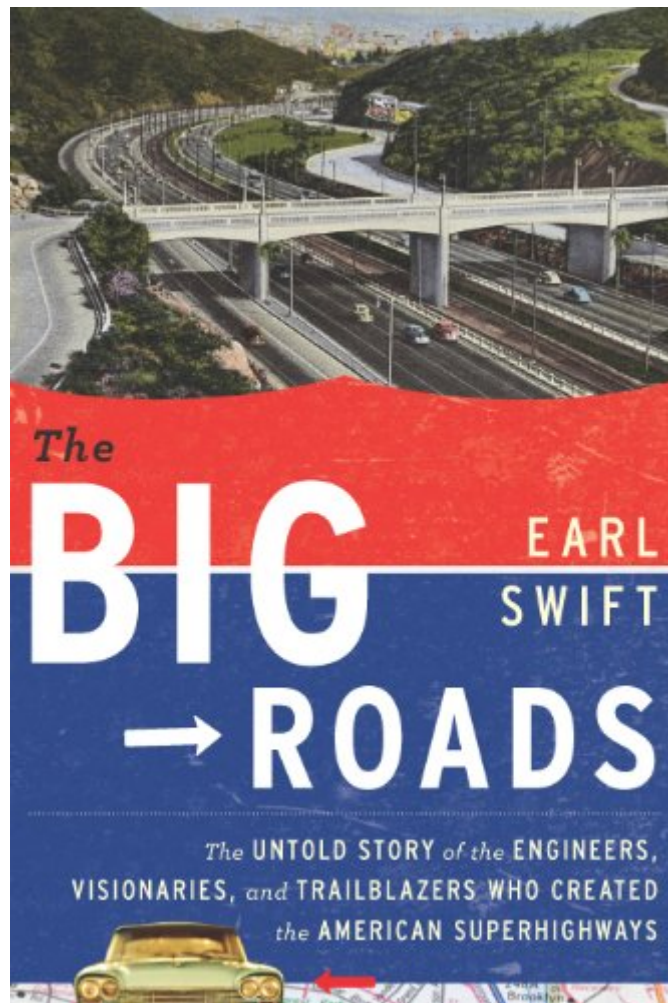


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The Big Roads: The Untold Story Of The Engineers, Visionaries, And Trailblazers Who Created The American Superhighw



Synopsis

As travelers hitting the highways this summer might better appreciate the asphalt beneath their tires thanks to this engrossing history of the creation of the U.S. interstate system. "Los Angeles Times Perhaps nothing changed the face of America more than the creation of the interstate system. At once man-made wonders, economic pipelines, agents of sprawl, and uniquely American sirens of escape, the interstates snake into every aspect of modern life. The Big Roads documents their historic creation and the many people they've affected, from the speed demon who inspired a primitive web of dirt auto trails, to the cadre of largely forgotten technocrats who planned the system years before Ike reached the White House, to the thousands of city dwellers who resisted the concrete juggernaut when it bore down on their neighborhoods. The Big Roads tells the story of this essential feature of the landscape we have come to take for granted. With a view toward players both great and small, Swift gives readers the full story of one of America's greatest engineering achievements. Engaging, informative . . . The first thorough history of the expressway system. "Jonathan Yardley, Washington Post "The book is a road geek's treasure" and everyone who travels the highways ought to know these stories. "Kirkus Reviews

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Customer Reviews

I have always had a fascination with major highways, especially the US Interstate system. It is certainly one of man's greater achievements, both from an engineering and political level. Road building and architecture have always been among the crowning achievements of nations, and the US is no exception. I had high hopes for this book.=== The Good Stuff ===* Earl Swift would certainly subscribe to the theory that the political side of road-building is more interesting and more difficult than the actual engineering side. Given the current state of US highway building, it might appear that he is correct-more roads have been shot down over politics than insurmountable engineering problems. Swift does a masterful job of capturing this conflict.* We meet an interesting cast of characters, and Swift does a nice job at capturing the personalities and motivations of these people. There are certainly the stereotypical engineers-you can almost see the slide rules- planning the routes; the finance guys figuring out how to pay for it; and the political operators-managing what is possible. But there are also the citizens who refused to have their city gutted by a cross-town expressway, and environmentalists and historical preservationists who stand up for their principles.* Much of the history presented was new to me. I had always subscribed to the "Eisenhower cross-country trip" theory of how the Interstate system came about. Swift makes a convincing case that much of the work was done prior to Eisenhower, some as early as WWI, and much of it under Roosevelt. Eisenhower comes across as a sort of final enabler, and someone who wasn't really paying attention anyway.* We see some of the dealing that went on to make the project happen.

Earl Swift has written a marvelous book about the US interstate road system and the men - and there were a lot of them - behind the scenes, in "The Big Roads". Most people seem to think that the US Interstate system was devised and begun during the Eisenhower administration. It was Eisenhower who approved and began the billions dollar project but planning had begun years before, as the automobile designs improved and costs went down, and people-in-cars took to the roads. At first, cars were used basically to go short distance, but as the 1900's turned into the 1910's, visionaries began to see the need for roads - and good roads - to stretch across the United States. Various government and private companies began working on developing a nationwide system, basically based on the upgrading of already established roads. State governments would approve upgrades in their own states, but there was no country-wide plan. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's plans continued to be made but not necessarily implemented. Notice was taken of the autobahn system being developed AND built in Germany. Strange how those beautifully developed four lane highways went out to the country's borders and not from city to city within Germany...

Strange. After WW2, the US government realised they had to begin building the Interstate system. Added cartage of goods and materiel during war-time had shown how inadequate US road system truly was. It was under Eisenhower, who, curiously had been part of a government study as an Army officer in the 1930's of the country's transportation system, that the national United States Interstate system was finally developed, approved, and built. Begun in the 1950's, roads are still being built and fixed today.

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