



Gail Albert Halaban
Italian Views

Joy rides, voyages of discovery, surveys, wanderings, migrations, polemics, travel diaries, and assessments of the nation. Is America imaginable without the road trip? Without everything the road trip implies: the cars, the buses, the motels, hotels, campsites, diners and gas stations? Is it imaginable without the camera that records, expresses, and promotes such journeys? When the American photographer Stephen Shore wrote that, “Our country is made for long trips,” was he being obvious, merely noting that in a place of such size, epic travel is inevitable, or was it something more profound? America’s newcomers had made long trips to get here. They had the appetite and the experience of distance. More importantly, might we not say that as a nation formed at the onset of an industrial revolution, perhaps even the concept of modern America presumes the need for long trips? The means of travel may come and go, but the impulse is constant.

Whatever the truth of these questions, when photography arrived in the 1830s it was into a world of expansion and exploration, a world in which space was not just to be conquered and mastered but contemplated and incorporated as an imaginative resource. The long trip would always be as poetic as it was practical. The Open Road is a survey of photographers on the move across America and across the last century. Most of us think of the road trip as starting fully formed with Robert Frank and his landmark book *The Americans* (1959). This essay explores the cultural context leading up to that moment and is followed by a series of portfolios that show the various directions taken by photographers and artists after Frank. Setting out by car for a few weeks, a few months, or even indefinitely, they have produced chronicles of experience and change.

As soon as it was possible to cross the country by automobile, such journeys became if not a final frontier then at least a marker, a way to feel the expanse of the continent and achieve some kind of grasp, however personal or provisional, of its variety and magnitude. At start of the twentieth century the majority of America’s intercity roads were a mess, having fallen into disuse and disrepair as a result of the shift from horse and cart to the extensive rail network. Beyond the urban centers over 90 percent of roads were still dirt. A few were gravel or shells. They were dusty when dry, quagmires when wet, and frequently impassible. Railroads had become more than a transport system. In cutting through mountains and conquering rivers, they were the symbolic heart of America’s identity as an industrializing nation. By 1903 there were 250,000 miles of rail track but only 160,000 miles of badly surfaced roads, and just 141 miles of asphalt or concrete highway. A cross-country trip in one of America’s 4,000 automobiles would take an intrepid driver about two months. Despite the challenge, the appeal of such trips was enormous. While rail had bound the country together and made travel communal, the automobile reignited the pioneer spirit for a new century that would come to be defined by individual freedoms and independent venture.

Car production grew rapidly, promoted by intensive campaigns presenting the automobile as a vital tool of commerce and a new source of leisure. Meanwhile a wholesale shift in photographic culture was well under way, with equally comprehensive promotion to get the country buying mass-market cameras with easy to use roll film. In 1888 George Eastman of Kodak prompted a major move from professional to amateur photography with his legendary slogan, “You Press the Button, We Do the Rest.” Travel and picture taking were now in the hands of the people, or so the advertising went. More to the point, with its novel speeds and fresh encounters, travel itself heightens experience and sharpens the senses, often in ways that permit the world to strike the beholder as images. Advertisers understood this very early, and the act of photographing could be marketed as a natural component of travel. The camera would both record the road trip experience and help to define it.

Let us begin our journey with a remarkably early and innovative experiment in publishing. Launched in 1906 the Photo-Auto Guide series of illustrated books replaced conventional maps with hundreds of photographs taken from a driver’s point of view. Each book is dedicated to a popular route and shows every junction, bridge, and landmark along the way (and back again, with reverse views). In the absence of consistent signage, or even agreed names for the longer roads, a visual aid was useful. Moreover, motorists could experience the thoroughly modern novelty of previewing the road ahead in photographic form. Twenty-five Photo-Auto Guides were issued over five years, the most ambitious illustrating the drive between New York and Chicago. The venture, however, was a victim of its own success. By 1910 there were about 130,000 automobiles in use, plus 35,000 commercial trucks and 150,000 motorcycles. These vehicles transformed the roadside environment so thoroughly that the photographs were soon outdated. A century later, the Photo-Auto Guides are extraordinarily rich documents not just of the look and feel of the early years of motoring but of the desire to put the camera at the service of the road trip. They are also uncanny precursors of the seamless image environment we now associate with Google’s Street View, more on which at the other end of this history.

In 1930 there were 26.7 million automobiles in America, one for every 4.5 people. The pace and extent of the change was breathless and unparalleled. Interest in the situation spread around the world. Several photographers from overseas came to America to produce books that would satisfy the mass curiosity. Generally these were picturesque albums of beautiful landscapes interspersed with shots of awesome bridges, roads, and skyscrapers. The most ambitious and bestselling was *Romantic America* (1927) by E. O. Hoppé, who was at the time the most celebrated and highest paid photographer in the world. He took several cross-country trips by car and the result was a book of forms in steel, concrete, and glass interspersed with epic images of nature. In the hope that the book would outlast the ever-quicker turnover of fashions, the publisher excluded most of Hoppé’s images of people and cars. Nevertheless, Hoppé understood that the truth of modern life is often felt in its little details and signs of change. Clothing. Gesture. Temporary spaces. Makeshift structures. New vehicles. Many of his unpublished images show the fascination with commonplace scenes that would come to characterize the work of key figures in the history of the road trip, including Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Stephen Shore.

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The car soon became the preeminent symbol of transition, not so much for its evolving styles and technology but for the effects it had upon its environment. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan put it years later: With a motor car, most people are interested in changing designs or patterns of the car. They pay only incidental attention to the huge service environments of roads, oil companies, filling stations. . . . It never occurs to them that this figure of the car might generate a huge ground of new services far bigger than the figure was ever thought to be.

The “figure of the car” is inseparable from the “ground” of the world that is changed around it. In 1930 the Swiss journalist Felix Moeschlin made a three-month, 12,500-mile tour of America in the company of amateur photographer Dr. Kurt Richter. The aim was to address the new changes in the country. With 154 images, their book *Amerika vom Auto Aus* (America from the Car) takes in not only landscapes and big cities but also small towns, gas stations, Chinese communities, African American workers in the rural South, and the growing gulf between rich and poor. The accomplished photographs are grouped into sequences that function as mini documentary essays on these themes while describing very directly the presence of automobiles and their impact. The authors’ car is the unifying symbol; its hood, windows, and outline appear throughout the publication. Richter recorded the slick new surfaces rolling out over the old dirt roads while Moeschlin noted how the car that makes it possible to cross the country with great freedom has shaped what there is to see. The car promises unimaginable access but brings unimaginable change.

Automobiles heralded a revolution on many fronts: social, technical, aesthetic, ecological and financial. In 1934 the writer James Agee was commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to produce a report on the commercial implications of the automobile. Titled “The Great American Roadside,” his essay is an idiosyncratic epic, written in a visionary and fragmentary style entirely suited to the new subject. Lists of facts and poetic observations describe “the most hugely extensive market the human race has ever set up to tease and tempt and take money from the human race . . . a young but great industry that will gross, in this, the fifth year of the great world depression, something like \$3,000,000,000.” Ice cream parlors, hot dog stands, quick-stop cafes, and cheap holiday cabins were sprouting around local landmarks, all advertised to the passing motorist. It was unstoppable, giving rise among newly mobile citizens to a whole new culture that was demotic and rootless. Provincial differences were being subsumed by the first American popular culture that could truly call itself national. It was not production that had united the country but consumption, propelled by the motorist.

At the center of Agee’s essay is the auto camp cabin, the forerunner of the modern motel. Variations on the doghouse, these single-room structures in wood or adobe clustered along the approaches to major leisure destinations. It is six in the afternoon and you are still on the road, worn and weary from the three hundred miles of driving. Past you flashes a sign DE LUXE CABINS ONE MILE. Over the next hill you catch the vista of a city, smack in your path, sprawling with all its ten thousand impediments to motion—its unmarked routes, its trolley cars, its stop and go signs, its No Parking markers. Somewhere in the middle of it is a second-class commercial hotel, whose drab lobby and whose cheerless rooms you can see with your eyes closed. Beyond, around the corner, eyes still closed, you see the local Ritz with its doormen and its bellboys stretching away in one unbroken greedy grin. You see the unloading of your car as you stand tired and cross, wondering where you can find the nearest garage. Your wife is in a rage because she has an aversion to appearing in public with her face smudged, her hair disarranged and her dress crumpled. All these things and more you see with your eyes closed in two seconds flat. Then you open them. And around the next bend, set back amid a grove of cool trees you see the little semi-circle of cabins which the sign warned you of. You pull in by a farmhouse—or a filling station, or a garage—which registers instantly as the mother hen to this brood.

Roadside life “sprang up prodigally as morning mushrooms, and completed a circle that will whirl for pleasure and for profit as long as the American blood and the American car are so happily married.” This was the first comprehensive diagnosis of this new world. Although the writer’s influence was not direct (the essay was published without his name on it) Agee had defined an inventory of sights and attitudes that would soon become common currency in American travel writing, art, and cinema.

While Agee’s essay was on the newsstands, moviegoers were flocking to Frank Capra’s hit *It Happened One Night* (1934), a comedy set largely on the road in the new auto camps. This early “road movie” caught perfectly the spirit of highway adventure. Free of the norms of city and home, the open road is where day-to-day obligations and perhaps even the restrictions of social class might fall away. Character is tested, values are reviewed, and for a while at least alternative ideals are permitted to surface. The film tells the story of a runaway society heiress who meets a wily newspaper journalist hoping to cash in with a scoop on her whereabouts. From camp to camp they cross the country and fall in love. In the finale she leaves her millionaire fiancé at the altar, dashes to the journalist’s waiting car, and they drive away. We do not see them working out their new life together, just making a return to the open road of hope and escape—where opposites are magically reconciled. A Hollywood ending for an era of motoring.

In 1935 Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, the Soviet Union’s most celebrated satirists, arrived in New York for a ten-week tour. In their Ford, they crossed the country and back again, Ilf photographing with his Leica, Petrov penning wry observations. The Soviet Union was beginning to industrialize on a grand scale, and although America was still reeling from the economic crash of 1929 there was much to learn. The duo happily mocked America’s vulgar excesses but they were in awe of how sophisticated technology had found its way into every corner of daily life. Back home their reports appeared in the popular magazine *Ogonek*, in illustrated installments themes such as *Small Towns*, *the Desert*, *Indians*, *Negroes*, *New York*, *California*, *Mark Twain*, *Advertising*, and *Hollywood* (where they even stopped to write a film script). Their first subject, however, was roads, the like of which they had never encountered. “Before we say that the American West is a mountainous country, or a desert country, or a forested country, we want to say the most central, important thing about it: it is an automotive and electrical country.” The car symbolized the best and worst. It was the supreme embodiment of American modernity but it was clearly creating problems of its own, particularly road crashes and the alarming alienation of people from one another.



Rome

*Campo Di Fiore,
Rome,
Red Flowers,
June 2017*





*Victor Emmanuel Monument,
Rome, Italy, June 2017*



*Luigi and Family,
Via Monserrato,
Rome, Italy,
June 2017*

The distance between our windows is about the length of an extra room. Close enough for me to read the time on their clock, but far enough so that I cannot attempt to read their lips as they speak. They don't have shades either. And every so often, as I am gazing out my window, I lock eyes with one of them. They smile, sometimes even nod. They seem to be very comfortable being seen, shades would only cover up their view. Their ease makes me trust them, makes me want to leave my shades open and live so that I too have nothing to hide.

*Chess and Guitars,
Near the Termini,
Rome, Italy,
June 2017*





*Piazza dei Ponziani,
Rome, Italy,
Out My Window,
February 2017*