I REMEMBER
EARLY AUTOMOBILE TRAVEL
THE AUTOMOBILE ERA

At the time I was born, our country was making the transition from horse and carriage to the automobile. There were still many horses, but their days were numbered.

By the time I was ten, I had ridden in both horse-drawn buggies and automobiles. I was living with one foot in the old age and the other in the new.

Henry Ford was making his automobiles by the thousands and General Motors was just coming on line. G.M. began producing the Chevrolet automobile in an effort to match and surpass Ford.
In 1925, my father bought a Chevrolet. It was our first family car and was the most beautiful thing on wheels. From that time on, our way of life was changed forever. We became part of the thousands throughout the land who, over the next few decades, acquired new autos to make Americans the most mobile people in the world.

To a lad barely thirteen years old, the 1925 Chevrolet Deluxe Touring car was a mechanical marvel and a thing of beauty. With a finish of shiny blue-gray, sturdy cloth top, side curtains for bad weather and good-smelling imitation leather seats, it had all the things about which a family could be proud. There were also disc wheels that replaced the wooden spokes of earlier models. Best of all were the glass wind deflectors that gave an air of elegance.

In addition, right out there where you could see it, was the nickel-plated radiator cap with a thermometer heat indicator.

It was not the screw-on cap you saw on most other cars.
We were then living at the salt works. The car dealer drove all the way from Magna to show the car and to take the family for a demonstration ride. The stretch of road from Garfield to the salt works wasn’t paved at that time and was very rough in places. Nevertheless, the dealer seemed to have a lot of patience with my mother, who wasn’t quite sure if we ought to get the car. His patience paid off because the next two cars my father bought came from the same dealer.

In those days, no drivers’ licenses were required, and few people carried insurance. Those came later as more cars appeared on the road. On top of all this, I recall that gasoline sold for 16 to 20 cents a gallon, six cents or so of which was for tax. When I was old enough to drive, I often drove to the gas station and bought fifty cents worth of gas. This was enough to keep me going for an entire evening during which I could cover fifty miles or more.
While our family was a Chevrolet family, there were others who were strictly Ford people. Everyone seemed to develop a loyalty for a certain car and heated arguments on the merits of one car over another often took place. In our area, the ultimate test for a car was whether it could climb over Magna’s power house hill in high gear.

For most of my younger years, the Ford Model "T" was the most visible car on the road. It became the domestic servant of the nation, as well as a reliable work horse. It was affectionately referred to as the "Tin Lizzie" because it looked as flimsy as tin next to other, heavier cars. With a top speed of only 40 miles per hour, the Model T nonetheless was lively and had good acceleration. Its high ground clearance suited it perfectly to the rough roads of the times. Comfort was not one of its attractions, but it was dependable.

It had no battery, no complex wiring or brake fluid. Indeed, simplicity was one of its greatest virtues. It was said that the most useful tools to carry in the Ford were a pair of pliers and a length of baling wire. The most annoying feature was the need to crank the old "Flivver" with a hand crank to get it started. Curious to note, however, until the late ’30’s most cars came equipped with a hand crank that was often needed if the starter refused to work. There was a hole in the framework beneath the radiator through which the crank could be inserted to engage a projection at the front of the engine.

The Ford was a tremendous success because Mr. Ford deliberately made it without frills and concentrated on keeping it cheap and practical. At one time you could buy a Ford for less than $300.

As kids, we would often recite an anonymous poem about Henry Ford:

"...So he got a board
and an old tin can
and made a Ford
and the darn thing ran."

There was also a parody on Kipling:

"You’re a better can
than I am, Hunka Tin."
The Old Tin Lizzie

Like the youngsters of today, we learned to recognize automobiles by name when we saw them at a distance. There were many of them to remember.

Ford

Many of them are long gone, but I remember them still. Occasionally, when I see an exhibit of old cars, I suddenly remember many of the makes I haven’t thought about in years.
THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY

The first transcontinental road across the United States passed through Utah. It followed the old Mormon Trail from the Wyoming state line to Salt Lake City. Westward from Salt Lake it passed through Tooele, then linked with the Overland Stage and Pony Express route to enter the State of Nevada near what is now Baker. This latter stretch was perhaps the most desolate along the entire length of the road.

As early as 1910, adventurous motorists drove from coast to coast and demonstrated that it was possible to drive an automobile from New York to San Francisco. Others followed, and within a decade there were many motorists on this road. Primitive, dusty and rutted as the road was, there seemed to be no stopping the ever increasing number who sought adventure traveling over it and discovering sights that they could only have imagined a few years before.

In the mid-20’s the Lincoln Highway Association was organized for the purpose of memorializing President Lincoln by naming the transcontinental road the Lincoln Highway. On September 1, 1928, three thousand concrete markers were placed along the route at pre-designated locations by Boy Scouts across the country. Many of these were placed in Utah, some of which were a little more than a mile apart. They remained in place many years, then slowly began to disappear as the demand for wider roads and realignments became apparent. Today it is extremely difficult to find one in its original location.

I still remember the Lincoln Highway, and I remember the markers. They offered a little spot of color alongside the road. Set on a white background was a strip of red above the letter "L" and below it a strip of blue, intended to represent the national colors.
I remember some of the travelers, too. Some of them were "through" travelers headed mainly for California. I observed them much as one would regard space travelers today, with wonder and awe at their adventurous spirit. Their invariably black open cars were often covered with dust, and some appeared to hold out a promise of trouble in the desert ahead. But they came, they saw, and they conquered.

Interstate 80 today is the main east-west highway through Utah. From the Wyoming state line to Salt Lake City it generally follows the old Lincoln Highway. From Salt Lake City westward to the Nevada state line it departs from the old Lincoln Highway and now follows a more direct route through Wendover.

All designations of named coast-to-coast roads fell out of use when the federal highways were given a numbering system. All references to the Lincoln Highway are now just a memory.
VERSE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

They're gone now, but I recall with some nostalgia the light-hearted signs along the highways that advertised a brushless shaving cream called Burma Shave.

A new concept in advertising, they offered welcome relief from the staid, matter-of-fact signs everyone else was using. And they added humor to a generation that had little else to be cheerful about.

Each sign measured about three feet in length and usually contained no more than four words. Installed along the roads in groups of six, each about 100 paces apart, their messages were written in a delightful cadence to achieve a distinctive poetic statement richly laced with humor.
Beginning in about 1926, the Burma Shave signs were seen in over 40 states and soon became a familiar part of the national highway scene along with gas stations, speed limit signs, and motels. We enjoyed them for over 35 years, during which time scores of sets could be seen along the Utah highways.

While the signs were a new concept in advertising, the product they advertised was also completely new: so new, in fact, that many who first read the signs didn’t know what they were. But over time they learned, they bought it and were converted. These signs spelled the beginning of the end for the mug and shaving brush.