

Looking Beyond the Highway: Dixie Roads and Culture

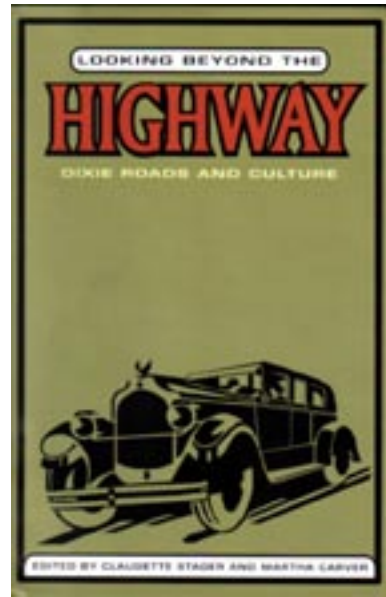
Edited by Claudette Stager and Martha A. Carver
Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006
408 pages, 9.2 x 6.3 inches, \$48 hardcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

“The story of the Dixie Highway is a tale worthy of Chaucer,” Robert Craig dramatically declares in the grand finale of *Looking Beyond the Highway: Dixie Roads and Culture*. Indeed, intriguing stories abound about this auto route running from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, to Miami, Florida, in an interconnected network of roads. Whether seeking eternal sunshine or simply a vacation from work, southbound motorists encountered distinctly Southern roadside attractions on their journey: “underground” nightclubs situated in naturally air-conditioned caves, drive-in theaters metamorphosing on Sunday morning into temporary places of worship and observation towers soaring to the heavens featuring all the orange juice you could drink for dime. As co-editor Claudette Stager notes in the Introduction, “this represents some of the best of southern culture.”

After reading this long-anticipated book, I’d also add to Craig’s pronouncement that I’m not sure Chaucer could have told the story of early auto trails in the South—and the roadside they spawned—any better than the book’s talented team of 17 contributors. The authors, mainly Southern historic preservation professionals, pursue their chosen topics with a passion reminiscent of the legendary Harrison Mayes of Middlesboro, Kentucky—the gentleman who fanatically planted roadside crosses bearing prophetic messages such as “Get Right With God” along roadways for over 50 years and rightly earns his own chapter in the book. Many of the chapter authors will be familiar to readers, since *Looking Beyond the Highway* is produced by the Society for Commercial Archeology as an outgrowth of its 1998 conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The book opens with chapters that cover the route planning and road construction of the Dixie Highway and other early Southern auto trails including the Tamiami Trail in Florida, Dollarway Road in Arkansas, and the Natchez Trace Parkway that stretched from Nashville, Tennessee to Natchez, Mississippi. The book grabs your attention



immediately with relevant and eye-catching black and white illustrations. Crisp photos are combined with excellent vintage maps, postcards and some unusual images: Dixie Highway orange crate labels and newspaper editorial cartoons and, my favorite, the sheet music cover for the *Tamiami Trail Song*.

Subsequent sections examine building types found in the South—and not just your typical gas, food and lodging variety. Chapters focus on such overlooked businesses as commercial caves, observation towers, urban hotels, drive-in churches and firework stands. These last two topics nicely illustrate another strong point of the book: the authors bring their diligent roadside research to life with engaging writing. Who can resist Carrie Scupholm’s title, “Park ‘n’ Pray: An Examination of Drive-in Religion in Florida” or Karl Puljak’s firework’s stands opening, “Like many kids in my St. Louis, Missouri, neighborhood, I had a passion for two things: summer vacation and explosives.”

The book ends with a crescendo, with two chapters that explore the impact of the road and the roadside spectacle on culture—a challenging topic that is a stretch for many scholars. Kevin Patrick examines the duality of natural attractions and the man-made ones that are inevitably built around them, concluding, “Nature has gone from being perceived as the center-stage representation of the Almighty himself to just one of many different

tourist diversions. This does not mean to imply that people appreciate nature any less, just that there are many more options for vacationing tourists.”

The book finishes with Craig comparing motorists traveling on the Dixie Highway to the foot-bound pilgrims and their stops in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. He concludes that despite their different modes of transportation and time periods, the travelers’ experiences were remarkably similar. Perhaps more importantly, Craig provides an amazingly accurate and humorous description of our organization, which I will quote at length in case you should neglect to read such an outstanding book as *Looking Beyond the Highway*:

I prefer to think of our devotional gatherings as a roadster revival meeting, a kind of campground religious experience. Here we seasonally seek absolution for societal sins of demolition, by calling with raised arms and bended knee for the salvation of threatened but revered

“ordinary” buildings. At the annual SCA pilgrimage missions, we, too, worship relics and purchase Deco indulgences: miniature Miami Beach hotels that we can wear as ceramic broaches to ward off the evil spirits of the unenlightened, or SCA transfer-adorned coffee mugs to line up atop our office desks like votive candles to serve as reliquaries for our streamlined Parker pens.... The SCA has become the Streamlined Church of the Automobile.

Amen, brother.

Douglas Towne has considered himself an unacknowledged expert in the location of fireworks stands since the age of 11 when he surveyed street maps to find the shortest bike route out of Denver to outlying counties where the sale of pyrotechnics was legal. Looking for a bigger bang in high school, he increased his shopping commute across the state line to Wyoming where anything short of dynamite was available—a restriction he later overcame by venturing as far as Rocky Point, Mexico.

The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment

By Thomas T. Fetters with Vincent Kohler,
Contributing Author
Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2002
186 pages, B & W photos, \$35 paperback

Reviewed by Harold Aurand, Jr

Three years ago my wife and I bought a new house. It’s in a development of similar, recently constructed homes on what had once been Pennsylvania Dutch farmland. We shop at a large grocery store in a strip mall, with a McDonalds in the middle of the parking lot. Our surroundings are typical of what middle-class Americans have enjoyed for the last 50 years. But could things have turned out differently?

The Lustron Home covers one type of prefabricated home that for a few years after World War II promised to make the landscape a bit different. The book begins during the Great Depression, when the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Company (Chicago Vit) was selling prefabricated buildings of porcelain enameled steel. Usually used as gas stations, diners, or White Castle-like hamburger restaurants, the structures were sturdy, easy to clean, and gave off a shiny, antiseptic ambiance that suggested clean restrooms and healthy food. Because the enamel sections could be stamped into any shape, they were ideal for the streamlined designs favored by Raymond Loewy and Norman Bel Geddes.

Wartime restrictions on steel forced Chicago Vit out of the building business. After the war, the national housing shortage convinced the government to restrict all non-residential construction. A Chicago Vit engineer named Carl Strandlund developed a prototype porcelain enamel house. He convinced the Reconstruction

Finance Corporation (RFC) that the homes could be mass-produced. The RFC provided financing as Chicago Vit spun off Stranglund’s housing venture into the separate Lustron Corporation and allocated the new company factory space in a former Curtiss-Wright aircraft plant in Ohio. The home parts were loaded onto specially designed trucks and driven to purchasers’ home-sites to be assembled.

This delivery system did not allow Lustron to achieve the cost savings more traditional builders like Levitt and Sons realized by building numerous homes next to one another. It’s interesting to speculate that if the Lustron home had proved viable, there might not have been the rapid post-war expansion into the outer suburbs and the development of commercial strips, as these homes could have been dropped into vacant lots in denser, more mixed-use neighborhoods. By 1950, though, Lustron was out of business, and the idea of a porcelain enamel house went with it.

The Lustron Home has a lot to offer as Fetters clearly explains how porcelain enamel is produced, and how its durability made it almost ideal for commercial buildings. The book contains floor plans of each model of Lustron home, with period photos of homes being assembled and how each room may have appeared once furnished. Appendices provide the street addresses of every remaining Lustron home (two existed just a few miles from where I live); nearly every one built is still in use. They obviously lived up to their potential for durability.

If Lustron homes were so good, why did the company fail? The author devotes much of the book to examining the business problems that bankrupted the company. Unlike traditional home builders, Lustron needed a great deal of specialized equipment to stamp out the differently shaped porcelain enamel plates. By the time these machines were designed and ready, the worst of the post-war housing crisis was over.

Management decisions also undermined the company. For example, scarce resources were wasted on getting machines to stamp out bath tubs instead of simply purchasing them on the open market. Because they had previously sold commercial buildings, Lustron executives were used to selling on a cash basis, and were slow to set up a finance division to handle mortgages.

Finally, government malfeasance may have played a role. Lustron had received funding through the RFC which was able to insist on certain appointments to the company’s board of directors. Like current government bureaucracies, the RFC operated as a revolving door. RFC officers who negotiated loans with companies often left for better paying jobs with those companies, and used their government connections to get them more loans. At the time of

