

## Highway 36: A history with some personal remembrances

By JACK BRIGGS

Secretary/Treasurer of the US 36/I-72 Assn.

It took over 60 years.

This week the effort to four-lane U.S. 36 all the way across Missouri culminated in success. Appropriately, the final ceremony took place in Macon, where it all started.

Sometime in the late 1940s, a group of leaders from all across Missouri gathered to discuss what could be done to make Highway 36 an economic lifeline. They had two points of concern: Tourism and improving the highway to four lanes.

At the time, Highway 36 was part of the "Pike's Peak Ocean to Ocean" road. The PPOO stretched from New York City to California. The Highway 36 portion was from Indianapolis to Boulder, Colorado. It now runs for 1,414 miles from Rocky Mountain National Park to Ohio.

Many in Cameron still remember the "Ocean to Ocean Caf & eacute;,"

Much of the present highway was Route 8 in the 1920s. The section from St. Joseph to Hannibal parallels the route of the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, which was the reason St. Joseph was selected for the Pony Express. The two towns were the second and third largest cities in the State of Missouri prior to the Civil War. Prior to the establishment of the railroad in the late 1850s, the stagecoach route was called the "Houn' Dog Trail."

That seed of today's Highway 36/I-72 Association was made up of some forward-thinking men all along the route. My father, Tom Briggs, was the founding secretary/treasurer and he was joined by Bob Pringle of Cameron as well as Cliff Churchill and Bob Staton of Chillicothe and others from several states. Churchill's son, Ken, has stayed active to the end.

Around 1735, the first unofficial road in Missouri was called Three Notch Road. It was marked by notches cut into trees lining the route. Some of the first roads were called plank roads because the surface was covered with wooden planks to keep vehicles out of the mud. The planks were stacked adjacent to the road when low spots in the road made it impassable.

Around 1900 the automobile clubs began to spring up all over America to meet the needs of these wealthy travelers. In 1906, half a dozen St. Joseph men, who thought the automobile might become more common in a few years, met to form an Automobile Club. The first President of the club was Huston Wyeth. Some of the members (all wealthy) were the proud owners of two cylinder Buicks.

In 1910, the group became interested in the development of the "Houn' Dog Trail" from St. Joseph to Hannibal. Step one was to devise some way of marking the trail.

The task of the Club was to mark the roads so people would not get lost and to see that bridges and approaches were strong enough to bear the weight of a car. In 1910, governments both local and federal were saying it wasn't their responsibility. Cars were toys of the wealthy, not that popular.

By 1910, Henry Ford was building 2,000 Model T's a month. The car originally sold for \$825, but dropped to

\$259 which made them affordable for almost everyone. Top speed was 45 mph, and they got 25 miles to the gallon. Gasoline sold for 20-cents a gallon then.

The St. Joseph Automobile Club began to realize that there was money to be made by attracting first-time motorists. They did a little research and found that there were actually two transcontinental highways being planned that St. Joseph might qualify for: The Pikes Peak Ocean-to-Ocean Highway and The Jefferson Highway.

The Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway Connected New York to San Francisco and called itself the Appian Way of America. It measured 3,564 miles in length. It also called itself The Street from Hell's Gate to the Golden Gate.

Markers consisted of poles painted with red and white bands, each 10 inches wide at cross roads, forks, and at frequent intervals. These markers were painted on telephone poles, fence posts, trees or rocks. Cities, towns, counties and states paid for the privilege of having the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway come through their town.

The charge was \$9 a mile per year at first. Later, inspired by the Federal Government's sale of Liberty Bonds, the group sold bonds to raise \$100,000 over five years by selling individual \$25 memberships in the rural districts and in the route's seven large cities.

The route pretty closely follows what is now Route 36 today. In 1919, the association formally adopted the name "The Pikes Peak Ocean-to-Ocean Highway - the Pershing Transportation Route," for this portion to take advantage of the tourism potential presented by General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe and America's greatest World War I hero name. General Pershing was born in Laclede, Mo., which is along the Highway 36 route.

In 1913, the Missouri State Legislature created the State Highway Department. In commemoration of Missouri's 100th year of statehood, the first bipartisan State Highway Commission was created by the Centennial Road Law in a special legislative session. This law shifted the focus of Missouri highway building from the local to the state level.

On December 1, 1921, Governor Arthur Hyde appointed Theodore Gary, of Macon, the Commission's first Chairman.

In 1925, the state highway agencies and U.S. Bureau of Public Road joined to create a new national marking system. In November 1926, the States approved the plan and began installing the U.S. Shields. That is when all of the other numbers and names were thrown out and Highway 36 was born. Trails associations fought this change, because whole sections of their trails would be abandoned and would no longer qualify for state and federal dollars to maintain them.

That brings us back to the late 1940s when the Highway 36 Assn. was formed. Tourism and four-laning was their emphasis and they started talking about a Chicago-to-Kansas City path that would bring both to the area.

The group's first effort to get noticed was the "Miss Perfect 36" contest. The search for a 36-26-36 spokesman for the highway had local, state and, finally, a national pageant. Measurements made up 50 percent of the points and there was a penalty of 10 percent for every inch of deviation. The other 50 percent was 10 percent for questions, 15 percent for personality, 10 percent on poise and the other 15 percent was for "composition." I think that was translated into "build."

Yup, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

The winner traveled the length of the highway promoting its use. She garnered headlines everywhere and met with governors and other bigwigs. She threw out the first pitch at baseball games and made a big splash in her

official costume: Shorts and a sweater.

The one that stands out in my mind is Sue Leist (now Parsons) of Macon. She won in 1953 when she was 18. She had placed second the year before.

The first national winner (1951) was Pat McKinley of Norton, Kansas. 1952's winner was Shirley Gall of St. Joseph. She won over 130 contestants in dozens of local contests.

The 1954 national contest was held in Macon and it was a seminal event in my young life. I was 14 and the fact that those college girls changed clothes in my room left me a Highway 36 fan forever!

I can recall many trips my dad, Tom, made to Kansas City to raise money and shore up support for the Chicago-KC effort. With the exception of one year, in the 60+ years since its inception, my dad or I have served the group as the administrative secretary/treasurer.

I sure wish he could have been here to see this day! The creation of a connectional highway system that provides four lanes from Chicago to Kansas City represents the accomplishment of a long held dream of many in this region. This achievement represents a major improvement in highway safety and provides the foundation for increased economic development along the entire U.S. Highway 36 corridor and beyond.

The I-72 designation was added in the 1990s when Hannibal's Tom Boland was able to get that designation for a few miles of Highway 36 in Hannibal. "Interstate" status won't be accomplished in my lifetime. The cost is prohibitive and the state has other priorities (I-70, for instance) that need attention first.

But the effort will continue.

Jack Briggs was raised in Macon, Mo., where the Briggs family owned the Macon Chronicle-Herald. He also did work as an economic developer in Macon County. Briggs is retired and now lives in Cameron, Mo., along U.S. 36.