



THE OLD PAUL'S OIL CO. Phillips 66 station in Oberlin was a landmark on the route across northern Kansas from its earliest years. The building became Petro Pal when owned by Decatur Co-op Association and now sits at the Decatur County Last Indian Raid Museum in downtown Oberlin.

U.S. 36 Association marks centennial year

Booster group one of few left from earlier day

The U.S. Highway 36 Association, one of the few highway organizations from the early part of the 20th century that survives today, is celebrating its centennial this month.

That's something of an oddity, because the actual designation of U.S. 36 dates only to about 1927, but road boosters across the state were busy before highways had numbers.

Today, roads, highways and freeways are developed, maintained and marked by state and federal agencies, but that wasn't the case in 1913. Road enthusiasts, auto clubs, businessmen and entrepreneurs with visions for a road system benefiting commerce and tourism led the charge.

Today's Highway 36 Association grew out of that era and traces its founding to a few pioneer highway boosters who saw a shining future for motor commerce across Kansas. Most prominent among them, perhaps, was A.Q. Miller, editor and owner of *The Belleville Telescope*.

On March 21, 1913, representatives from northern-tier Kansas counties, including businessmen, auto-club enthusiasts and railroad representatives, met in Belleville to form the Rock Island Highway Association, so named because the proposed route would parallel that railroad for many miles. The first officers were president, Dr. C.W. Cole, Norton; vice-president, C.F. Travelute, Marysville; and secretary-treasurer, Mr. Miller.

On Sept. 21, 1913, Kansas Gov. George H. Hodges, D.R. Watkins, W.S. Gearhardt, Mr. Miller and officials from the Blue Book Corp. left the Robidoux Hotel in downtown St. Joseph, Mo., in a two-car convoy, destined for Denver. Their mission was to map a route across Kansas.

Mr. Miller was in charge of publicity. Many towns held ceremonies and welcoming parties greeted the governor and these highway pioneers. Four days later, hub caps crusted in mud, they arrived in Denver, sharing stories of the adventure with greeters and reporters.

Other highway associations had been formed, dating back to 1910. The grand vision was to build the first transcontinental highway from New York to San Francisco. Mergers and reor-

ganization resulted in formation of the Pike's Peak Ocean-to-Ocean Highway Association on March 18, 1914, at a meeting in St. Joseph. An account of this event appeared in the May 1914 issue of *Better Roads & Streets*.

Incorporated in the new groups were the Springfield-Hannibal Highway Association, through Illinois; the Hannibal-St. Joseph Cross State Highway Association, through Missouri; the Rock Island Highway Association, through Kansas; the Lincoln Highway Association through Colorado; and the Utah Division of Pike's Peak Ocean to Ocean.

World War I slowed progress but did not deter the grand vision. In his lifetime, Mr. Miller served on the boards of three highway associations: U.S. 81 Highway (also known as the Meridian Highway from Winnipeg, Canada, to Mexico City; U.S. 36 and Pike's Peak.

The July 1920 issue of the American Automobile Association's *American Motorist* reported, "Pike's Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway: the street from Hell's Gate to the Golden Gate".... is the superlative scenic route. It leads to places of beauty and grandeur; it gives expression to the phrase 'See America!'"

In 1924 the highway's western terminus was changed to Los Angeles, whereupon the June edition of the *Citizens Good Roads Association* magazine wrote: "The PPOO is the central scenic route of the United States ... it's the shortest transcontinental highway in the United States. Roughly following the 40th parallel The highway runs westward in almost a straight line." However, the "highway that couldn't make up its mind" slowly disappeared from national awareness.

Through the 1920s and '30s, state and federal governments got more involved in road building. By 1925, route names, overlapping roads, starting and end points were found to be based on payment of dues and not on solid engineering.

State highway agencies, with approval of federal officials, joined to create a new marking system, the U.S. numbered highway system. The plans were approved and by 1926, U.S. Route

shields were being installed. Today, U.S. 36 starts in Indianapolis, as it has since 1936, but has been extended beyond Denver to Boulder and Rocky Mountain National Park.

While its first 40 years were focused on road location and creating a good route across Kansas, in the past 60 years the U.S. 36 Highway Association has kept up a dialog with Kansas highway officials, promoted the use of U.S. 36 for commerce, and published literature that provides readers with historical and tourist information.

The organization became one of the most efficient and best-financed groups in the nation. The operating budget is raised through memberships. The money provides for a one-person office, materials used to promote and publicize the road, paint poles, erect markers and produce tourism folders.

In 1968, the association filed for status as a not-for-profit corporation in Kansas.

Among other things, the group has paid for signs directing travelers to the route and advocating the use of U.S. 36. In 2010, the Docking Institute at Fort Hays State University was commissioned to conduct a \$48,000 feasibility study for widening the route to four lanes across the state. In addition, the association has been visible at the annual Kansas Sampler Festival.

Its most widely known program, however, is a boost of business across Kansas, the annual "U.S. 36 Treasure Hunt" Border-to-Border Garage Sale launched in September 2006. The event has grown to attract national and international attention. Towns along the route organize their own activities, all coordinated by the statewide group. In 2012, Kansas from Elwood to St. Francis and 26 towns in between participated. This year's event will be Sept. 20 to 22.

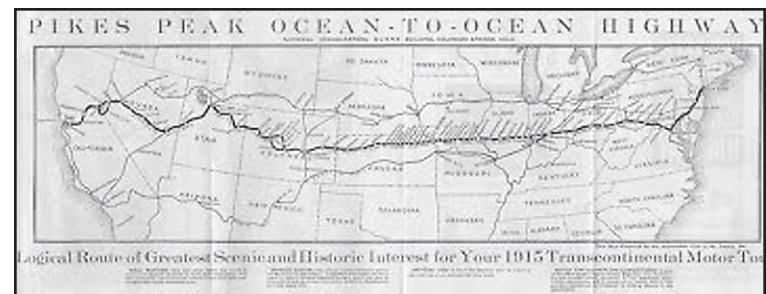
The Kansas Legislative Research Department says only a handful of highway associations remain active. U.S. 36 has more than 500 members across Kansas, with a scattering in Colorado and Missouri. It continues to promote travel and special events, encourage the upkeep and improvement of the highway and advance the economic well-being of the rural communities along the way.

Thursday, leaders of the group were in Topeka for ceremonies including a resolution adopted by the Legislature recognizing the association for the anniversary, and a meeting with Gov. Sam Brownback. Sen. Elaine Bowers of Concordia and Rep. Sharon Schwartz of Washington spearheaded the effort in the Legislature. Attending the various events were association President Chad Kramer of Marysville, directors Sarah Kessinger of Marysville (and formerly of Oberlin) and Jeff Hofaker of Phillipsburg, and Reps. Travis Couture-Lovelady, Ward Cassidy, Troy Waymaster, Randy Garber and Jerry Henry.

This report was pieced together from information provided by Christiane "Criquet" Cole of Phillipsburg, field representative for the U.S. 36 Association, and other sources.



A SIGN AT THE KANSAS-COLORADO LINE near Kanorado (above) informed travelers that Omaha was 405 miles and Kansas City 492 via the Rock Island Highway, much of which is now U.S. 36, and other roads to the east. A map from a promotional piece (below) shows the route of the former Pike's Peak Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, a predecessor of today's U.S. 36 —Kansas Historical Society



LEADERS OF THE U.S. HIGHWAY 36 Association were in Topeka on Thursday for ceremonies marking the group's centennial. Sen. Elaine Bowers of Concordia (center) presented a framed copy of a Senate resolution to President Chad Kramer of Marysville (left), board member Sarah Kessinger of Marysville (and formerly of Oberlin) and Christiane 'Criquet' Cole of Phillipsburg, field representative.