



Remembering Roadside America: Preserving the Recent Past as Landscape and Place

John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle

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The use of cars and trucks over the past century has remade American geography—pushing big cities ever outward toward suburbanization, spurring the growth of some small towns while hastening the decline of others, and spawning a new kind of commercial landscape marked by gas stations, drive-in restaurants, motels, tourist attractions, and countless other retail entities that express our national love affair with the open road. By its very nature, this landscape is ever changing, indeed ephemeral. What is new quickly becomes old and is soon forgotten.

In this absorbing book, John Jakle and Keith Sculle ponder how “Roadside America” might be remembered, especially since so little physical evidence of its earliest years survives. In straightforward and lively prose, supplemented by copious illustrations—historic and modern photographs, advertising postcards, cartoons, roadmaps—they survey the ways in which automobility has transformed life in the United States. Asking how we might best commemorate and preserve this part of our past—which has been so vital economically and politically, so significant to the cultural aspirations of ordinary Americans, yet so often ignored by scholars who dismiss it as kitsch—they propose the development of an actual outdoor museum that would treat seriously the themes of our roadside history.

Certainly, museums have been created for frontier pioneering, the rise of commercial agriculture, and the coming of water- and steam-powered industrialization and transportation, especially the railroad. Is now not the time, the authors ask, for a museum forcefully exploring the automobile’s emergence and the changes it has brought to place and landscape? Such a museum need not deny the nostalgic appeal of roadsides past, but if done properly, it could also tell us much about what the authors describe as “the most important kind of place yet devised in the American experience.”

John A. Jakle is Emeritus Professor of Geography at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Keith A. Sculle is the former head of research and education at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. They have coauthored such books as *America’s Main Street Hotels: Transiency and Community in the Early Automobile Age*; *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America*; *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*; and *The Gas Station in America*.

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