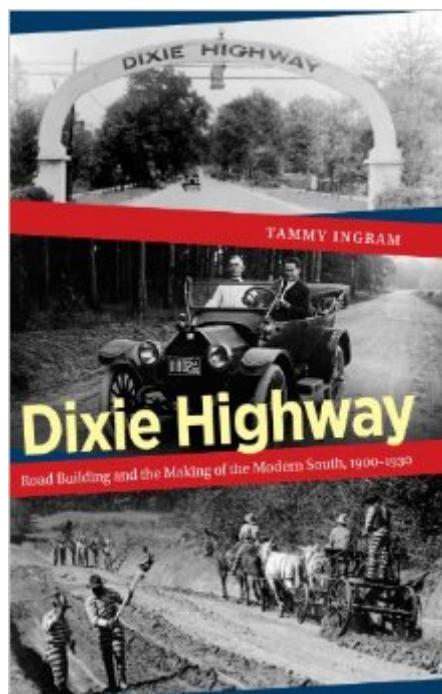


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Dixie Highway: Road Building And The Making Of The Modern South, 1900-1930



Synopsis

At the turn of the twentieth century, good highways eluded most Americans and nearly all southerners. In their place, a jumble of dirt roads covered the region like a bed of briars. Introduced in 1915, the Dixie Highway changed all that by merging hundreds of short roads into dual interstate routes that looped from Michigan to Miami and back. In connecting the North and the South, the Dixie Highway helped end regional isolation and served as a model for future interstates. In this book, Tammy Ingram offers the first comprehensive study of the nation's earliest attempt to build a highway network, revealing how the modern U.S. transportation system evolved out of the hard-fought political, economic, and cultural contests that surrounded the Dixie's creation. The most visible success of the Progressive Era Good Roads Movement, the Dixie Highway also became its biggest casualty. It sparked a national dialogue about the power of federal and state agencies, the role of local government, and the influence of ordinary citizens. In the South, it caused a backlash against highway bureaucracy that stymied road building for decades. Yet Ingram shows that after the Dixie Highway, the region was never the same.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book may be about a road, but it is really about much more. It is a book about the political backstory to road building and, as such, highlights something we all take for granted in our modern age. Who ever thinks to question the presence or persistence of roads? They are such an organic part of our daily lives, but few stop to think about how roads became part of our culture, our politics,

and our daily lives. Dixie Highway explains the fraught and complicated processes by which modern roads and modern road building became a constant and lasting part of our political discourse. Perhaps most illuminating about Dixie Highway is the fact that road building was not always seen as a natural and positive good. While most recognized the essential role that roads would play in the dawning automobile age, the funding, construction, routing, and control of such roads inspired some of the most deeply contentious domestic debates in early twentieth-century politics. As entrepreneurs, businessmen, politicians, and local people conceived of and planned modern highways during the Progressive Era, road-building projects created deep and long-lasting political tensions over local, state, and federal power. Supporters of modern highways recognized that roads required massive bureaucracies, modern technologies, and federal dollars to work. Tensions quickly emerged, however, as some in the rural South feared losing local control to distant bureaucracies and insisted on preserving inefficient, but racially exploitative forms of labor to maintain roads within their local communities. In the case of the Dixie Highway, it seemed that everybody wanted modern roads, but nobody could agree on how to pay for them, build them, and manage them.

Tammy Ingram's "Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930" is everything a good academic history should be. It takes a topic – in this case, the building of the Dixie Highway in the 1910s and 1920s – and explains it in terms of the surrounding cultural and political events. This is not a road trip narrative or a nostalgic look back at a bygone era of dirt-road travel. It's a serious examination of the politics of road building at the dawn of the automobile age, and how this new force shaped – and was shaped by – the politics of race, the economics of the rural South and the natural inclination of voters to grow less trusting of politicians and bureaucrats the further away they are from the county seat. The Dixie Highway was not, like Route 66 or the Lincoln Highway, a single road spanning from sea to shining sea. It was a collection of routes running from the upper Midwest into the South. The brainchild of Carl Graham Fisher, a real estate magnate, auto entrepreneur and a founder of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the road was promoted and – at first – paid for by private interests under the aegis of the Dixie Highway Association. These businessmen promoted the road building, understanding early on that more cars meant more business, faster delivery of products and a way to develop a tourism industry. Ingram expertly delineates the competing interests. By 1921 the politics of highway construction proved to be about far more than just roads, she writes. They encapsulated the political growing pains of a nation conflicted over the role of government in a modernizing world. Those pains

continue to resonate almost a hundred years later.

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