characteristics and quirks as a highway can have. This system was made of preexisting state highways and county roads that were joined together by numbered road signs; even numbered roads were to go East-West and odd numbers North-South.

Sometimes cobbling a long highway out of a number of other existing roads caused some deviations in direction, some strange situations where a driver headed east for a few miles in order to go west or jogged west for no apparent reason before resuming a journey heading south. However, the larger mystery concerns where the highway began or ended. Many highways began in upstate New York at Rouse Point and many others began in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. My assumption of beginnings is based on my being a Northerner and thinking that serious travel flows south.

The 1926 highway system was not a construction project. It did not have a large economic impact when it was created. Few roads were built, extended, or significantly altered to create the federal system. There was little money to be made by highway contractors and few jobs created that politicians could claim that they had brought home to their constituents. It was more an idea than a concrete entity. It was like Progress. Manifest Destiny. The American Way. Maybe the American Dream. Someone thought the US needed a national highway system to be considered a great country, so we made one, even if in number only. It was a Babbitt thing; we did it because we could.

We made a national highway system that connected towns and cities that few wanted to travel to in a time when there were relatively few travelers on the highways. Who needed to drive from Brownsville, Texas to Salt Lake City? Maybe this is a typically American thing; we created a national highway system, and then extended it to virtually everywhere, whether there was need for it or any people to use it. It could be seen as farsighted, as good planning, given that we soon became a nation of cars and drivers, but by the time we did become that nation, these US highways were deemed obsolete and the current Interstate system was begun by the Eisenhower administration. That too, I suppose, is very American.

The long highways were not made, as our interstate highways are, to connect cities hundreds of miles from each other; these highways were just the opposite in their genesis. Short segments of a US highway ran from town A to town B; these segments were then married to form a system. This system became a long highway. In the more populated and older Eastern half of the country, which had far more roads than the West, these marriages created a family highway tree of branching "daughter" highways: US 19 adds 119 and 219 and 319 that drift away from their parents to connect some other towns to the system, but the daughters don't go too far away, and they eventually come back to join their parents somewhere further down the road, as the saying goes.

The practice of coupling and linking to form a US highway is most noticeable when we see four road signs with a different number than the highway we think we are on. The bigger problem comes when the highway that we want to stay on eventually separates itself from the rest of its numerical family. That's when we sometimes find ourselves having to turn around and go back and read the signs more carefully.

There are periodic realignments, divorces, second marriages, which might move what was a stretch of Highway 52 a few miles to where transportation engineers think there's a more efficient location. The old union just wasn't working anymore, didn't meet the needs of the people it served, or demographic changes rendered the location of the old highway obsolete. Quite often the old highway segment will be marked with a closely related number — 52A, 52X — and left to get a handful of people to a town that they need to go to, but very few other travelers will ever visit. Or maybe there's a town on the old highway's course that has enough historical significance to change the original 52 into a tourist road — a heritage trail or something else that sounds good to county officials.

Because the long highways once served a local, or at best regional need (and we can argue that most of them still do since the Interstates serve our larger, national needs) long highways have hundreds of local names as they make their way across the country. Quite often each town has a name for the US highway that runs through it, and were it not for the US highway shield that pops up just when we are wondering if we are still on US 221, we'd think we were lost.

Those who live on a long highway think it goes from their town to where they work — maybe they have a two county, a forty-mile drive version of highway's longer story. They might think it just goes to the local big town. They rarely know their long highway's many identities, aliases, and incarnations. They see the highway on a county map; I see it on a national atlas, but it's harder to find now that the Interstates are taking up so much space.

US 27 runs through Tallahassee near where I'm writing this, and at the same time it rolls south to Miami and north to Michigan. On any given day there are cars and trucks on the highway in Tallahassee and similar cars and trucks on each end of the same highway, albeit hundreds of miles to the south and a couple thousand miles north. I am more interested in how this can happen than I am in the heavens. I can't drive a highway to a star.

A Highway by Any Other Name . . .

When a long highway rolls through a city as US 52 does in Charlestown, South Carolina, when it's either almost at its end, or its beginning, its name might change every few blocks. If our journey were to begin in Charlestown, US 52 is also US 17, and for this first segment our highway is called East Battery, then East Bay, Meeting Street, Rivers Road, Camer, South Goose Creek, North Goose Creek, and we will have traveled only a few of the 2100 miles left to go. US 52 will split from US 17 and head west while 17 heads north and both will have hundreds of names before they reach their ends.

This confusion, if it is such a thing, because local drivers know their long highway, mostly afflicts the driver who is traveling a longer stretch of the

highway than can be considered local. The poor driver who uses Map Quest will be even more confused about what highway he is navigating.

Once I drove from my house in rural Gadsden County, Florida, on a trip to Statesboro, Georgia, and the county road I began my journey on, CR 270, already had two other names — the Sycamore Road and Bonnie Hill Road. When I got to Quincy a few miles east of my house I was on US 90 and Jackson Street. This multiple naming continued and was not really a problem until late on this cold and rainy night, a Bridge Out detour on a road I'd never been on near a town I'd never heard of, made me use the Milledgeville Highway when I knew Milledgeville was a good ways south of where I was and that I had been heading north before the detour. My computer directions were of no avail since my mapping guys didn't account for a detour that had occurred in yesterday's heavy rain. I went on faith, believing that the purpose of the detour signs was to get me back on the highway I had been on, going the direction I had been going. My faith was tested but rewarded. By the time I was back on my desired highway it was late, dark, cold, wet and I was low on gas. The little Georgia towns were closed. When I saw a sign for US 1, one of my homeboy long highways, my spirits lifted and I took it. Heading north I believed would take me to I-16 where I would find gas and a bathroom and a highway system guaranteed to deliver me, like freight, to Statesboro. As long as I could read the big green exit signs in the rainy night, I was okay. On the interstate everybody knows its name.

Doubts, Meditations

If these highways were cobbled together in 1926 and reconfigured a few years later — extended, renamed, segments traded to another highway like baseball teams swap utility infielders — for a good purpose, for many of these highways I can't see it. That's one thing I hope that driving my highway will reveal. As for the question of why any stretch of highway is where it is, it's much like how water, or deer, get where they need to go. The first highways followed paths that offered the least resistance. The old highways are palimpsests — pavement and asphalt laid down on the dirt tracks of paw prints, footprints, and wagon ruts of whoever traveled them long before cars and pavement covered them over. Usually, an old road follows the course of the river because the river knows the easiest way to move across the land. And an old highway follows ridgelines in hills and mountains, not because it wants to but because it has to; its mission, the way it knows how to live is to follow the easiest, less taxing way from there to there. When a long highway, which is always also an old highway, goes across a bridge, it's because there was a ford there. It's where the old ones crossed the river.

Does it matter, when driving a long highway from beginning to end, where we begin? Is a journey on a long highway the text Barthes wrote about, where the reader could begin anywhere, read it forward or backward? Yes. The road is a text and yes it goes two directions, and though the volume and

demographics of the highway's traffic might be the same each way, like the tide there's a difference between what happens on the outgoing and the incoming flow. What we see heading in one direction sometimes can't be seen when heading the other way. The sun that's in our eyes heading west in the late afternoon, shines in our mirrors when we drive east. Direction always matters; direction is a matter of intention and purpose, of desire and need. Coming and going, leaving a lover and coming back to her, are never the same. The song says *six days on the road and I'm gonna see my baby tonight*. It's a coming home song. It has direction and desire. In our cultural mythology, heading west trumps east. We go west to discover, to get rich, to begin again, to pursue a dream. We go *back* East to see family, to have a reunion, or to live with our western-gained riches. No one in America ever said go east young man. The territories Huck lit out for were out west.

North and South, maybe that's not so obvious. North is, as Richard Hugo said, up on all the maps. Up sounds better than down in our Rags to Riches dreams. The North won the war. The South reeled and tottered until conservative Republicans and Fundamentalist Christians made it rise again and I, for one, prefer the battered South. But south is where we go for warmth and fun-and-sun vacations, unless we live in the South and then we head north to escape the heat, the humidity. Today, if we were to study the emotional state of I-95, it seems that cars travel south with urgency; they want to get to Florida so that the vacation can begin. But cars going north do so with resignation. Vacation is over. Work looms, and the driver, everyone in the car, is tired, sunburned; sand grinds skin in places they didn't even know sand could get into. Though it's true that a long highway can be traveled in two directions, which direction we drive will determine the nature and tone of our journey and who meets us, who we hold and who we break bread with at the journey's end.

How I Discovered US 52

The website called *U.S. Highways from US 1 to US (830)* has a list of 209 US highways listed in 1926 and a link to an updated list compiled in 1956. On the original 1926 list I noticed Highway 52 and dismissed it as not worthy of being designated a long highway or, for that matter, even an interesting highway. In 1926 it ran from Huntington, West Virginia to Fowler, Indiana. It covered only 343 miles, and Huntington and Fowler didn't strike me as places that needed to be connected.

But on the 1956 list, Highway 52 had been extended and looked a little more interesting. A *little* more only because I read the chart wrong. It looked like US 52 originated in Bluefield, West Virginia, and extended to Portal, North Dakota. Portal, that was interesting enough just for its Star Trek name. I got out the map and traced 52 west from Bluefield, which on my atlas was tucked in the fold of the page. West Virginia is never given much respect in a road atlas. It's an oddly shaped state that extends too far east, has a little slice that

runs north to Wheeling and then ends up wedged between Ohio and Pennsylvania. The whole weird state is often crammed onto one map page. Bluefield was hard to find even though I knew where it was; after I had it, I followed 52 across southern West Virginia and watched it cross the Ohio River into Kentucky. Then it and I followed the north bank of the Ohio into Cincinnati where we headed north again into the heart of Indiana. We passed through the original terminus in Fowler.

But a pattern was beginning to show itself — a zigzag. North, then west, then north, then west. This is supposed to be an East-West highway, since it has an even number, but it's gone almost as far north as it has east. I'm starting to really like this highway. I traced 52 into Indianapolis and then started to ask some questions — why does this highway go where it goes? It ghosts out of the west side of Indy and then at Lafayette (Purdue) cuts north into Illinois. So far, it's zigzagged its way a few hundred miles and accomplished little — if the purpose of this highway was to carry trade goods, it has not connected any real centers of trade except maybe goods shipped by river to Cincy and then taken by truck to Indy and the other way around.

Suddenly in central Illinois the highway executes a series of right-angle turns, as if it's on a mission north to Joliet. I'm even more confused; why travel from Cincinnati and Indianapolis to Joliet and not to Chicago? In Joliet, probably near the State pen, 52 heads west again into western Illinois and then cuts north and west toward the Mississippi River, where it crosses the river and heads north again up the west bank in Iowa. No other highway travels the banks of these two great rivers, the Ohio and the Mississippi, and crosses the Appalachians for a bonus. 52 rolls north through Iowa and then angles west and north into Minnesota. It bounces west again after going through Minneapolis/St. Paul and crossing the Mississippi River twice. It continues its west and north course to Fargo, North Dakota and then in Jamestown it takes a pretty straight line north through Minot, Bow Bells, Kenmare and finally to Portal where it enters Saskatchewan. There the Canadians change this noble and confused long highway's number to 39.

I love this strange highway now; I want to drive it if only to end up in Portal and then cross into Canada. I want to see where this highway ends and ask again, *why?* Why connect Regina, Saskatchewan to Bluefield, West Virginia? Where must I go for the secret to be revealed?

And then the really strange thing happens. I'm back in my atlas, trying to find out how many northbound miles the highway covers, and how many east to west miles as well. I'm measuring a line north from Bluefield when I see 52 popping out of the mess where the pages are bound and heading east toward Charlotte. Highway 52, on its southeast run, is decidedly more of a north-south highway. It passes through Darlington that Springsteen sang about and then south toward Charlestown.

As Highway 52 enters Charlestown, I realize that I've driven it before, but I thought it was a street — Rivers Avenue. This great long highway ends in the

Battery. Years ago, I stood right where it ends (or begins). It must begin there, a Virgin Birth, a highway born without any intersection. This might be the greatest highway ever, a highway born like Athena bursting from Zeus' head.

What do I know? Why should 52 go from Charlestown, South Carolina to Portal, North Dakota? Who plans and designs such a highway, even if it's a series of roads linked together long after they've first been traveled? Why such meandering to connect two end points that would seem to have no reason for commerce, for travelers, for anyone at all to go from one end to the other? The problem, fundamentally, is that hardly any places in the 2000 and some miles of US 52 need to be connected. I have to imagine that it's an accident. Nothing that I've considered before — game trails, Indians trails, roads following rivers — nothing explains the genesis and path of Highway 52.

What's my driving wheel, my North Star that will guide or misguide me? Since I think that Highway 52 does not make sense in its geographical and commercial nature, is that what I am going to try to prove? Am I predisposed to finding this lack of purpose, and will I miss evidence to the contrary? Will I be like Columbus who, seeking India and the East, decided he was in India because that's where he wanted to be?

The reality is, that for US 52, and for most of the long highways, no one "wanted" them to go where they go; no one "wanted" them at all. The numbers are just numbers. It's not an American dream we are dealing with, but a local, community dream. And it's maybe far less a dream than just daily needs and some smaller wants. Highway 52 was made, not born.

Highway 52 was designated and named, linked by rational men, engineers, who by 1935 could write that it connects Charlestown to Portal. Nothing I have found yet explains why even one of these rational men wanted to do this or thought it was necessary.

US 52 can be described in much the same way as George R. Stewart, author of *U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States of America*, says of Route 6, that it "runs uncertainly from nowhere to nowhere, scarcely to be followed from one end to the other, except by some devoted eccentric."

Yes, given the web of roads and highways, blue highways, red highways, spurs, business routes, interstates, one can go from anywhere to anywhere else, but that kind of trip, wherever it might lead, takes desire and a sense of whimsy. *Let's see where this one goes*, you say, and if you can keep finding gas stations and your vehicle keeps running you will get to your "anywhere."

There have been, fortunately, a number of eccentrics willing to travel these highways. One of them was Jack Kerouac. I am now about to add myself to their number.

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