

Old Red/Old Ten

The Route

In 1913, scouts for the AAA were deciding on a route spanning the continent from New York City to Seattle, Washington. The section of this route that crosses North Dakota from Fargo to Medora became the Old Red Trail, which was officially laid out in 1914. The original trail was set to cross the northern part of the state because of the difficulty of crossing the badlands in the west. The route was changed, however, to cross the southern tier of North Dakota because it was a more direct route to a popular tourist destination – Yellowstone National Park.

Building the Roads

In the early years of the North Dakota State Highway Department, horses were often used to building and maintaining roadways.



This 1920s photograph shows earth moving and hauling for a roadbed.

Getting from Here to There

Early travel was hampered by poor roads, often mere ruts that turned into stretches of mud with any moisture. Winter snows made the roads impassable with deep drifts.



A typical early 1920s road



1920s motorists would often find themselves in this predicament. This is an ND State Highway Department "Pickle Car," so called because the logo resembled a pickle.



North Dakota State Highway Department car on snow-covered roadway – winter of 1927



And, with only red bands on poles, rudimentary signs, and local landmarks to mark the trail, getting lost along the way was a probable experience.

Eventually, the AAA did produce maps to help travelers reach their destinations, but the directions were often confusing and difficult to follow. But, the AAA was dedicated to improving roads and encouraging auto travel. As roads and signage improved, people embraced their new freedom of mobility. They were going places!

Old Red to Old Ten

In 1923, North Dakota state highways were designated by number, and the Old Red Trail became State Highway 3. It was renamed Highway 10 in 1927 after becoming part of the national highway system.

Improving the Roads

Until the 1950s, most of the rural roads in North Dakota were gravel. In 1934, the State Highway System boasted about 9,000 miles of roadway in the state, but only about 100 miles were hard-surfaced. A major effort during the 1950s was to improve the roads by paving them.



North Dakota State Highway Department crew patching U.S. 10 on the west edge of Dickinson in the 1920s.

The Interstate

The Interstate System was made possible by President Dwight Eisenhower, who had traveled across the United States in 1919 as part of a military convoy and found the route extremely difficult. The trip across country from Washington D.C. to San Francisco took two months. He took the experience with him to the White House and, in 1956, signed the Federal Highway Act which resulted in the construction of 41,000 miles of the Interstate Highway System. The first stretch of I-94 through North Dakota was opened between Jamestown and Valley City in 1958. Much of what was Old Red/Old Ten became I-94.