

# Pathfinder

NEWS MAGAZINE

March 5, 1952

## AAA: 50 years on the road and service all the way

*Motor clubs solve troubles for millions*



Bureau of Public Roads

**Early hot-rodder.** *Harebrained stunts the 1900s—just as today.*

**A frantic call** came in one night to the American Automobile Association's affiliated club in San Francisco.

His wife, the caller said, was expecting a baby and had to get to a hospital. But he couldn't start his car.

The driver of the emergency truck streaked to the rescue and started the car—by doing what the prospective father in his excitement had forgotten to do. He turned on the ignition switch.

In St. Petersburg, Fla., the AAA found for an embarrassed motorist the false teeth she had lost, and in Vancouver, Wash., it removed a hitch-hiking mouse from a woman's car.

In the Midwest the AAA helped a farmer lift a cow from a well, and in Washington, D. C., its lock expert opened a car door for fishermen who wanted to eat their catch before it spoiled.

For the 750 affiliated clubs and branches of the Triple A, attending to the motoring needs of 3.5 million members, such unusual services were all in the day's—or night's—work.

They were performed in addition to the more prosaic services: the fixing of flat tires, the replenishing of empty gas tanks, the hauling of wrecked cars from ditches and the mapping of routes from Guatemala to Alaska.

In 1950 the AAA clubs spent \$6 million for 3.2 million emergency road service calls. They held contracts with almost 20,000 garages employing 87,000 mechanics and operating 34,000 trucks.

This week the AAA, a pioneer in the fight for good roads, sound motoring laws and highway safety, rounds out 50 years of "service to the motorist and the nation."

To honor the AAA and the school safety patrols, the Post Office Department issued 115 million 3¢ blue commemorative stamps. The first-day sale on March 4 was assigned to Chicago where the AAA was born in 1902.

In that year America's 79 million people owned only 23,000 automobiles—about one to 3,500.

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## AAA: 50 years

The horseless carriage, in the popular mind, was still the rich man's toy or the wasteful hobby of the crank or town tinkerer. Its devotees were referred to as the "automobility" and New York's wealthy owners and their liveried chauffeurs were parodied in the humorous magazine *Life* in a verse ending:

*Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to kill and die.*

*Into Fifth Avenue*

*Rode the Four Hundred.*

The automobile, which took more than a million lives by 1952, already was piling up statistics of death.

**Legal Barriers.** Cities barred the smelly, clanking, new-fangled contraption from their quiet parks, limited their speed to from 4 to 10 miles an hour, and proposed that they be preceded by a man with a warning red flag by day and a red lantern by night.

Teamsters, their horses frightened by the new noise of the automobile, swore at it. Livery stable proprietors refused it a roof. When automobiles broke down, which was more often than not, crowds jeered the hapless operator. "Get a horse!" became the common cry.

The early motorist needed the hide of an elephant, the patience of Job, the strength of Hercules and the mechanical cunning of Daedalus. The self-starter, the convenient service station and public acceptance were still a long way off.

Only the hardiest, equipping themselves to rough it, ventured beyond city limits. In all the length and breadth of the land there were, outside the towns, only 173 miles of well-paved roads.

In addition to the hazards of the unmarked roads—they were quagmires after a rain and rutted, dust-choked trails in dry spells—the pioneer at the wheel faced speed traps and the hostility of the farmer whose horses he scared.

One community proposed an ordinance to require the motorist approaching a turn to toot a horn, ring a bell, fire a gun and send up three bombs as a signal to any who might be around the bend. Another decreed that if a horse refused to pass an automobile, the operator must "take the machine apart as rapidly as possible and conceal the parts in the grass." Some places barred motorists altogether; others so hemmed him with restrictions as to immobilize him.



Automobile Manufacturers Association

**Dobbin's triumph.** The horseless carriage often needed the horse in the old days.

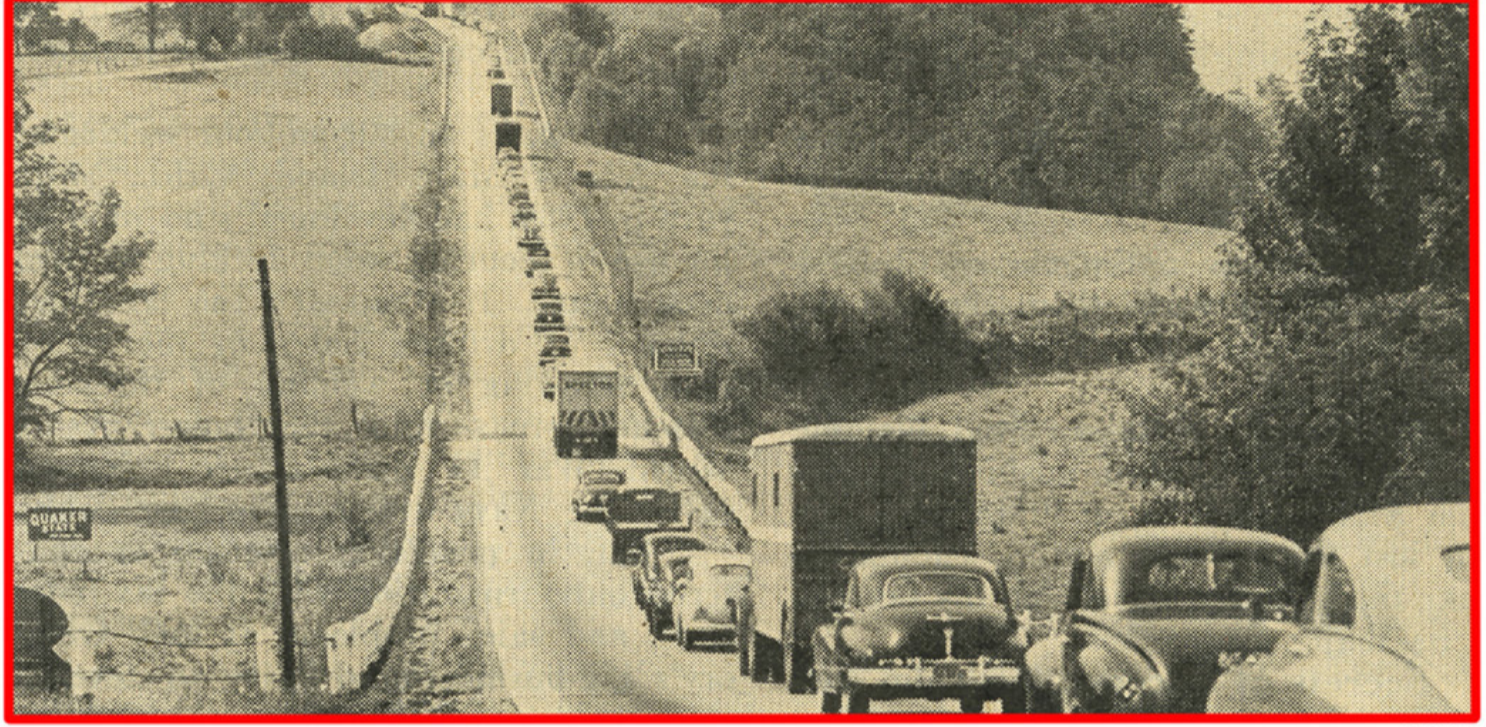
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Bureau of Public Roads

**Mud in your eye.** In 1915 even the famed Lincoln Highway had spots like this.



**Any week end.** A far cry from the <sup>AAA</sup> turn-of-the-century road, but not far enough.



Wide World

**Ever wider.** Even such an artery as this can't keep pace with multiplying autos.

**Hay-burner.** A budding genius named Uriah Smith suggested a solution to the horse problem: Build the front of the automobile in the shape of a horse's head and neck. Then, when horse met car, there would be no cause for alarm.

It was in this atmosphere that representatives of the Automobile Club of America (the nation's first, born in New York in 1899) and eight other clubs met on March 4, 1902, to form the AAA.

The program adopted then resembles, with few changes, the programs of motor clubs today: liberal motor laws, protection of the rights of motorists, improvement of highways and better cars.

A prime objective was to demonstrate that the automobile could be a trustworthy device capable of taking people from place to place faster than the horse and buggy. That was not easy. But through reliability runs—later known as Glidden Tours—the betterment of the car by Ford and Olds and Maxwell and others now forgotten, and the improvement of laws and roads, the automobile advanced.

**Road Builders.** AAA members rolled up their sleeves and fixed the worst places in the roads. They marked highways long before states and the Federal Government awakened to the need.

The early route guides called for a keen eye, since such landmarks as "the big oak tree on the left" or "the bright yellow barn on the right" had to be noted while the speedometer and the road were

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closely watched. A Utah guide read:

*11.8 Section house on right.*

*12.0 Loray. Water tank on right.*

*13.0 Look out for high centers, and take to sagebrush if necessary.*

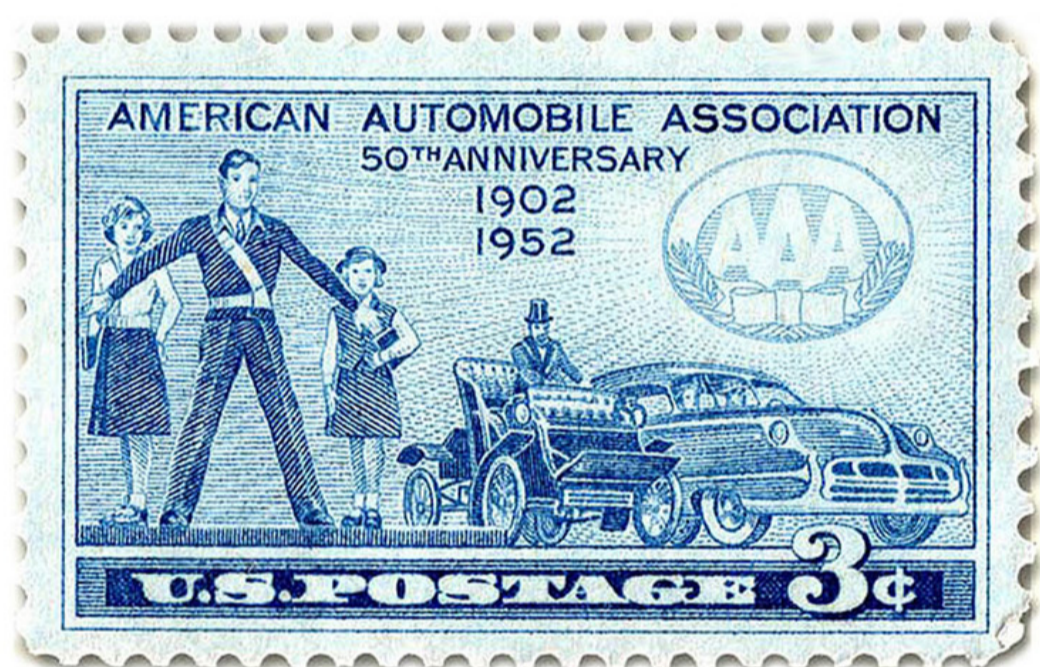
In 1903, Henry Ford started making cars. His Model T—the “Tin Lizzie”—appeared in 1908. It did more than any other car of the day to put America on wheels.

It was in 1903 that a buyer who couldn't run his Winton hitched mules to it and pulled it through the streets. Alexander Winton retaliated by placing a mule in a wagon and drawing the wagon with his car. A placard said: “Only a jackass is unable to drive a Winton.”

In that year also, Dr. H. Nelson Jackson and Sewall Crocker pushed a 2-cylinder, 20-horsepower Winton from San Francisco to New York in 65 days, and a total of 60 new makes of cars issued forth. (There have been more than 2,000 since 1893, when the Duryeas built the first successful U.S. car. Only 22 passenger car makes survive.)

By 1917, passenger car production had risen to 1,745,792, the States had highway departments, the first Federal-aid highway act had been adopted, and order was emerging from chaos.

Wherever there was room for improvement, the motor clubs led the fight.



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