

Happy Golden Anniversary I-75

by Steve Madden

As you drive on, under, or over Interstate 75 in south-west Florida this June, remember to wish it Happy Anniversary. It was fifty years ago that President Dwight D. Eisenhower (obviously before the 1964 law limiting presidential last names to two syllables or less) signed into law what is referred to as the Interstate Highway Act, authorizing the construction of more than forty thousand miles of expressways. Although nobody knew then what an expressway was, soon they were going to have lots of them.

This might come as a surprise to today's younger generations, but there was no I-495 just west of Plymouth, Massachusetts, when the pilgrims first arrived in America. Back then, if Miles Standish missed the plane or train to Boston, he was in for a pretty rough ride on the rutted wagon trails that served as roads. And I-95 to Miami? Fuhgetaboutit.

In rapid succession, cars and root beer floats were invented, and Americans began to realize that rutted wagon trails just weren't acceptable for a Saturday night cruise to the drive-in. Worst of all, the bumpy ride really made the CD player skip.

At about that same time, the U.S. Military was coming to the realization that moving military convoys around the country on a hodge-podge (a military term that when translated means hodge-podge) of meandering country roads was not in the best interest of our national defense. "Hold on, don't attack us yet. We need a month to get our tanks to that end of the country" clearly wasn't a good military strategy. What was needed was a network of

wide, straight superhighways capable of allowing vehicles to hurtle along at over forty or maybe even close to fifty miles per hour.



So in 1944, Franklin Roosevelt appointed a committee to craft a plan for a nationwide system of expressways. This was before Gobbledygook had become the official language of Washington, D.C., and this committee was simply called the National Highway Committee. (Interestingly, the committee was headed by a man named Thomas H. McDonald. Is it mere coincidence that most interstate exits have a restaurant with the same name as the guy who decided where the highways would be built? I smell an insider information scandal.)

The committee decided on a simple, easy-to-remember numbering scheme: north-south routes have odd numbers, with numbers increasing from west to east; east-west routes have even numbers, with numbers increasing from south to north; routes have one- or

two-digit numbers, except that a three-digit interstate always ends with the two-digit number of the main interstate it loops off from, except I-238; north-south interstates ending with a "5" and east-west interstates ending with a "0" are major cross-country routes; three-digit road numbers beginning with an even number are either beltways that go around a city or freeways that go through a city; while three-digit road numbers beginning with an odd number branch off the main interstate. I swear, every word of that is true.

In those days, the government actually worried about how to fund major projects before approving them, so it took until 1956 before Congress hit upon a "tax-based financing plan" (which, coincidentally, permanently ended any future worries Congress had about how to fund projects) called the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which it sent to President Eisenhower for his signature. Ike, who later left politics for a brief singing career with his wife, Tina, signed the bill on June 29, 1956. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Now, fifty years and 46,773 miles of highway later, there will be a celebration of this historic project. A convoy of representatives from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO...I rest my case) will leave San Francisco, California, in early June traveling east on Interstate 80 arriving in Washington, D.C., on June 29, exactly fifty years to the day from the signing of the Interstate Highway Act. Or maybe they will arrive on July 23 or August 1, depending on construction delays and traffic tie-ups. 🐘

ILLUSTRATION BY KELLY MADDEN