Romance and the historic road

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Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road

Route of the Kukini

When people ask me what my favourite historic road is I have difficulty identifying a single standout. But when people ask me about my most memorable drive I never hesitate – a midnight drive along Hawaii's historic Hana Road on the Island of Maui. It may be semantics, but a few years ago this great historic road, a new CD and a full moon conspired to create the most memorable, and romantic, drive of my life.

I had arrived late in the evening at the Kahului Airport on the island. The heavy tropical night air wrapped around me – its familiar scents carried on the warm breezes passing through the open-air terminal. I was going to the tiny village of Hana to conduct public workshops focused on the cultural landscape and, not surprisingly, the historic highway. Hana is a mere fifty miles (80 km) from the airport, but the narrow winding historic road with its fifty-plus one lane bridges required well over two hours in the best of circumstances – considerably more when choked with tourists in their shiny red convertibles. I opted for a more sedate silver sedan. 'You're not driving to Hana tonight,' a concerned rental agent asked as I signed the agreement. 'The Hana Road is winding and narrow; it will be very dark – besides, there'll be no place to stay when you get there.' I assured her I had accommodations (a favourite house overlooking an ancient Hawaiian fish pond and within earshot of the surf) and that I was familiar with the road.

I was VERY familiar with the road. I had driven it, studied it, photographed it and crawled under its bridges. I had read reports, talked with Native Hawaiians, reviewed the transportation department's new safety proposals and met with local leaders. I was ready for the drive – I was looking forward to the drive.

Before I left town I stopped at Borders Books and Music superstore on the commercial strip that had so surprised and appalled me on my first visit to the island - how naive of me not to expect the same modern trappings of civilization in our fiftieth state. I was over that now and welcomed the late-night opportunity to purchase the newest CD by Keali'i Reichel - a Native Hawaiian singer reviving traditional music and language with contemporary melodies. I set out. As the lights of Kahului disappeared around the silhouette of yet another hill. To get to that stretch of highway would mean turning inland, or 'mauka' waters that still scoured the coastline of the island. I gripped the wheel and descended into the blackness of the rainforest and the haina curwenes of the shelf road. It was midnight. I popped in my new CD. The full moon etched the obsidian sea with iridescent crescents as Keali'i Reichel's rich tones floated out into the night air and intertwined with the rushing falls and roaring surf below.

The air was cool and heavy. In areas the blue-black pavement was interrupted by the silvery wash of earlier rains. Through the glistening foliage, and across the deep fold in the landscape, I could make out the line of the highway ahead until it disappeared around the silhouette of yet another hill. To get to that stretch of highway would mean turning inland, or 'mauka' as the Hawaiians say, and crossing one of the simple concrete bridges nestled in a landscape cleft high above the impatient waters that still scoured the coastline of the island.

I turned the car mauka to meet the bridge – the headlights picking up the bold pink and orange petals of the impatiens that now grew wild on the mossy banks. The car slowed to make the tight curve; I slowed to enjoy the moonlit falls. I stopped on the bridge and stepped out of the car onto the damp pavement. A cool mist fell gently. Despite the action of the ocean and the falls, it was profoundly silent. I felt alone, but not lonely. I closed my eyes, and breathing in deeply tried to capture the beauty of the moment.

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757. How the Polynesians discovered this isolated land mass may remain a mystery, but is certainly one of the great accomplishments of science, transportation and faith in human history. Here, until 'discovered' by Captain Cook in 1778, the Hawaiian people remained in the Stone Age until thrust into the modern world. Their lack of metallurgy or a written language did not, however, equate to a lack of culture or the development of a sophisticated infrastructure. In fact one of the great accomplishments of the Hawaiians was the well-engineered roads that ringed many of the islands.

The Hana Road was arguably the greatest. Begun in the early sixteenth century by King Pi'ilani (d. 1527), the 'Alaloa,' or long-road, was completed by his brother King Kahi'polani in 1516. The four-to-six foot wide 138-mile-long road (222 km) was the first paved ring road in the Hawaiian Islands. Paved in lava rock it was used as a military road, facilitated the collection of taxes and served as a communication conduit along which specially trained runners known as 'kukini' travelled with news of the island. It would later serve as the route of the island's automobile belt road in the early twentieth century.

I was travelling the route of the Kukini – travelling along a nearly five-hundred-year-old corridor engineered and constructed on the head of a pin in the Pacific Ocean. I gripped the wheel and descended into the blackness of the rainforest and the hairpin curvemes of the shelf road. It was midnight. I popped in my new CD. The full moon etched the obsidian sea with iridescent crescents as Keali'i Reichel's rich tones floated out into the night air and intertwined with the rushing falls and roaring surf below.

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The Hana Road lives within the culture of the island. It treads lightly on the landscape, takes no more than required for its function, and ages like a respected elder - slow to change and generous if consulted. It has shared its secrets with the gentle travellers who have been patient and observant from generation to generation and from century to century. It was getting late and I didn't want to leave the bridge and the falls; but knowing the road ahead I decided to push on to Hana through the silvery blackness. Tracing the edge of the Pacific, I moved with the rhythm of the road, guided by the moonlight, welcomed by the scented air and content in my peace. I didn't pass another car that night.

The romance of historic roads

It has been six years since my romantic drive along the historic Hana Road and for some reason that memory still haunts me at the unlikeliest of times. A slight bump, the tropical breezes evaporate, the moonlight fades and I am brought back to reality. I am flying over the Canadian Rockies high above the planet and far from Hawaii. The setting sun is casting a warm golden light over jagged snow-capped peaks so bold and expansive that 'endless' seems the only appellation capable of grasping the magnitude of the landscape. My destination, more than 600 kilometres north of the beautiful port city of Vancouver: Dawson Creek - the starting point of the legendary Alaska Highway. I am filled with anticipation; my mind is filled with sepia images of soldiers and machinery. How completely different from the Hana Road. 'How completely different from…' My mind wanders again.

Exactly one week ago I was in the once glamorous, now faded Aztec Hotel on historic US Route 66 in the desert foothills high above Los Angeles. My room was dingy, but overlooking the road the great American novelist John Steinbeck dubbed 'the Mother Road.' As I looked out the window to the street below I imagined the weary Dust Bowl migrants, in equally weary automobiles, heading for makeshift campsites on the edge of town and desperately scanning the pavement hoping for a glimpse of one of the film stars known to haunt the Aztec in its better days.

Exactly one week from now I will be surrounded by the orange and crimson blaze of the sugar maples in Vermont while exploring some of the first forestry roads in the United States. From there I'll travel across the New England countryside to Boston to drive the serpentine and leafy parkway system designed by the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and affectionately known as the Emerald Necklace. I contemplate these very different roads as the glinting sun washes across the gently rolling walls of the airplane cabin. What is the allure of these historic roads? It is easy to distil each of these roads through landscape, environment, culture, alignment, cross-section and pavement. Yet such clinical analysis cannot measure the anticipation, memories or longing to return that are associated with many of these roads. At what point do paving stones and mathematic equations transcend the reality of engineering and design and enter the realm of the romantic?

From the rocky mountains of British Columbia to the rocky coast of the Atlantic; or the rock strewn desert of California, Arizona or New Mexico and down the dusty remnants of El Camino Real to Mexico City, historic roads are generating unprecedented attention. From the Great North Road constructed in Britain by the Romans over two-thousand years ago to the Great Ocean Road constructed in Australia by returning World War I soldiers in the 1920's, individuals, organizations and governments are recognizing that these familiar resources, some in public service for centuries, provide more than a conduit for movement. They provide an introduction to the past; a glimpse into the technologies, goals, desires and needs of our forebears. This interest in historic roads is clearly beyond a mere appreciation for efficient transportation networks or the cultural influences mobility had on the continents. This is about feeling, association and passion. It is about the prospect of travel, exploration, enlightenment or amnesia, and, in short: opportunity.

I look out the window. The once laborious and dangerous crossing of the Canadian Rockies has been accomplished with the small hardship of a lacklustre beverage service. Below, the groomed fields of the Peace River valley unfold like a green accordion. In the distance a razor sharp line cuts through the autumn-gold aspens: the Alaska Highway? It must be. I watch it reaching toward the edge of the arc of the Northern Hemisphere. I have already travelled the far northern parts of the Alaska Highway, but have been particularly looking forward to this trip to the southern terminus of the highway to visit – to touch – the zero milestone marking the start of the highway. It is a silly goal I try to convince myself; deep down I know it is a pilgrimage. I slip back into my romantic world of historic roads and the memory of my first drive on the Alaska Highway.

Ever since first learning about the Alaska or Al-Can Highway as a boy I had fantasized about driving the military road constructed across Canada and Alaska in a mere nine months during the height of World War II. When I lived in California I promised myself I'd take my trusty Honda and head north – me, my 4-door Civic and 1,523 miles (2,452 km) of isolated gravel road. I was seeking more than the technology of constructing a highway across permafrost or the forgotten stories of the 'Negro' troops or of the native peoples whose villages and lives were forever changed when the rumble of unexpected bulldozers arrived on the horizon. I was seeking 'the road' in its rawest, purist form – a tenuous line of gravel at the top of the world linking Alaska to North America. In this purist of forms no alternate route exists. All become equal on the Alaska Highway regardless of purpose, wealth or wisdom.

The fact that I ultimately made this trip in 1997 in an unmemorable rented vehicle, or that I did not have to kill a moose or stalk a caribou (and lose a digit to frostbite in the process), is irrelevant. What is relevant is my disappointment that much of the Alaskan Highway in the United States was paved and that the Canadians were laying down asphalt in the Yukon at a hurried pace. This construction zone with its frenzied activity was not the rugged highway of my imagination. I had missed that last great drive in North America. Then I rounded the next hill and the smooth black surface abruptly stopped. Before me a gravel trail stretched to infinity across the grey landscape. I had found the Alaska Highway of my mind. All was forgotten and all was forgiven. This was the Alaska Highway! This scene, this environment, this landscape softly lit by the low sun would be indelibly etched in my mind. The bulldozers, trailers and muscled men with orange flags would be forever halted by my imagination – so long as I never returned to this stretch of the Alaska Highway it would be protected. It would never be paved, it would never change.

For all its romance, the Alaska Highway was borne out of fear
and paranoia with a liberal sprinkling of bravado and racism. In 1942, after the horror of Pearl Harbour and the never discussed Japanese occupation of American territory (a few rocky Aleutian Islands) the United States felt a vulnerability from a global conflict it had never before experienced. Alaska with its mineral wealth and strategic positioning was wholly vulnerable and strategically significant. Suddenly the land of the midnight sun, the land of the Eskimos, the territory derided as ‘Seward’s Folly’² when purchased from Russia in 1867 had become a back door carelessly left ajar to Fascism.

With little thought to the environment, weather or indigenous peoples, a route was hastily drawn from Dawson Creek in British Columbia, then the northernmost terminus of North America’s rail network, to Fairbanks, Alaska, the terminus of the Alaska Railroad. In a burst of energy launched from three strategic points the road was simultaneously constructed north and south like the ripples from three stones cast in a boggy mosquito-infested pool. Nearly 11,000 men in trucks, tractors and jeeps felled trees, bridged chasms, filled wetlands and graded the road close on the heels of the survey teams slightly ahead, and still determining the alignment of the route. It was a historic undertaking.

Outside, the sky was shifting from orange to pink as a cool lavender haze absorbed the remaining colour in the landscape. The Alaska Highway was no longer marked by the gold leavings of the aspens but by automobile tiny comets of red and white streaking through the settling blackness. This modern scene sustained my romantic expectations, but did it belie the realities of war, construction and inequity?

I thought about the ‘Negro’ troops that helped construct the highway. I thought about their numbing cold, lack of provisions and segregated campsites. I thought about the emotional burden of being sent to the end of the earth by a government with little faith in their ability to build the road and little care for their well being. Was I romanticizing their hardship or honouring the triumph of the human spirit?

In 1965, twenty-three years after the Alaska Highway was completed, international attention was focused on a rain-splattered and unremarkable stretch of highway in the deepest part of America’s Deep South – Alabama. US Route 80 between Selma and Montgomery, a two-lane stretch of open highway in the process of being ‘four-laned’ at the time, was thrust before the nation and the world as an oppressed people march for five days to demand the right to vote.

Systematically and institutionally denied a legal right to vote by poll taxes, literacy tests and intimidation, black Americans in the South had little say in their government. This began to change in the 1950s. Returning from military service at the end of World War II black soldiers humanized by equality in Europe or inspired by their ability to work together in segregated and highly decorated units, grew increasingly impatient with the ‘Jim Crow’ laws of the South that by practice or tradition limited most aspects of their lives. The discontent was particularly strong in Selma, Alabama home to a highly educated middle class black population.

In the spring of 1965, with the support of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, the people of Selma decided to take their case to the state capitol at Montgomery by organizing a march along the principal highway connecting the two cities. The marchers were twice turned back by violent attacks from the state militia – the second attack on a spring morning ignominiously known ever since as ‘Bloody Sunday.’ Finally, under the watchful eyes of the federal government the marchers started out over the hills and past the poor farms and weathered rural churches of central Alabama. Despite the violence and injustice that compelled 25,000 souls to march fifty-four miles across the countryside, and the uncomfortable soul-searching Americans were compelled to undertake as a result, the event’s purpose, its lofty goals, over time has transcended the ugly realities of the past. Ordinary people, peaceful people, determined people challenged authority, challenged injustice and challenged a fundamental belief in change itself.

Forty years later, a route that by all other accounts would hold no particular romantic attachment, has been proclaimed an ‘All-American Road’ by the Federal government, has been studied and interpreted by the National Park Service and has been lionized by documentaries, books and, in a surprising twist of fate, the Alabama state tourism office.

As I struggled with how to reconcile racism with romance on this historic road, I sought the counsel of two women who had suffered the indignities of the past and were now working to preserve the historic highway. ‘It brings out the best in people,’ they said. By preserving the historic road ‘you contribute to what America hopes to be.’¹³ This is the romance of historic roads.

The end of the road, the beginning of the journey

As the plane touched the tarmac I realized the highway from Selma to Montgomery is not a monument to slavery or injustice. It is the noble vehicle by which these wrongs were righted. The Alaska Highway is not a monument to perseverance or war, but the corridor by which the fragility of our planet and living cultures can be appreciated. And the Hana Road?, a centuries-old lesson in environmental design and thoughtful stewardship.

Visionaries, societies and civilizations have long constructed roads to facilitate communication, commerce and empire. But it is the people who have traveled these historic roads; surveyed, hacked and paved these paths with whom we share our emotions. Fear of the unknown, anticipation of new landscapes, the longing for loved ones. These historic roads are tangible threads, however tenuous, anchored to the planet and spinning through space with the collected hopes and ambitions of travelers through the millennia. We may never be able to capture their longing, fatigue or exhilaration, but we can walk in their footsteps, share their views, breathe their air and rest, think and contemplate our own future along their corridor. This is the reality of historic roads.

On the Alaska Highway I am an explorer, on the Selma to Montgomery Highway I am an activist and on the Hana Road I am the kukini. Sometimes romance becomes reality.

Oh highway I travel, do you say to me ‘Do not leave me?’ Do you say ‘Venture not – if you leave me you are lost?’ Do you say ‘I am already prepared, I am well-beaten and un-denied, adhere to me?’

Oh public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you, You express me better than I can myself, You shall be more to me than my poem.

Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road.
Endnotes

1 The Dust Bowl of the 1930's in the United States encompassed over 25,000 square miles (64,750 sq km). Resulting from poor agricultural practices and over-grazing, and a devastating drought, huge dust clouds rendered the land in many of the plains states worthless. Tens of thousands migrated along US Route 66 to California in hopes of a new life.

2 U.S. Secretary of State William Seward was derided for his $7.2 million purchase of Alaska from Russia as a wasteful expenditure of federal funds for a block of ice.