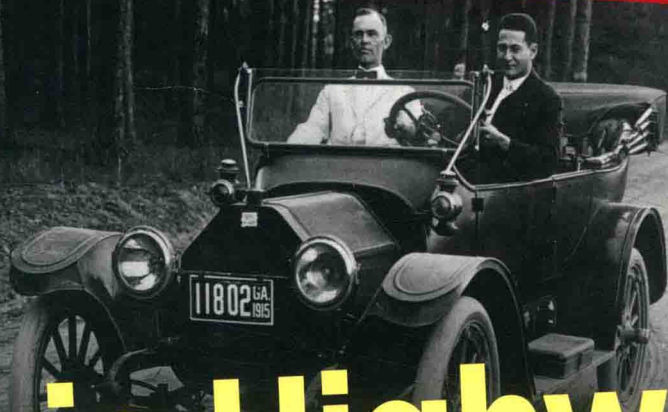


TAMMY INGRAM



# Dixie Highway

Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930



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Making of the Modern South, 1900–1930

The University of North Carolina Press ■ CHAPEL HILL

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# Dixie Highway

# Dixie

Road Building and the

*For my mother*

■ ■ ■

*and in loving memory of my father*

## Acknowledgments

I learned how to drive on the back roads of south Georgia, roads that in the 1980s were not entirely unlike the rutted dirt roads farmers had navigated by horse and wagon a century earlier. Even before I could see over the steering wheel of my dad's old one-ton flatbed Ford, I explored the mostly unmarked network of narrow dirt, gravel, and paved county roads around our farm. When farmers passed me in their trucks and tractors, they waved. Once, I encountered the sheriff at a four-way-stop, but he just laughed and wagged his finger. Farmers' kids had special privileges in Seminole County, a sparsely populated peanut- and cotton-farming community where long country roads were the lifelines connecting farm families like mine to markets, schools, hospitals, and each other. While this may not explain entirely my decision years later to write about road building in the early twentieth century, I am certain that it helped me to appreciate how important roads were to the people I write about in this book.

My intellectual journey into road building began in graduate school at Yale, when the North Caroliniana Society at UNC-Chapel Hill granted me an Archie K. Davis Fellowship to begin my dissertation research. Thanks to Harry McKown there for sharing his inexhaustible knowledge of the Good Roads Movement with me and for persuading me that this was a topic worth pursuing. For the next several years, grants and fellowships from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale and the Yale Graduate School supported my research and gave me time to think and write. I am grateful to George Miles and the entire archival staff at the Beinecke for their help, and also to the archivists and librarians at Yale's Sterling Memorial Library. Archivists at the National Archives in College

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Angela Pulley Hudson and I began our academic careers together at UGA and then Yale and both ended up writing about roads. This surprised us both but shouldn't have, since we hammered out the basic ideas behind our dissertations over dozens of happy hours in New Haven. I hold Angie up as not only a scholarly example but also a personal one. I'm proud to be her colleague and friend, and I am thankful that she is part of my extended family.

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## Introduction

This is a history of the Dixie Highway, a hugely ambitious route built between 1915 and 1926 that proved the promise of the automobile age and helped inspire a federal highway program. Made up of hundreds of short, rough, local roads stitched together into a continuous route, the Dixie Highway looped nearly 6,000 miles from Lake Michigan all the way to Miami Beach and back again. It was originally conceived as a single tourist road to steer wealthy motorists from cities such as Chicago and Indianapolis through the South on their way to fancy vacation resorts in south Florida. Yet within a few short years, the Dixie Highway became a full-fledged interstate highway system—the first in the country’s history—and served tourists, businessmen, farmers, and everyday travelers alike. By eroding distinctions between old farm-to-market roads and new automobile tourist highways, the Dixie Highway galvanized broad public support for modern state and federally funded roads and highways in the twentieth century.

The life span of the Dixie Highway was brief but exceptional. It began as an experiment by auto industry pioneers and their allies in the Progressive Era Good Roads Movement, a loose confederation of individuals and organizations committed to improving the nation’s roadways. When the route was first proposed in 1914, the only good roads in the nation were in the urban Northeast, where denser populations, shorter distances, and market necessities had produced fine city streets and passable intercity routes in the nineteenth century. Elsewhere over the vast continent, atrocious roads administered by county officials and inadequately maintained by convicts or statute labor stifled the economy and isolated Americans from one another. The southern United States,

increasingly populated and nurturing nascent industry, found itself imprisoned by often impassible roads that linked farms to only the nearest railroad depot. By bridging North and South, the Dixie Highway promised to both end the region's isolation and serve as a model for modern long-distance automobile routes. In many ways, it was successful. By the mid-1920s, it was the backbone of thousands of miles of new and integrated state and federal highway systems. Although it soon faded from memory, the Dixie Highway left an indelible mark on the modern highway system.

The Dixie Highway served as a model not only for highway reform but for political reform as well. Building public thoroughfares, even ones planned and administered by private organizations like the Dixie Highway Association, required financial and administrative resources beyond the means of most local road commissioners. In the Dixie Highway's brief lifetime, road construction and maintenance passed from the sole jurisdiction of local officials into the hands of state and federal highway experts. And what began as a project to build an interregional tourist route exploded into a national dialogue over the politics of state power, the role of business in government, and the influence of ordinary citizens.

In the South, where both roads and politics served to isolate the region from the rest of the nation, these transformations were the most pronounced and consequential. This book argues that road building was a crucial linchpin in the transition to the modern South, a transition that shaped the region's political institutions as much as its infrastructure. As the nation began to shed its nineteenth-century past—and with it, a unilateral dependence on railroads for long-distance transportation—road building propelled the country, and especially the South, into the modern age. As the first major interstate route to bridge North and South during a time when most roads were built by local governments for local use, the Dixie Highway was far more than just a road. It symbolized the possibilities and limitations of the American can-do spirit in an increasingly complex world. Its very existence both inspired and reflected the sweeping changes under way in the South and the nation.

This book also challenges the prevailing assumption that southerners, who were historically suspicious of federal government intervention and loathe to pay for public works projects (which often disproportionately depended upon farmers' property taxes), automatically eschewed "big government." During the Progressive Era, they recruited it, shaped it, and enjoyed its fruits. Nowhere was federal intervention more conspicuous,

or southern interest in it greater, than in road building. This book explores that process by showing how southerners linked hands with midwestern automobile men in the Good Roads Movement and lobbied government bureaucrats to build the modern roads and highways that county governments could not build.

Road building played a decisive role in the transition to the modern South, but that transition occurred with a series of twists and turns. As the power required to build long-distance highways became concentrated in the hands of state and federal officials, the decision-making power of local people was diminished and a populist backlash arose. This response to federalization, coupled with the onset of the Great Depression and then World War II, stalled significant progress in road building in the South for the next three decades. Ultimately, it took a soldier who had witnessed the Dixie Highway experiment while stationed in Georgia during World War I to revive the highway program in the 1950s. Dwight D. Eisenhower never forgot the lessons that the wartime highway crusade taught him. The interstate highway system is his legacy, but in a way it is the Dixie Highway's legacy as well.

■ ■ ■

Despite its importance, the Dixie Highway has been largely forgotten in popular memory and all but ignored by historians, except as an anecdote related to early auto tourism and the origins of roadside architecture.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, very little at all has been written about roads in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A few writers have examined the New York-to-San Francisco Lincoln Highway, initiated just a year before the Dixie Highway, but none have engaged the larger political or social complexities of road building in that era.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the scarcity of historical studies of early road building stands a wealth of fine scholarship on southern Progressivism and the emergence of the modern South. Yet, despite their significant impact on the political and economic developments of that period, roads are not addressed in any depth in these works.<sup>3</sup>

Although the stakes were higher for the Good Roads Movement than for other policy changes or reform movements that required fewer resources and less political reorganization, it too has received remarkably little scholarly attention. A few studies have explored the supposed tensions between the urban bicyclists who founded the Good Roads Movement and the farmers who later joined it. A handful of good articles focus



on local road-improvement efforts in rural areas of the South and West. These works comprise a small but fine body of scholarship, but none link the history of road building during that era to the larger significance of the Progressive reform agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Howard Preston's excellent *Dirt Roads to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885–1935* is a notable exception, but it diverges from *Dixie Highway* in important ways. Preston argues that good roads “lost their significance as a reform issue” after the Good Roads Movement was taken over by New South boosters such as John Asa Rountree, “wolves in sheep’s clothing” who promoted tourist highways at the expense of farm-to-market routes. *Dixie Highway* argues against this traditional, divisive view of road building and shows that farmers and businessmen, northerners and southerners were for many years united in their support of the Good Roads Movement. This is key to understanding not only how such an ambitious interregional project like the Dixie Highway was completed but also why bold, expensive new state and federal highway legislation proliferated during the Progressive Era. And while Preston explores the ways numerous new roads facilitated modernization and replaced “the region’s cultural identity with a wholesale, predictable sameness,” *Dixie Highway* eschews an emphasis on sweeping cultural changes in favor of a close look at the political and social consequences of modern highway construction, using the story of the Dixie Highway—which Preston addresses only briefly—to explore the complicated interactions of local, state, and federal highway agencies and ordinary citizens.<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming majority of historians who have written about the highway revolution have focused on the Eisenhower interstate system of the 1950s. Many others have written about the early automobiles that fueled the Good Roads Movement but have ignored the dirt roads on which those cars ran—or tried to run. While both of these topics are important to the history of American transportation and southern modernization, the heavy focus on them has obscured the central role that roads played in some of the most important political debates and reform movements of the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

*Dixie Highway* therefore fills a significant void in the historiographies of southern Progressivism, modernization, and transportation. By using one of the most successful Good Roads Movement projects as a narrative device, this book illuminates the debates that shaped Progressive Era politics in the South as well as the development of the modern