

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

by John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle

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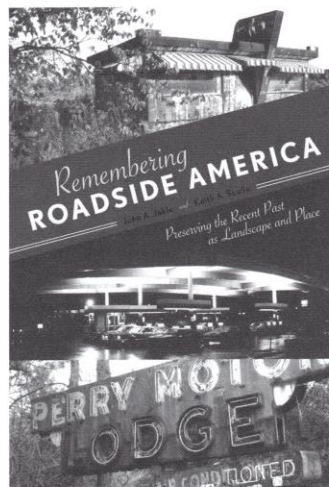
After nearly forty years of collaboration cultural geographer John Jakle and historian and preservationist Keith Sculle have produced their eighth book together focusing on the history of roadside America. In those forty years they have witnessed a growing appreciation for America's roadside all while watching evidence of the past disappear from these "ever changeful" landscapes (p. xv). *Remembering Roadside America* is a "coming to grips" with the challenges of preserving, remembering, and understanding America's roadside history (p. xix).

Auto-related history is woven into a rich discussion of landscape development, architecture, and memory that cites the works of well-known writers such as John Stilgoe, Jane Jacobs, David Lowenthal, and John B. Jackson. As these writers and others have argued, unanticipated consequences—both geographic and social—of rapid roadside development and redevelopment have resulted in the loss of significant material cultural. In fact, it was transportation-related destruction as a result of post-World War II urban renewal policies that gave rise to the modern historic preservation movement.

Although the book makes few specific references to Kansas, its usefulness to Kansas geographers, historians, preservationists, and museum curators should not be overlooked. Kansas has a rich auto-related history dating to the late nineteenth century, when both urban bicyclists and the rural free delivery of mail reinforced the need for good roads. The 1890s through the 1910s, in particular, saw tremendous change to the Kansas landscape as road networks developed and roadside commerce evolved to accommodate automobiles.

The authors suggest that only relics remain from this earliest period of auto-related development and that whole, intact roadsides simply cannot be found. Indeed, recent historic surveys of roadsides in Kansas support this claim. In 2008 the Kansas Historical Society sponsored a study that included documenting a broad spectrum of buildings, structures, and objects constructed between 1900 and the mid-1960s. As the authors argue on a broader scale, the study revealed that the built environment along Kansas's historic roadsides largely reflects post-World War II development that can be generally attributed to postwar prosperity, the ephemeral nature of early auto-related places, and the need to remake properties to appeal to consumers.

Illustrations in *Remembering Roadside America* provide examples of building rehabilitations and creative reuses found throughout America's historic roadside landscape and also highlight key losses like the Coral Court Motel in Marlborough, Missouri. What really concerns Jakle and Sculle, however, is the loss of the broader, collective roadside, which, they argue, lessens our understanding of how people interacted with and



behaved within these landscapes. The notion that the built environment can be a powerful educational tool—particularly from a broad landscape perspective—guides their underlying purpose of advocating multiple approaches to preserving roadside America, including its historic districts, heritage corridors, and outdoor museums.

Each approach offers different conservation and interpretation options, and each has advantages and disadvantages. Historic districts are authentic places, architectural or cultural ensembles that have survived largely in situ, and they are often established as a matter of pride and a way to both slow unwanted change through zoning and spur redevelopment with incentives. Heritage corridors embrace that same notion of authenticity, but with the intention of showcasing an area's history and culture by linking individual places to a common theme through partnerships. These approaches take place in living, functioning places and allow for change and redevelopment that may, over time, erode authenticity.

Outdoor museums, on the other hand, allow for the complete simulation of a landscape for educational and recreational purposes. Typically a replica landscape is achieved using a combination of relocated and reconstructed features. Preservationists caution, though, that interpretation is weakened when a building, structure, or object is plucked out of its original environment and placed in a new, more convenient setting. Jakle and Sculle recognize the importance of preserving buildings and landscapes in situ, but, they argue, outdoor museums allow for an authentic simulation of those earliest roadside landscapes that no longer exist. Outdoor museums are worthy projects, but should not be undertaken without genuine consideration of economic feasibility, expectations, and consequences.

Jakle and Sculle succeed in raising awareness about the loss of historic roadside landscapes and proposing solutions for preserving and remembering these places.

Reviewed by Sarah J. Martin, National Register coordinator, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.