Hamburgers and gasoline

U.S. 1 a highway to past

By RANDY WALKER

The roadhouses are mostly deserted now, the used car lots weeded over. A rusting sign offers color TV—just seven miles ahead—at a motel abandoned when Johnson was president. At crumbling Essos and Pures, only cement islands are left of pumps that once measured out thousands of gallons per day.

U.S. Highway 1, U.S. Route 1, Route 1, or just Number 1. It was once the north-south artery of the most mobile people in history, a throbbing thoroughfare of commerce, business and pleasure, fueled on both sides by hamburgers and gasoline. U.S. 1—the Number One Highway of the Number One Nation in the world.

In the age of interstates and oil cartels, America's Number One Highway hangs on to a boarded-up memory of its former glory.

It's a fine October afternoon. I cruise north on Interstate 85 in a 1965 Thunderbird, heading home to Richmond. The Thunderbird, once the arrogant ruler of the highways, struggles to keep up; Datsuns and Mazdas blow by it without even a glance of respect. Full of gadgets and chrome, the 'Bird seems out of place among the plastic and pasteboard gas misers of the '80s.

The sign rises ahead—Norlina Exit—Route 1. Getting off the interstate is like dropping out of warp drive into normal space. Relaxing, I adjust the electric seat and raise the power antenna.

Compared to the access-controlled interstate, U.S. 1 is primitive and slow. It rolls over hills, rather than blasting through them, and winds from town to town, rather than boring from city to city in all-out straightaways. Yet, in its heyday, U.S. 1 was the best in highway technology.

Passing by the abandoned Hawtree Motel in Norlina, I imagine the bustling Route 1 of the '50s. Chrome barges with grills like battering rams charged down the highway, past service stations fighting to sell gas at 29 cents a gallon. Businessmen on their way to New York stopped for the night at the Magic Fingers Motel. Families on their way to Florida pulled in at the Route 1 Diner for barbecue, fries and shakes.

Now convenience stores with self-serve gas sell Red Man to locals. The independent grills and motels have been replaced by Burger Chefs and Holiday Inns clustering around I-85's exits.

The government made the Interstates. But the government also made Route 1.

Before the First World War, the United States could have been Siberia as a far as roads were concerned. The future Route 1 was little better than the Indian trails and colonial trade routes it had evolved from. The government left marking highways up to women's groups, chambers of commerce and auto clubs; trans-continental routes were marked by painted poles stuck in the ground at crossroads.

In 1925, the Secretary of Agriculture appointed a Joint Board on Interstate Highways to untangle the anarchy. The Board came up with this scheme: Main east-west routes would be given even numbers, starting with 10 in the north and working down to 90 in Florida. North-south routes would be given odd numbers; 1 in the East, 101 in California.

Thus a shield with "1" on it became the symbol of this strip of pavement that runs from Key West to the Quebec border.

South Hill, Virginia, lies somewhere in the middle. I pull in at the West End Restaurant for barbecue and a beer.

The King of the Road Trippers, Jack Kerouac himself, may have eaten barbecue in this very booth. Almost certainly he blew through South Hill in the late '40s, probably in a creaking Hudson jammed full of bodies, bop music wailing out the window.

The postwar years—the Neon Age of America On The Road. The veterans returned to make up for the lost years of their lives. As the war economy switched from battleships to Buicks, from P-51s to Plymouths, the new rich Americans exploded down the highways, leaving a trail of rubber and money. They had to eat. They had to sleep. And above all, their cars needed gasoline. And along the highways motor inns, restaurants and filling stations thrived.

But the abundance of traffic that brought life to the U.S. routes also signaled the end. They just could not handle the huge increase in mileage, the higher speed limits, the heavier vehicles. A new concept was needed—a wide, high-speed, limited access freeway to funnel traffic to the centers of population and industry, bypassing the county courthouses and junctions that only slowed things down. In 1956 Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act, authorizing the construction of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

That is, the interstates.

I shift the Thunderbird into warp drive, using Interstate 95 to avoid the tortuous path Route 1 takes through Petersburg. A few minutes later Petersburg is gone; I never even saw it. At the next exit I drop out of hyperspace and pull onto U.S. 1 for the last time.

The stretch from Petersburg to Richmond was the glittering gateway to the great Northeastern Megalopolis. U.S. 1 rolls through a thousand nameless nowhere-villes on the way, but in its prime it tied together the meccas of American civilization. Here, on the southern fringe, an orgy of empty motels reminds me of the days when hundreds of heated swimming pools and thousands of color TVs soothed the travelers of the Auto Age.

Coming into Richmond I pull my car off Route 1, again for the last time. I'm selling the Thunderbird. Gas in 1981 is just too expensive for a car built in 1965. Besides, I can't stand putting regular into a car built to burn now-unavailable premium.

Richmond is my destination. But what about Route 1? Once the symbol of the Nation On Wheels, it is now used only by locals for two- or three-mile hops along its 1500-mile stretch.

According to the Virginia Highway Department, 598 Virginia cars and 1548 out-of-state used Route 1 near the North Carolina border on an average day in 1956. In 1980, the local count had increased to slightly to 880, while the out-of-state count had fallen 94 percent to 90 cars per day.

The Golden Age of U.S. 1 began the day we defeated Japan and ended World War II. Now Japan has taken over the roads of America, and Route 1 is a highway of ghosts, a road with no destination.

But in a way, it never had a destination. When Arabs were still romantic nomads driving camels over burning sands, travel was an end in itself, the road itself the goal. Just get yourself a car, a car like a spaceship with rocket fins and gleaming chrome and a dashboard full of lights and switches, and America's Number One Highway would take you wherever you wanted to go. S

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The shield, above, with a "1" on it became the symbol of the nation's Number One Highway. The neon, to the left, burned out years ago at the #1 Motel and Good Food Restaurant.

Photos by Randy Walker