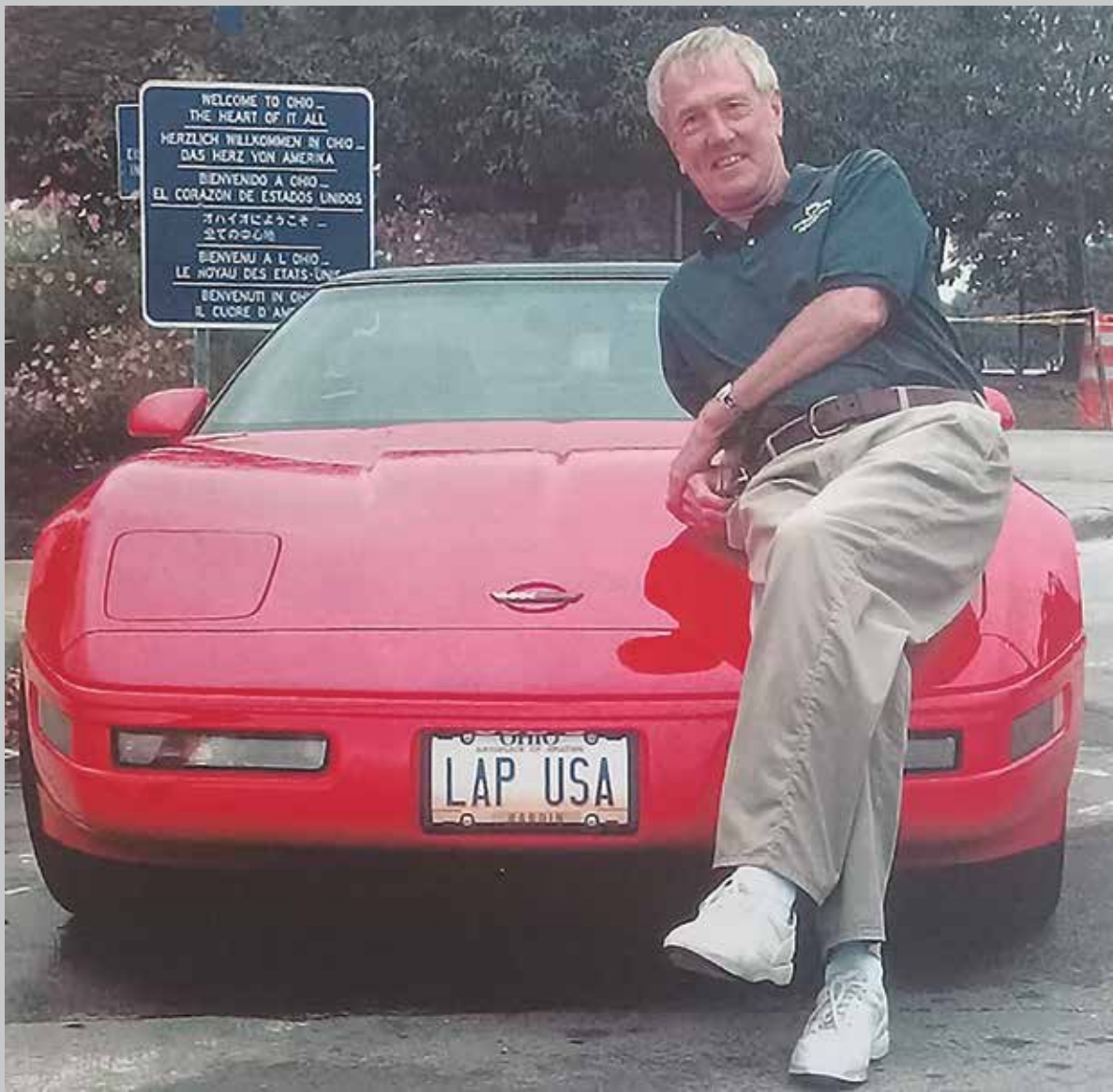


Lapping America: A Man, A Corvette, and the Interstates



Claude Clayton Smith

This is an excerpt from Claude Clayton Smith's book *Lapping America: A Man, A Corvette, and the Interstates*, published by Burford Books, 2006.

I THOUGHT I HAD COME UP WITH the perfect vanity plates for my big trip—LAP USA. After all, that’s exactly what I was doing, making a grand lap of America, one turn on the Interstates around the perimeter of the forty-eight states. But not everybody read those plates the same way. One college student at an Ohio rest area wanted to know what kind of laptop I was using. He had an Apple Powerbook G3/300 with third-generation power PC chips and he was going to speed bump that puppy to 400 megahertz. What did I think of that? I told him I thought Megahertz was a giant car rental company and he shook his head in disgust. Then there was the woman of a certain profession at a Mississippi Welcome Center who offered to use my lap in any way I wanted. I respectfully declined. So much for vanity plates. LAP USA. I think next time I’ll go incognito. But it’s hard to do in a red Corvette.

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I left on a Monday—September 13, 1999—toward the end of a summer filled with disasters both natural and man-made. The East Coast was burning up, the West Coast was burning down, and the hurricane season was brewing in the Atlantic. We’d endured the loss of John-John,

a string of mass murders, and were in the throes of the Y2K countdown. Hurricane Dennis had lingered through Labor Day, ending vacations prematurely and sending children back to school in a sour mood. But in Ohio all was green and quiet. Our little village of Ada had somehow escaped the droughts that were ravaging the nation. The weather had been beautiful for days—blue skies and low humidity with temperatures no more than eighty—absolutely perfect for my departure. Until the very last minute.

Sunday night I woke to what sounded like rain on the roof. Then my big day dawned dark and drizzly, foggy and cold—Charles Lindbergh weather. An Internet check revealed that Hurricane Floyd was on the way, a Category 4 storm threatening to become a “Cat-5.” Weather-watchers were unanimous in their warnings: “Keep a very, very close eye on the progress of this major hurricane!” But there was more. The season’s ninth tropical depression had been upgraded to a tropical storm—Gert. I’d have to deal with both her and her big brother a week or so down the road.

Backing the ’Vette from the garage at 8:15 AM, I hit a switch and the headlights somersaulted out of the sleek hood to reveal the slanting rain. It was the first time I’d used



the headlights, the first time the car had ever been rained on. Not good vibes. In the headlights' full glare, my wife and older son, who had not yet returned to college (our younger son was already on campus), stood silhouetted in the garage. I was abandoning home, job, and family (with everyone's blessing!) to pursue a long-standing personal dream. With a toot of the horn I slipped into the fog, then headed up Main Street to I-75.

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I-75 to Toledo cuts through the wide-open outback of northwest Ohio. The terrain—mostly farmland planted with corn, wheat, and soybeans—is flat, but not oppressively so. In some places it might be said to roll, but I have a friend in Maryland who says I'm deceived by this, that I've been living in Ohio for too long. Still, the I-75 landscape has two distinct features that I would see nowhere

else in America. The first is an abundance of farm ponds. You see a farm pond every few minutes. At every entrance, exit, and overpass, farm ponds hug the highway to either side. Some are fringed with cattails, others have sandy beaches, and a few are protected from the west wind by rows of white pine. The shorelines are ringed with riprap, chunky gray quarry stone that prevents the banks from eroding. Almost all are rectangular—some long and thin, others nearly square—but very few are round, the more natural shape you'd expect.

The second feature—totally annoying compared to the pastoral farm ponds—is the woodlots. Having grown up back East, I'm used to forests that run on and on. You can't tell where they begin and you can't tell where they end. Eastern forests are continuous, but not so in northwest Ohio, where forest is entirely the wrong word. Trees occur across the horizon in scattered woodlots ranging in size from a few acres to several hundred. Ohio was once totally forested, but pioneers developed special methods of clear-cutting, notching trunks across a wide area so that the crash of a single tree would tumble many more, like matchsticks. Once the land was cleared and the stumps had been exhumed, subsequent growths returned—where allowed—in neurotic units. Hence the regular

blocks of elm, oak, swamp maple, thorny locust, and tall cottonwoods that fill the air in summer with a pillowy fluff.

At nine-thirty I pulled into a rest area just south of Bowling Green. The outside temperature, according to my dashboard monitor, had risen to a damp sixty-five degrees, the rain but a drizzle. I-75 rest areas are welcome oases—entirely green, entirely clean. This one was no exception. Trucks to the left, cars to the right. Then an attractive brick comfort station, with picnic tables and charcoal grills along winding sidewalks through a grove of tall trees. I parked among a host of empty spaces at the far end of the lot, just beyond a green Corvette the same year as mine. Its driver, returning from the brick building, waved briefly and the unexpected gesture thrilled me, my first ever from a fellow 'Vette owner, confirming my membership in some sort of club. In the weeks to come I would count fifty-eight Corvettes around the nation—mostly in Texas and Florida—exchanging salutes with many of the drivers. But that initial nod of recognition seemed to validate my mission, a moment of Corvette karma that dispelled the uncertainty I was beginning to feel about getting out of my own 'Vette to ask total strangers about the Interstates.

Inside, I approached an attractive young woman by the water fountain. "The Interstates?" she said. "I don't



know. I slept most of the way. He drove." She nodded at her husband, who was exiting the men's room. An elderly Canadian gentleman followed, stopping to wait for his wife. "The Interstates are the only roads we ever take for any distance," he said. "They're clean, well serviced, and in good shape. We're just returning from Branson, Missouri."

Outside again, I explained to a lanky trucker and his shorter driving-partner what a colleague had said about trucks ruining the Interstates.

"You tell that guy," the tall one said, "that everything in his home is delivered by trucks. The railroads can't do it as fast. The economy



would fold without trucks on the Interstates.”

His partner tugged on the bill of his cap. “The main problem for us is the damn construction. It’s dangerous ‘cause it takes so long to get done. Meanwhile, people’s gettin’ killed.”

On my way back to the ‘Vette I took note of two signs. One said Welcome To Ohio . . . The Heart Of It All, a message repeated in German, Spanish, Japanese, French, and Italian—the only Interstate sign I would see in all of America in more than two

languages. The second, which I’d see more frequently, said The Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate Highways, its words surrounded by five white stars for the five-star general. Having never served in the military, I gave it my best Corvette salute.

In Toledo I picked up I-80 and my grand lap officially began. Until then I’d felt like Sal Paradise in Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*: “All the way up I’d been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north.” It was the late forties and Sal was headed west. But I was heading east. Except for a few hundred miles between Albany and Boston and again between Orono, Maine, and the Canadian border, I was familiar with the Interstates as far as Savannah, Georgia. I was saving the best for last. Beyond Savannah— if anything was left down there after Floyd and Gert had done their dirt—the thousands of miles remaining would be new for me, all the way around to Chicago, just five hours from home.

Stopping for a ticket at the tollbooth, I was overwhelmed by a sense of occasion. I had ten thousand miles ahead of me, the entire circumference of the forty-eight states, and as I plucked the ticket from the automatic metal mouth, I was struck by the enormity of what I was undertaking. Then the ticket was in my shirt pocket and I flew from the gate. *

image credits



The Interstate Highway System

The government’s effort to construct a national network of highways began with the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, but the nation’s revenue needs associated with World War I prevented any significant implementation of this policy, which expired in 1921. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921 then provided funds for an ambitious project to construct a national road grid of interconnected “primary highways,” which also set up a method for state highway planners to cooperate with this project. As automobile traffic increased, planners saw a need for such an interconnected national system to supplement the existing, largely non-freeway, United States Numbered Highways system. A boom in road construction followed throughout the decade of the 1920s. By the late 1930s, planning had expanded to a system of new superhighways.

The Interstate Highway System gained a champion in President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was influenced by his experiences as a young Army officer crossing the country in the 1919 Motor Transport Corps convoy that drove across America. He recalled that, “The old convoy had started me thinking about good two-lane highways . . . the wisdom of broader ribbons across our land.” In 1954, Eisenhower appointed General Lucius D. Clay to head a committee charged with proposing a plan for an interstate highway system. It was evident to everyone that the country needed better highways—for safety, for defense purposes, and for a growing economy.

Clay’s committee proposed a 10-year, \$100 billion program (\$1.17 trillion in 2024) that would build 40,000 miles of divided highways

linking all American cities with a population of greater than 50,000. In June 1956, Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 into law. Under the act, the federal government would pay for 90 percent of the cost of construction of Interstate Highways. Milestones in the completion of the project:

October 17, 1974: Nebraska becomes the first state to complete all of its mainline Interstate Highways.

October 12, 1979: The final section of the Canada to Mexico freeway Interstate 5 is dedicated near Stockton, California.

August 22, 1986: The final section of the coast-to-coast I-80 (San Francisco, California, to Teaneck, New Jersey) is dedicated on the western edge of Salt Lake City, Utah, making I-80 the world’s first contiguous freeway to span from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

August 10, 1990: The final section of coast-to-coast I-10 (Santa Monica, California, to Jacksonville, Florida) is dedicated.

September 12, 1991: I-90 becomes the final coast-to-coast Interstate Highway (Seattle, Washington, to Boston, Massachusetts) to be completed with the dedication of an elevated viaduct bypassing Wallace, Idaho.

October 14, 1992: The original Interstate Highway System is proclaimed to be complete with the opening of I-70 through Glenwood Canyon in Colorado.