

Get your kicks on Route 20

Hugged U. S. Highway 20 across the Midwest a couple of weeks ago in a post-Covid adventure and came away with impressions, some clear, some painful.

Highway 20: It spans Indiana up north, about a dozen miles south of the Michigan state line and runs from Angola to Gary. It pretty much parallels Interstate 90, so carries only a fraction of the traffic it once did. And that is very much what it has become all the way from downtown Boston across 12 states and 3,3265 to an overlook of the Pacific Ocean in Newport, Oregon. I'm told you can drive it, ocean to ocean, in 60 hours, but I'm not about to try.

This road doesn't get – never has gotten – the romantic patina that Route 66 or the Lincoln Highway – that's U. S. 30 – have acquired, even though it is longer than both. Nat King Cole never sang a note about the joys of Route 20.

In Indiana, it started life as the Old Chicago Road about 1900 and morphed into the Dunes Highway, which was the route of Chicago fun-seekers headed for the Indiana Dunes back in the teens and '20s. If you are a person of both persistence and courage you can still drive it from the Civil War memorial obelisk in the center of Angola all the way across through Shipshewana, Mid-

Ed Breen's column is sponsored by: First Farmer's Bank & Trust—see their ad., below.



A MOMENT

Ed Breen



dlebury, past the legendary Eessenhaus German restaurant, on to Elkhart, the Region and then try to follow its twists and turns through Gary to East Chicago and on into Illinois.

Like most historic American roads, chunks of it have been bitten off and swallowed by the Interstates with which it waltzes here and there across the country. On the 298.3 miles from the Missouri River in Sioux City to the Julian Dubuque Bridge over the Mississippi at Dubuque, Iowa, the U.S. highway designation has pretty much been relocated about a half-mile to the south on the new four-lane design-



A mural painted on a building in Dyersville, Iowa.

nated "520" much of the way, but the highway folks have ben decent enough to label the old route as "Historic U.S. 20" on the slower-paced two lane, where 18 wheelers have pretty much given way to John Deere and Case and Harvester and Oliver farm equipment: Combines, corn planters, chemical applicators, plows, discs, and all the other motorized machinery of American agriculture.

You can still drive through Stockton and Elizabeth and Woodbine and Galena in Jo Daviess County in far northwest Illinois. Not incidentally, early settlers out there named their county to honor a man killed right here in Indiana at

the Battle of Tippecanoe near Lafayette in 1812, the same Jo Daviess for whom Daviess County, Indiana, is named. In fact, you *must* drive through those towns on U.S. 20 because for reasons known only to the Illinois Department of Transportation, those 65 hilly, winding miles are the only ones along the transcontinental trek that are narrow, two-lane highway. Nobody knows why, but if you stray off the porch at President Ulysses S. Grant's house perched on the hill in Galena, or from the balcony on the DeSoto House hotel from which Abraham Lincoln once spoke, the trucks on 20 will make roadkill of you.

On to the west, you can drive right on into Dyersville, Iowa, and be within throwing distance of the legendary "Field of Dreams" baseball diamond, where a major league baseball game between the Yankees and White Sox lost to Covid last summer and is rescheduled for Aug. 12 this season. Recall the last scene in that great movie of 32 years ago, when a long line of cars comes to the ballpark to fulfill the prophesy that "if you build it, they will come"? Well, they're winding their way to the field on old U.S. 20.

Farther to the west, along the straight line ribbon of highway that parallels the old

Illinois Central railroad, the line that brought cattle and corn east in exchange for people with money and ideas moving west, farther along that road are towns whose time has come and gone. To drive anywhere in the Midwest is to find skeletal remains of towns that busied themselves serving farmers long gone and towns that busied themselves making things now made elsewhere.

We live in such a town. And so do thousands of others. Richmond, Muncie, Kokomo, Logansport, Monticello. It is similar if more severe on to the west.

Some are now non-existent. You can locate them and walk the streets only on an old map. Barnum, Iowa, was a farm town: Grocery store, elevator, auto repair, housing for a few hundred souls. And a bar. All are gone and on their way out of town they knocked down the bar.

All of this is by way of suggesting that Jim Fallows has something valuable to tell us, those of us who inhabit rural America. Fallows and his wife Debra hopscotched America, visiting highways and byways, but mainly the people who remain, first in search of material for a book that is now about to hit the screen as "Our Towns."

Next week they shall tell us of their long journey into America.

1 FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST

WHAT IF

this is **the year** you **literally knock** down the **walls?**



Start your **Home Equity** Loan at **FFBT.COM**