Secrets of the Magic Valley

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Route 30

Chapter Eight

Route 30 from Burley to Bliss threads the Magic Valley with diners, drive-ins, scenic attractions, and cut-rate motels. A hundred miles of two-lane blacktop, the highway connects ten rectangular townships made magic by irrigation and platted along the approximate route of the old Oregon Trail. Drive west and backwards in time through an America lost to the clover-leafed freeway. No ice plant landscaping. No medians or emergency lanes. Three dollars buys a quarter-pound burger and coffee at the Snake River...
Lounge in Burley. Crinkle fries round out a foot-long hotdog at Crowley's in Twin Falls. Fill up the Ford in Filer. Turn north at the Black Bear Bar and dip through the Hagerman Valley where Bonneville boulders, farmers maintain, are petrified watermelons, where poplars planted as windbreaks run straight as meridian lines.

Paved from 1927 to 1935, the highway recalls a nation's infatuation with cars and car culture in an era when touring by motor coach became a leisurely alternative to coast-to-coast travel by rail. The railroad sacrificed scenery to velocity. Trains were "uncomfortable necessities which must be employed upon occasion because we live in an unimaginably commercial world," said Robert Sloss, a motor tourist. For author Theodore Dreiser, writing in 1916, the railroads had become "huge, clumsy affairs little suited to the temperamental needs and moods of the average human being." But motoring, being slower and more independent, reduced the
wonder of transcontinental travel to a human scale. "We are seeing the country for the first time," wrote Emily Post.

Already in 1914 a bus line out of Shoshone reached Twin Falls on an oiled highway. After Congress passed the 1921 Federal Highway Act creating the interstate system, tourists crossed west from Carey, Shoshone, Gooding, and Bliss on snowy U.S. 20 via Yellowstone National Park. To the south was the Lincoln Highway from New Jersey to San Francisco, an ocean-to-ocean connection that bypassed the Pacific Northwest. Idaho and Oregon demanded a northern all-weather interstate. Winter, the states protested, closed the switchback Yellowstone passes, and the park charged an admittance fee of $7.50 per car. The compromise hammered out by the U.S. Bureau of Roads was a spur off the Lincoln Highway called U.S. 30 North, now simply U.S. 30. Locally known as the Oregon Trail Highway, Route 30 joined "Mother Road" Route 66 and the well-traveled Lincoln Highway as one of three principal links coast-to-coast.

Before a steel bridge linked Heyburn and Burley in 1955,
motorists from the east entered the Magic Valley on a vibrating timber truss. Burley—a farm town named for its rail agent and chartered in 1906—had been the empty intersection of the Oregon Short Line and the gold road to California before the U.S. Reclamation Service built Minidoka Dam. A processing and shipping center for sugar beets and potatoes, the Burley area in 1942 lured thousands of Mexican braceros, Japanese American field workers from Camp Minidoka, and even German prisoners of war. In 1947, however, city fathers warned that the future would be stunted if Congress failed to green Cassia County with water stored by the dam. "What is needed is 50,000 more votes to make the folks back in Washington bring pressure on the reclamation service," protested a
city official. "We need more land under water," he said, "to produce the food the nation needs." Still, the town with its motels and neon Main Street buzzed with automobiles. The 1950 census showed that 5,924 Burley residents owned 5,200 motor vehicles, nearly twice the national average. Traffic fatalities kept pace. Statewide numbers showed an astounding death-per-mileage rate of seven fatal collisions per one hundred-million-highway miles.

Rail crossings and hairpin turns made Route 30 especially deadly in the postwar forties. Glenn Buckendorf, a high school senior in 1947, remembers a hazard called Deadman's Corner between Filer and Buhl. "That was before the corners were banked or contoured," says

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Hagerman poplars planted as windbreaks characterize the so-called "Mormon landscape" of island townships in checkerboard fields. Right: coffee, 2 bits in Bliss. Left: teardrop streamlining of the 1950 Ford featured "fingertip steering" and "magic-action brakes."
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Buckendorf. "People were always trying to pass a tractor or hay truck. Where the highway turned, some [people] kept going straight."

Buckendorf, whose father opened Buckendorf's Tire Service off the highway in Buhl, recalls seeing Gene Autry and Gone With the Wind for a nickel in the 1927 Ramona Theater—now a restaurant and the last remaining Moorish-style movie house in the state. In 1942, wartime gas and tire rationing kept teenagers off the highway. After 1945, however, "farm kids had plenty of cars." One of the first drive-in type restaurants was a hamburger place called Papenfuss, a high school hangout. Buckendorf also recalls drive-in movies on Moon Glow Road.

Buhl, the hometown of trout farming, thrived in the postwar era. So did county seat Twin Falls. Although a Hooverville called Shanty Town and the local custom of rolling junk cars off steep cliffs had long since tarnished the magic landscape, World War II and the construction of Camp Minidoka flooded the city with jobs. With a population of 17,000 in 1947, Twin boasted $190 million in agricultural exports. Wool, dairy, wheat, barley, fruit, potatoes, seed beans, and abundant fishing and boating made the farm hub "Idaho's bright spot for vacations or vocations," according to a booster's brochure. Car dealers milked the boom from glassy auto showrooms. Herriott's Auto Sales on Second
Avenue had more than 200 feet of plate glass windows and a car freight elevator to a second floor repair shop. Gooding Motors sold Chevrolets from a Main Street palace with curbside gas pumps.

Route 30 along Fourth Avenue sprouted boxlike, deck-roofed, Moderne-style diners and canopied service stations. In 1957, less than a year after President Dwight Eisenhower signed a $27 billion nationwide master plan for uniform superhighways, Twin Falls was congested enough to couple Route 30 southbound via Second Avenue and northbound via Main.

Federal aid for Idaho highways quadrupled to $20 million annually during the 1950s. The 1956 Interstate Highway Act, among the most ambitious public works ever attempted, committed the government to pay ninety percent of 41,000 miles of toll-free roads. Engineers imagined "magic motorways" with free-flowing traffic diverted around or away from gas-pump towns. Freeways, proponents believed, would boost the efficiency of the American economy and arrest urban decay. But technology's progress has never been seamless in Idaho's fractured valley. Broken like the fossil record and progressing in fits and jumps, the
interstate system turned the Malta-to-Burley-to-Bliss leg of old Route 30 into a "local service" highway under the care of the state. Work on Interstate 80 (now called I-84) stalled between Glenns Ferry and Hammet. Not until the 1970s could the freeway driver race past the Magic Valley. Not until 1981, when Caldwell retired its last interstate stoplight, could a driver span the desert without breaking for Idaho towns.

"Thanks to the interstate highway system," said journalist Charles Kuralt, "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."

But not like old Route 30. Still a remnant of a roadside culture lost elsewhere to standardization, the small-town highway reveals secrets of the Magic Valley that freeway travelers will never know.