



Transportation Book Recommendation: The Big Roads by Earl Swift

Recommended by Dr. Chad Miller

For anyone interested in the U.S. Interstate system and why the highways are the way they are today, The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways by Earl Swift is an interesting read. He brings out a number of important points such as highways initially being developed by the private sector and only later did the federal government take the lead role as it does today and how the highways got their number designation. The author also attempts to debunk a number of commonly accepted ideas about the highways system such as that President Dwight D. Eisenhower founded the interstate system, that there are straight stretches for military airplanes to land, and that Thomas MacDonald, who served as the chief of the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) for 34 years, from 1919 to 1953, was a unsympathetic technocratic who blurred the line between state and federal responsibility. The book follows the history and personalities of American highways from the Good Roads Movement of the 1890s to the interstate system as it exists today. The book particularly examines the “Freeway Revolt” between highway officials who were confident that interstates were the cure for urban blight versus city dwellers, such as activist Lewis Mumford, who tried to stop unchecked highway construction through their communities. The book makes a great book on tape for those long road trips. Perhaps nothing changed the face of America more than the creation of the interstate system. At once a connective network, economic force, man-made wonder, and bringer of sprawl and blight, the interstate system turned haphazard dirt tracks into an organized framework of paved highways. The Big Roads documents this historic feat, from its inception at the turn of the century to its completion during Eisenhower’s presidency.