

## Van Wert CVB looking for Lincoln Highway stories

Written by V.W. Conventions and Visitors Bureau  
Thursday, January 17, 2013 2:09 PM -

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The year was 1912. The American automobile industry was in its infancy, having been started in 1891 when John Lambert built his Buckeye gasoline buggy in the small village of Ohio City. Henry Ford began building cars in 1896 and started his own company, the Ford Motor Company in 1903. Nine years later, those who could afford to buy an automobile did so more for the novelty than practicality. In 1912, there were almost no good roads to speak of in the United States. The relatively few miles of improved road were only around towns and cities. A road was "improved" if it was graded; one was lucky to have gravel or brick. Asphalt and concrete were yet to come. Most of the 2.5 million miles of roads were just dirt: bumpy and dusty in dry weather, impassable in wet weather. Worse yet, the roads didn't really lead anywhere. They spread out aimlessly from the center of the settlement. To get from one settlement to another, it was much easier to take the train.

Living in Indianapolis, Indiana, Carl Fisher developed a plan that wouldn't go away. Fisher was man of ideas. His Indianapolis Motor Speedway was a success, and he would later turn a swamp into one of the greatest beach resorts – Miami Beach, Florida. However, in 1912, he dreamed of another grand idea: a highway spanning the continent, from coast to coast. He called his idea the Coast-to-Coast Rock Highway.

The gravel road would cost about \$10 million. Communities along the route would provide the equipment and in return would receive free materials and a place along America's first transcontinental highway. The highway would be finished in time for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition and would run from the exposition's host city, San Francisco, to New York City.

To fund this scheme, Fisher asked for cash donations from auto manufacturers and accessory companies of one percent of their revenues. The public could become members of the highway organization for a donation of \$5. Henry Ford refused to support the plan, but the country had become so enthusiastic about the highway that Fisher would not give up. Two men from the automobile industry who pledged money to the project were Frank Seiberling, president of Goodyear, and Henry Joy, president of the Packard Motor Car Company. It was Joy's idea to name the highway after Abraham Lincoln. Congress was considering spending \$1.7 million on a marble memorial to Lincoln; but Joy thought a good road across the country would be a better tribute to the late president.

And so it was that in 1913, construction of the transcontinental highway began. Several different routes were mapped out, but the final decision rested on directness. By bypassing many scenic

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attractions and larger cities along the way, narrow winding roadways and congestion would be avoided. This thinking brought the Lincoln Highway right to our community.

In 2013, the nation will observe the Lincoln Highway's 100th birthday. There will be celebrations throughout the year in communities all along its 5,869 miles. Van Wert will be no exception. There will be hundreds of classic cars in three tours coming through our city in May, June and July, and we are planning our own local celebration to mark the occasion.

A volunteer committee made up of the Van Wert Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Main Street Van Wert, representatives of the Van Wert County Historical Society and interested community members had started to work on our celebration plans. One of the projects we are working on is a booklet tracing the history of the Lincoln Highway through Van Wert County. We are asking for the public's help in locating photographs of homes, farms, businesses, and other buildings found along the Lincoln Highway between the years 1915 and 1930. Some of you may have family photos with some of these buildings in the background, or perhaps your family once owned a farm or business along the Lincoln Highway and you might still have an old photo tucked away somewhere that could be used.

We urge you to look in boxes or trunks or drawers where old pictures could be stored and maybe forgotten, but now can be used for a very worthwhile project. We would also be interested in stories you may remember concerning events that happened along the Lincoln Highway during this time period.

Photographs and stories may be shared at the offices of the Convention and Visitors Bureau and Main Street Van Wert located at 136 E. Main Street. Or you can us at 419-238-3978 or 419-238-6911. All photographs will be returned.