

April 30, 2007

Hello, Steam Team:

Until after World War I in this country, those wanting to make an extended trip on rubber tires had to rely on the Blue Book published by the AAA or something similar to know where they were going. Without numbered highways, it wasn't easy. In the 1920's, however, a system of numbering for major highways was devised by Federal authorities (probably in cooperation with AAA) and these roads obtained U.S. Route numbers. Although the U.S. is not a perfect rectangle, nor are its major cities equally-spaced, it was decided that the numbering should make some geographical sense, and that it did.

North-south major roads would bear odd numbers, and east-west roads even numbers. For example, U.S. Route 1, extending along the east coast from Maine to Florida touched every coastal state except Delaware (it passed through Philadelphia, Media, Kennett Square, and Oxford, PA, enroute to Baltimore). West of U.S. Route 1, north-south highways had higher odd numbers, terminating with U.S. Route 101 running close to the Pacific from San Diego to the Canadian border. U.S. 3, mostly in New Hampshire, went straight north from Boston and followed the Merrimac River. U.S. 5 went from New Haven up the Connecticut Valley, U.S. 7 went north from Norwalk, CT, through the Berkshires and Vermont to the Canadian border, U.S. 9 north from New York up the Hudson (and south through New Jersey to Cape May), etc. U.S. 13 ran north-south through Delaware from Claymont to Delmar and continued south to the Carolinas. U.S. 25 was the "Dixie Highway", running from Detroit (if not from Sault Ste. Marie) to Florida.

Numbering on east-west highways started at the north, with U.S. 10 starting west of the Great Lakes and going to Seattle. Even closer to the Canadian border was U.S. 2, going across northern New England and picking up again on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In this area U.S. 30 was also called the Lincoln Highway (which had been established a few years before numbering), starting at Atlantic City and ending at Astoria, OR, at the mouth of the Columbia River. U.S. 40 also began in the east at Atlantic City, crossing the New Castle-Pennsville Ferry, proceeding through Baltimore and ending in San Francisco. From Baltimore to the Mississippi River, it was known as the "Old National Road". U.S. 90 crossed the south, close to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mexican border. Important roads of shorter length usually had numbers between the "even 10's" (U.S. 6 started on Cape Cod and ran to the Cleveland area- possibly farther west as well). Many states soon followed suit with numbering, and state highways usually were numbered on a somewhat standard system. In many areas of the country, county and township roads have less prominent numbers, very helpful on steam car tours.

When Interstate Highways came along in the 1960's, numbering was easier, as there were not as many of them, and all were usually high-speed long-distance roads. North-south Interstates still carried odd numbers, but I-5 was in the far west and I-95 in the east, with "the 5's" representing, in most cases, the important north-south through highways. There are exceptions like I-81, which runs from the Thousand Island Bridge over the St. Lawrence to New Orleans. Even-numbered Interstates had the lowest numbers like I-10 crossing the south from coast-to-coast, and the highest numbers crossing the north (I-90 starts in Boston and ends in Seattle). I-80 crosses northern Pennsylvania, I-76 is the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and I-70 runs from Baltimore and Washington west to St. Louis, Denver, Salt Lake City and San Francisco. If you like geography, the understanding of the numbering of our major roads is great fun. Unfortunately, driving on them becomes less enjoyable as traffic increases, and it is indeed!

Last week was highly successful, thanks to our great cadre of volunteers. All worked hard to pull everything together for the first event of the year at Auburn Heights yesterday, April 29. The Wilmington Friends School “charter” netted 166 visitors over 2 years of age, and the perfect weather contributed to an enjoyable day for all. 24 volunteers worked the day itself, with several more contributing to getting ready. The steam train, the Mountain Wagon, the electric car, the electric trains, and the popcorn machine ran flawlessly. It was a good “test run” for our public event next Sunday, May 6. The Museum, although not finished, has a fresh look with a newly-painted floor where it shows, a new closet, and some special new exhibits. We plan to make further improvements in the next few weeks. The grounds people have also been busy sprucing up and the earth has come alive. The rest rooms have been painted and thoroughly cleaned with some new fixtures.

Off-site happenings last week and today included the '37 Packard driven by the Novaks (along with the Hoovers' 1940 Packard) participating in “Packard Day at Winterthur” on Saturday, my carrying about 10 dignitaries of the Kennett Land Trust to a dedication at “State Line Woods” in the Mountain Wagon, also on Saturday, and a trip in the Model 87 by Bob Reilly, Greg Landrey, and myself through the Winterthur property today, laying out the final route of the Steam Car Tour on June 18. Next Saturday, May 5, we expect to take the Models 76 and 87 to Dover to participate in “Old Dover Days”. Last year about 500 rode in these cars on a similar occasion. We hope for a good attendance at our May 6 public event. Thanks to all who have helped promote it, and to those who still have time to pick up flyers and distribute them. Remember to tune into Channel 12 between 6:00 and 7:00 P.M. each evening for our “ad” about next Sunday’s event.

Next week, I’ll talk more about the upcoming Steam Car Tour.

Tom