

1951 – The Year MOVITE Started

On April 6, 1951, the Institute of Traffic Engineers presented an organizational charter to the Missouri Valley Section, originally consisting of the states of Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Arkansas was added to the section in 1961.

What was it like in 1951? 1951 was part of an era spanning from post-war 1945 to pre-rock n' roll 1955 when there was growing prosperity and great expansion of housing, communications, and highway system all across the country. I was six years old in 1951. Understanding the events and culture of 1951 helps me appreciate the changes which have occurred over the last 50 years and those in the Transportation Engineering profession that have struggled to keep up with the changes and growth.

The Great Flood - I remember the “flood of 1951” that closed U.S. 71 highway south of Butler, Missouri, my home at the time. I remember hearing about the effects of the flooding in Kansas City. Kansas City Times headlines on July 12, 1951, “Rivers Rage On in Kansas.” The story reported that thousands of Kansans were homeless last night and at least five persons (later raised to 12) were dead in swirling flood waters (along the Kansas River) that inundate scores of communities in the eastern half of the state. Flood records were being rewritten in nearly every river basin in the area.” The Kansas River empties into the Missouri River in Kansas City, Kansas, where the flooding swept through the Argentine lowlands and the Armourdale district, flooding the Central Industrial District. Kansas Governor Edward Arn described the event as the “greatest catastrophe in Kansas history.” The flood is referred to as a \$1 Billion flood, destroying property and lives throughout the Missouri, Kansas, Neosho and Marais de Cygnes river valleys. Out of the disaster came unified action on flood prevention measures including a series of 18 major dams and miles of flood control levees on the Kansas River.

Government - In 1951, Harry Truman, from Missouri, was President. The US was in the midst of the Korean War leading the UN troops against Communist take over of South Korea. General Douglas MacArthur was dismissed as UN Commander in Korea. U.S. Congress ratified the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution to limit presidents to two terms. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and sentenced to death for selling atomic secrets to the Soviets.

Economy – Quick facts about the economy of 1951 include:

- The Consumer Price Index was \$100 in 1951 compared with \$675.77 in 2001.
- A first class postage stamp was 3 cents.
- In 1948, only 64% of all homes had telephones; by 1963, 83% had telephones. Note: My telephone number in 1951 in Butler, Missouri was 359J.

- Homes were mass-produced, affordable, built to look-alike. Average cost of a house was \$16,000. Over 75% of all homes in the U.S. had flush toilets.
- Unemployment was 3.3%. Average Annual Income was \$3,515. For year round full time work, women earned 63.9% of a man's income.
- Car manufacturers emphasized speed, choice and style. European sports cars were imported in response to the demand for fun-to-drive vehicles. These vehicles were in demand because of the soldiers who had seen the cars in Europe. A Ford cost between \$1424 - \$2253. A Plymouth business coupe costs only \$1,537. Gas cost \$0.20/gallon. By 1950, 60% of American families own a car.
- Milk cost \$0.92/gallon. A loaf of bread cost \$0.16. One pound of sliced bacon was \$0.63. A six bottle carton of Coke Cola was \$0.37. Swanson introduced beef, chicken and turkey pot pies. S & H Green Stamps got their start at a Denver store. Sugar Pops were introduced in 1951.
- Popular toys included Lionel trains, Silly Putty, Lego's and Daisy BB guns.
- Over 15 million homes had a television set. A TV set cost \$300.
- Drive-in restaurants of all types proliferated – eat fast; eat in your car; zoom off marketing. The first Jack-in-the-Box restaurant opened in San Diego.
- The drive-in movie theater boom was underway. Going from less than 1,000 in 1948 to close to 5,000 by 1958. The drive-in etched it's place in history, not just in the US but in other countries.

Sports – Significant sporting events of 1951 were:

- The New York Yankees defeated the New York Giants in the Baseball World Series.
- Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle played their first major league baseball games in 1951 while Joe DiMaggio retired.
- Topps Company started their first baseball card series with two individual sets of 52 cards each.
- Rochester Royals defeated the New York Knicks in the NBA Pro Basketball Championship.
- Kentucky Wildcats defeated the Kansas State Wildcats in the NCAA Basketball Championship.
- University of Tennessee was named NCAA Football Champions.
- Los Angeles Rams defeated the Cleveland Browns for the NFL Championship.

- Florence Chadwick swam across the English Channel from England to France in 16 hours.

Inventions – There were several important inventions made in 1951:

- CBS introduced the first color television broadcast in 1951.
- Glenn T. Seaborg and Edwin H. McMillan (both US citizens), were given the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for the discovery of plutonium.
- UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer), the first business computer to handle both numeric and alphabetic data, was introduced.
- U.S. chemists develop the first oral contraceptive.
- The first nuclear power plant was built by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.
- Superglue.
- The first Videotape recorder was invented.
- Chrysler Corporation introduced power steering.
- The Taco holder was invented enabling production of fast tacos.
- Tupperware was invented by Earl Tupper.

Entertainment - Top movies were *The African Queen*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *An American in Paris*, *A Place in the Sun* and Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*.

The books, *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk were published in 1951.

Popular TV Shows included *I Love Lucy*, Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts*, *Mr. Wizzard*, *The Red Skelton Show*, Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater*, *Howdy Doody*, *Kukla Fran & Ollie*, and *Your Show of Shows*.

Radio shows were still popular including: *Amos N' Andy*, *The Great Gildersleeve*, *Fibber McGee & Molly*, *Burns & Allen*, *Yukon King*, *The Lone Ranger* and *The Green Hornet*.

This was the pre-Rock N' Roll period. Top songs in 1951 were *Because of You*, Tony Bennett; *Mockin' Bird Hill*, Les Paul/Mary Ford; *On Top of Old Smokey*, Weavers; and *Come On-a My House*, Rosemary Clooney.

Historic Events - Charles F. Blair, Jr. made the first solo flight across the North Pole.

Famous Persons – A sampling of persons born in 1951 and eligible to join AARP this year are: Lynda Carter, Tony Danza, Mary Hart, Tommy Hilfiger, Cheryl Ladd, Rush Limbaugh and Jay North. Dale Earnhardt was also born in 1951.

Life expectancy in 1951 was 69.4 years.

Transportation – New housing developments led to the middle-class migration to the suburbs and contributed to the need for high-speed roads (turnpikes, expressways and freeways) to be developed to handle commuters driving their high-powered cars at relatively high speeds into the city.

In 1951, there were 36,996 motor vehicle related deaths, while there were 11 airplane crashes resulting in 185 fatalities. Note: During the period 1947 to 1963, automobile fatality rate dropped by over 40%.

Airstream Trailers – They look like a large silver bullet rolling down the highway. The Airstream trailer set the standard for luxury camping since they appeared on the highways in 1930's. Inventor Wally Byam introduced the name "Airstream" in 1934 for his aerodynamic-looking trailers because his trailers cruised down the road "like a stream of air". By the early 1950's, the Airstream Trailer had become a nationally known product. Thousands of trailers have been produced over the years and it is estimated that more than 60 percent of all Airstreams ever built are still rolling down the highways.

Automobile Production – Although production of automobiles nearly came to a halt in the United States during the war years (1942-45), the post war era saw a boom in production climbing to a peak in 1950 of 6,665,863 units, an annual figure not reached again until 1955 and then again in 1960. The most popular make of automobile in 1950 was the Chevrolet (1,520,577 units) and the Ford (1,187,122 units). In addition to models that continue in production today, vehicles bearing the names of Studebaker, Nash, Kaiser-Frazer, Hudson, Packard, Willys, and Crosley were also produced in 1950. The World Automobile Fleet was estimated at 50 million in 1950 as compared with over 500 million in 2000.

Traffic Safety – Going out for a Sunday drive in the slow-moving Tin Lizzies of the 1920s was a lot more dangerous than zooming along in a brand-new car on paved crowded multi-laned highways of today. U.S. motor vehicle deaths per miles traveled have dropped 90% since 1925, thanks in part to safety measures such as seat belts, bumpers and the pavement markings. Deaths dropped from 18 per million vehicle miles traveled in 1925 to 1.7 in 1997. At the same time, total miles driven increased tenfold, and there are 11 times as many vehicles on the road.

Narrow, unmarked roads have been paved with hard surface and equipped with lighting at intersections and interchanges, improved painted lines to separate and direct traffic, along with regulatory and guide signing systems, and installation of concrete barriers and/or guardrails. Highway design improvements include divided roadways, separate turn lanes, improved sight distance for hills and intersections, control of access, etc.

Route 66 – Route 66 was one of the most important highways ever constructed in America. It was an interregional link between Chicago and Los Angeles passing through the MOVITE states of Missouri, short portion in Kansas, and Oklahoma. Route 66 was conceived and officially numbered as part of the national highway system in the summer of 1926. From the outset, U.S. 66 was intended to connect the main streets of rural and urban communities along its course for the most practical of reasons: most small towns had no prior access to a major national thoroughfare. The routing for Route 66 was a diagonal course linking hundreds of predominantly rural communities in Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas to Chicago. The diagonal configuration was particularly significant to the trucking industry, which by 1930 had come to rival the railroad for preeminence in the American shipping industry. The route traversed essentially flat prairie lands and enjoyed a more temperate climate than northern highways.

John Steinbeck proclaimed Route 66 as the “Mother Road” in his 1939 novel The Grapes of Wrath. An estimated 210,000 people migrated to California to escape the despair of the Dust Bowl. For them and generations to follow, Route 66 symbolized the “road to opportunity.” After five years of intense effort using workers otherwise unable to find work, the Chicago-to-Los Angeles highway was reported as “continuously paved” in 1938. Completion of this route prior to World War II became significant to the nation’s war effort. Route 66 helped to facilitate the single greatest wartime manpower mobilization in the history of the United States. The West was ideal for military training bases because of the dry weather for air and field maneuvers and Route 66 was the conduit for supplies.

After the war, Americans were more mobile than ever before. Thousands of soldiers, sailors, and airmen who received military training in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas abandoned the harsh winters of Chicago, New York and Boston for the “barbecue culture” of the Southwest and the West. Route 66 facilitated their relocation.

Store owners, motel managers, and gas station attendants recognized early on that even the poorest travelers required food, automobile maintenance, and adequate lodging. The appearance of countless tourist courts, garages, and diners promised sustained economic growth after the road was completed. The demands of the new tourism industry in the postwar decades gave rise to modern facilities that guaranteed long-term prosperity.

Excessive truck use during World War II and the comeback of the automobile industry immediately following the war brought great pressure to bear on America’s highways. Virtually all roads were functionally obsolete and dangerous because of narrow pavements and antiquated structural features that reduced capacity.

General Eisenhower had returned from Germany very impressed by the strategic value of Hitler’s Autobahn. “During World War II” he recalled later, “I saw the superlative system of German national highways crossing that country and offering the possibility, often lacking in the United States, to drive with speed and safety at the same time.”

As president, Eisenhower gave strong support to the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 creating the Interstate Highway System. By 1970, nearly all segments of original Route 66 were replaced by a modern four-lane highway. In Missouri and Oklahoma, Route 66 was replaced by I-44.

Route 66 illustrates the evolution of highway development in the United States from a rudimentary hodge-podge of state and country roads to a federally subsidized complex of uniform, well-designed interstate freeways. There is effort to preserve still detectable segments of Route 66 as a tribute to the spirit of optimism that pervaded the country after the war. Route 66 is also referred to as “The Main Street of America.”

Turnpikes – In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Federal aid for funding roadways was so small in comparison to need, some of the heavily populated states and those with a great demand for improved roadways decided to authorize construction of toll roads. Turnpikes provide a way to build and use roads now and pay for them as we use them by collecting a fee from motorists at the point where they exit the facility with the amount of the fee based on their point of entry.

In the MOVITE area, Kansas and Oklahoma jumped on this bandwagon. Oklahoma constructed the Turner Turnpike between Oklahoma City and Tulsa in the late 1940s followed by construction of the Will Rogers Turnpike between Tulsa and the Missouri state line in the early 1950s. The Kansas Turnpike between Kansas City, Kansas and the Oklahoma state line south of Wichita, was opened to traffic on October 25, 1956.

Burma Shave – Burma-Shave was a brushless shaving cream. Burma-Shave used red and white signs that advertised the product along America’s rural highways and byways. On a non-descript stretch of road, where the best scenery might be a pasture with cows, the sight of Burma-Shave signs ahead was reason for celebration – it broke the monotony.

Burma Shave Signs were at their peak in the 1950s when super highways were two lane and cars were a little slower. At first, the signs were purely a sales pitch for the product. But soon, the owners of the company, Clinton and Allan Odell, found that their sense of humor, sometimes including a safety message, was appreciated by travelers. The signs were most often clustered in a set of five, placed 100 feet apart, each offering a single line of a jingle. At the height of the signs’ popularity, about 7,000 messages stretched across 45 states. As cars got faster and roads evolved into wide superhighways, Burma-Shave signs lost their effectiveness and ultimately their popularity. The last sign was pulled from its stakes in 1966.

Examples of some of the Burma-Shave messages directed at driving safety:

A Darn Good Driver
With Lots of Nerve
Still Won’t Pass
While Rounding A Curve
Burma Shave

Is He Lonesome
Or Just Blind
That Guy Who Drives
So Close Behind
Burma Shave

You Can Beat
A Mile A Minute
But There Ain’t
No Future In It!
Burma Shave

At School Crossings
Heed Instructions
Protect Our Little
Tax Deductions
Burma Shave