

Group draws St. Joe into Jefferson Highway effort

By Ken Newton News-Press Now

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Loring Miller of Leon, Iowa, left, and John Ross of Bethany, Missouri, stand in front a mural on a downtown building in Bethany. Both men have been involved in promoting the Jefferson Highway in Missouri communities.



The Jefferson Highway logo can be found painted on utility poles in Bethany, Missouri. It shows the path of the historic route through the Harrison County town.



This photograph, dated about a century ago, shows the front of the national headquarters of the Jefferson Highway and the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway, located at Fifth and Jules streets in St. Joseph.



Members of the Jefferson Highway Association want signs like this to promote the route in area communities.

The man who would serve as St. Joseph's mayor, George E. McIninch, spearheaded the "good roads" idea of a century ago. When the big idea got too big, escaping a local grasp, he acknowledged the inevitable.

McIninch, a visionary and businessman, presided over the Jefferson Highway Association, a group headquartered in St. Joseph and dedicated to the hard-surface road planned to run from New Orleans to Winnipeg, Canada, and right through his hometown.

At an April 1929 meeting, with the organization's future fading in the light of redesignated federal routes, McIninch announced the publication of 20,000 maps that played up the highway named for the nation's third president.

"Despite the present-day system of number roads," he said, "sentimental and historical significance attaches to the name of Jefferson Highway."

The numbers had their way. The Jefferson Highway, a creation of broad initiative but local cooperation, dissolved into history.

In St. Joseph, however, a comeback appears to be mounting, at least with its memory. The modern incarnation of the Jefferson Highway Association will hold its national meeting in St. Joseph next spring — April 26 to 28 — to mark the centennial of the headquarters being relocated to this city.

Along with this, a push begins to promote St. Joseph's role in the development of the historic highway, which the association wants to elevate to a status on par with Route 66, also running through Missouri and recognized as a scenic byway along part of its nearly 2,500 miles. Glenn E. Smith, a resident of Muskogee, Oklahoma, and current president of the association, visited St. Joseph recently to talk with city officials about the coming meeting and the group's work.

He cited a remark of a highway proponent in the 1920s in explaining the interest in Northwest Missouri.

"One of the board members made the speech that he hoped everyone would remember the pioneers that started the highways and the work that they had put in," Smith said during his visit. "We're talking, almost 100 years later, that we want St. Joe to remember those highway pioneers."

Pioneering spirit

John Ross has reasons, personal and civic, for studying so intently the Jefferson Highway and how it impacted his hometown of Bethany, Missouri, in Harrison County.

"My great-uncle was one of the bankers that helped start this Jefferson Highway," he said, pointing along a community street that had been part of the highway.

The idea for the 2,300-mile highway grew from a need to better move military vehicles in the years leading to World War I. President Woodrow Wilson supported a nondirt road system that would facilitate national defense and, by extension, serve to enhance commerce.

Communities formed "365-Day Road Clubs" to organize the improvements, which did not necessarily include paving; gravel and other surfaces qualified, anything to hold off the mud. Farmers and local business people did the actual work, horses pulling the graders.

"It was built by communities and landowners along the way, and I think that's a lot more of a pioneering spirit," Smith said.

The route progressed along property lines, meaning the map showed the highway as a long series of right angles.

In Bethany, remnants of the Jefferson Highway remain, including a former tourist camp, its stone-supported shelter intact, in the current Memorial Park. The Allen Fountain in the town, at 22nd Street and Oakland Avenue, still stands, as it did roadside for anyone traveling on the Jefferson Highway.

Bethany adopted the words “We Do” as its town slogan, a nod to the enterprise of its citizens. Ross, a Lions Club member who wants to spread the word throughout District 26-M4, has been instrumental in the addition of the Jefferson Highway logos — the blended JH initials set against a field of blue, to wooden utility poles in town.

An economic reward awaits from the historical connection, he said.

“If we get this brought back to our communities, then you’ve got something for people to drive through and see,” Ross said. “It will bring business people back into your town. Interstates took it away from our towns. Now it’s time to bring it back.”

Tourists welcome

In 1918, the general manager of the Jefferson Highway Association, a businessman named James Douglas Clarkson of Carthage, Missouri, moved the organization’s headquarters from Des Moines to St. Joseph. It landed in a building at Fifth and Jules streets, just across from the Buchanan County Courthouse.

With a sign out front that said “Tourists Welcome,” the facility also hosted the headquarters, and also under Clarkson’s guidance, of the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway, an east-west intersecting route that ran from New York to Los Angeles.

“At that point, J.D. Clarkson managed the longest hard-surface roads in the United States,” said Loring Miller, a Leon, Iowa, resident and a member of the Jefferson Highway Association board. “The general headquarters for both roadways were right here in St. Joseph.”

For that reason, he explained, St. Joseph becomes “a nice step” in the effort to get a broader recognition for their cause. Local residents could soon see the markings of the route that once led to hard-surface roads in the region.

“That signage is the visual that keeps bringing to the forefront the original highway and how St. Joseph played a major role,” Miller said.

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