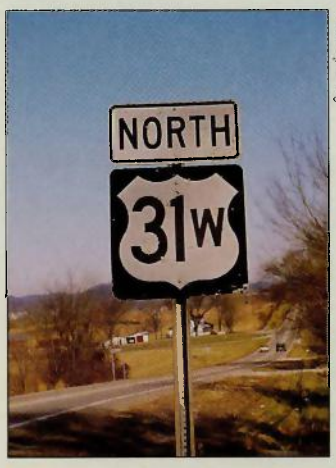


Kentucky Living

Driving Down The Dixie

By Nancy Farmer

Artifacts you won't see along the interstate make traveling US 31 a trip back in time

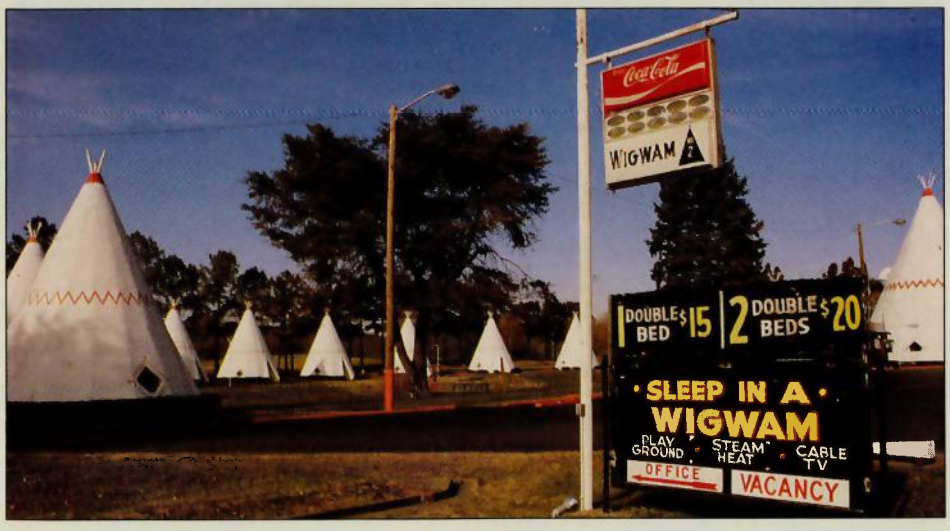
Touring is a lost art. Americans used to be excellent tourists, back when cars paused for trains and traffic lights, before they had air conditioners or FM radio. Interstate highways have lured travelers off the scenic old routes as Americans have shifted their focus from the journey to the destination.

John Steinbeck saw it coming as early as 1960. "When we get these thruways across America, as we will and as we must," he wrote, "it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing."

He was right. Whenever interstate highways opened, motorists abruptly abandoned the old roads with their villages and hamlets, leaving them to shrink and, in some cases, fade into ghost towns.

But some communities survive, with tourist courts and roadside cafes, neon signs and lighthouse filling stations. They're like lost civilizations, remnants of the past, with businesses that cater to local traffic and a few die-hard tourists.

Nowhere is there a better place than Kentucky to step back in time to relive the joy of traveling the backroads. Centered in



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Wigwam Village, between Cave City and Horse Cave, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

the country and stretching 411 miles east to west, Kentucky was a pass-through state for millions of northern vacationers seeking to warm themselves in Dixie's sun.

At one time there were four "best routes to the south" that cut through the state on the way to Miami: US 25 from Bay City, Michigan; US 27 from Cheboygan, Michigan; US 41, the Dixie Bee-Line from Copper Harbor, Wisconsin; and US 31 from Chicago. Businesses along these routes banded together in "Dixie Highway" associations to publish maps promoting their highways and lobby transportation departments to improve the roads.

Traffic became so heavy along US 31 that the road was divided into two branches, forming a slender loop between Louisville and Nashville. The loop exists today, and the sights along the way offer some of the best back-road exploration to be found anywhere.

From Louisville, US 31E unfolds across rolling hills to Bardstown, where Tom Pig's Restaurant still opens at 5 a.m., serving "breakfast anytime" and home-cooked plate lunches. In 1927, Tom Pig's was located in the heart of Bardstown. But hoping to catch hungry travelers first, a new owner ripped up the old marble counter and cast iron stools and moved the business to the town's edge in the 1950s.

Tom Pig's thrives in an old filling station, a rock building with somebody's seashell collection pressed into wet cement.

Historic sites have always been favorite tourist stops, and not far from Tom Pig's, My Old Kentucky Home, with its belles in crinolines and memories of Stephen Foster, still inspires motorists to pause.

Forty years ago, visitors to Judge Rowan's Kentucky Home were content that most of the family's heirlooms had been moved out, replaced with new "colonial" furnishings. Yesterday's tourists enjoyed mere suggestions of the past; today's can see an authentic restoration, the result of scholars and master craftsmen.

Past old Talbott Tavern, where stagecoach travelers found a night's rest in 1779, a green porcelain and neon sign announces "Old Kentucky Home Motel." It resembles George Washington's Mt. Vernon more than Kentucky's famous homeplace. Well kept with black and white heavy tiles in the bathrooms and little coffee pots that plug directly into the wall in each room, the motel still sells postcards

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to send back home: "Having a great time. Wish you were here."

Picture postcards and auto-touring went hand in hand. Families collected cards, filling albums so they could relive their journeys and share them with friends for years after.

Before the automobile became a fixture on the landscape, travelers rode trains from point to point (no stopping in the middle, just as with interstate traveling today), and found rest and refreshment at places such as New Haven's Sherwood Inn, built in 1875.

On October 1, 1913, a fire raged in downtown New Haven leveling one whole city block. Thomas Hardin Johnson thought his Sherwood Inn was safe, that the tracks would provide a fire break. But a spark caught the wind and the old Inn burned to the ground. He started rebuilding immediately, but with automobile traffic picking up on New Haven's dirt Main Street, he faced a difficult decision: should he orient his new front door to railroad traffic as in the past, or would this "newfangled" automobile catch on, diverting business toward the road?

In 1913, driving a motor car, sometimes called "air sailing," was still largely a hobby for the wealthy few and a novelty for onlookers. But Henry Ford had just perfected his mass-assembly line, automobile prices were falling and a wave of enthusiasm was sweeping the nation among people thrilled with their newfound mobility.

Johnson made the safe choice, angling his new door 45 degrees to the tracks and 45 degrees to the road. When travelers today cross the diagonal threshold, they still find murals G.O. Bell painted in 1914, and a metal stove with stoker coal warming a golden oak bar that was moved from Boston, Kentucky, just after Nelson Countians voted their town dry. They also find Johnson's grandson, Errol, still serving refreshments to weary travelers.

Across the street in a plain brick building with a Rainbow Bread screen door, another grandchild continues her family's business. Janice Vittitow runs the store Chester Howard and her father, Paul, opened in 1933, during the Great Depression. Howard's General Merchandise sells everything. "If we don't have it, you don't need it," Janice says.

The store is a traveler's delight with fresh fruit, bologna sandwiches, fishing tackle and iron skillets. From the wooden mezzanine, which circles three walls of the store, the light of a bare 300-watt bulb illuminates the stock and shines brightly on the old airplane-shaped fan from Belknap's in the '30s. Once a year, Janice has to climb up and drip two drops of 3-in-1 Oil on the wingless plane-fan; but when she pulls the cord dangling over the cash register, the propeller spins and the whole store cools down.

The sense of bygone eras, of bringing

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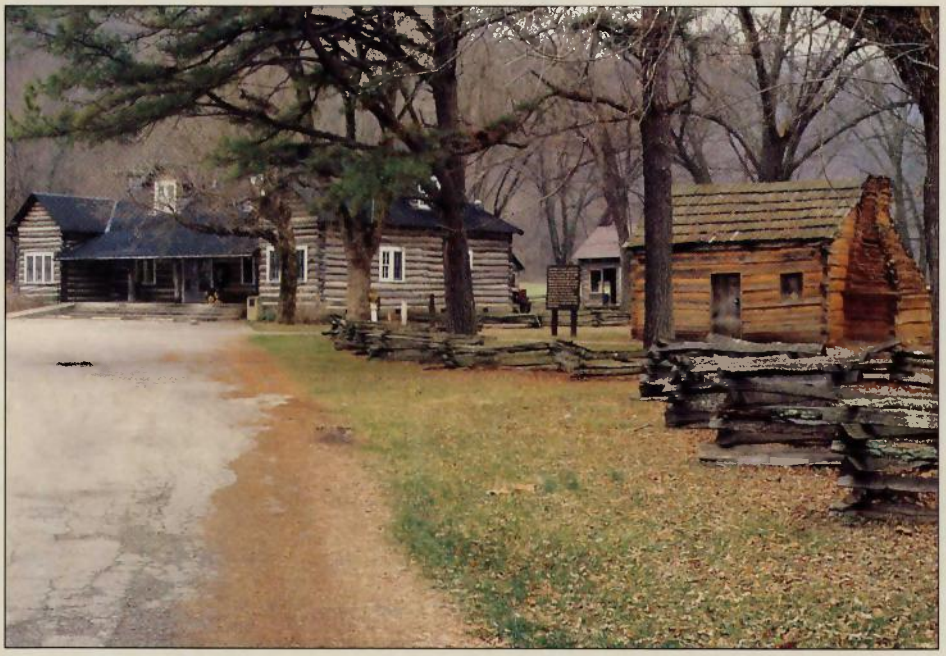

Abraham Lincoln's "boyhood home" is a popular attraction even though his family never lived there.

history to life, is found everywhere on the backroads. Appealing to all travelers' tastes, tributes to Abraham Lincoln abound in LaRue County — from the milk shake honoring the Great Emancipator at Ruthie's Lincoln Freeze (a roadside refreshment stop) to the dignified bronze statue on Hodgenville's town square; from Joel Ray's Lincoln Jamboree to the Lincoln Museum downtown.

In a wooded valley near Knob Creek, Lincoln's Boyhood Home arrived in 1889. Historians say Abraham Lincoln's neighbors, not his family, lived in the tiny log cabin before it was moved near the road. But it's a real traffic-stopper. So in 1933 an industrious entrepreneur put a bigger log building next door and opened the Lincoln Tavern and Dance Hall.

The ladies of LaRue County didn't think drinking and dancing were a fitting tribute to a great American president, and launched a successful campaign to shut down the tavern in the '50s.

For its important role in American tourism and social history, the Lincoln complex is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With picnic tables, a comfortable old swing, and a well-stocked gift shop, Lincoln's Boyhood Home remains a popular tourist stop in LaRue County.

On down the road, just beyond the Lincoln Memorial Motel and Tourist Cabins (identified with a neon marker), an elegant shrine designed by world-renown architect James Russell Pope elevates a tiny log cabin — Lincoln's birthplace. That cabin has traveled more than most Americans, spending time in New York's Central Park and Public Library and appearing at Tennessee's Centennial Exposition near replicas of the Parthenon and Egyptian pyramids. There's talk about moving it to the basement of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., but such talk isn't popular locally. The attraction still pulls in more than 300,000 tourists annually.

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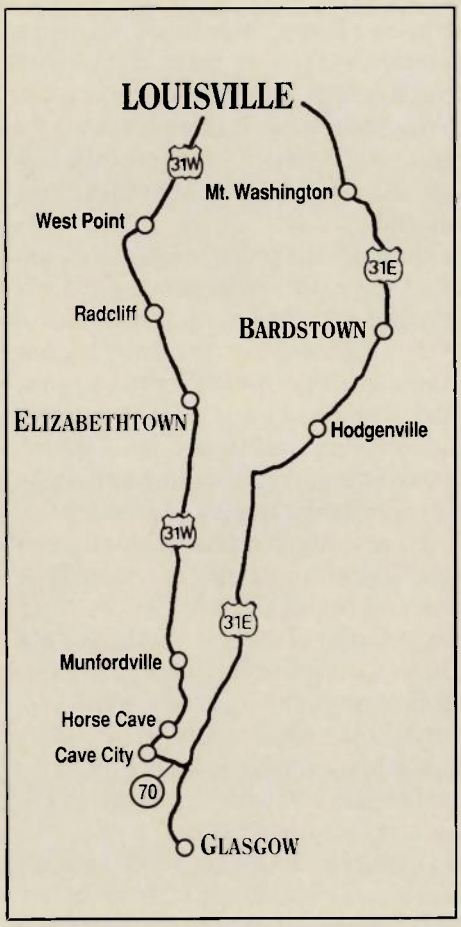
Unusual architecture along the Dixie Highway includes this abandoned stone service station.



A good Dixie Highway tour follows US 31E south from Louisville to Highway 70, eight miles north of Glasgow; Highway 70 west to US 31W at Cave City and US 31W north back to Louisville.

Rich in color and texture, the back roads are galleries of art. During the 1960s when Lady Bird Johnson suggested we "beautify America," the country responded by taking down thousands of old billboards, covering countless painted barns, and putting up millions of mansard roofs. Yet between the Lincoln Memorial and Glasgow, two wonderful "See Rock City" barns escaped the creosote cover.

The stone filling-station at 31E and Highway 70 was not so lucky. The roof is almost gone. Windows are shattered. But the tall tower stands solid, like a monument to things lost along the way.

Fortunately, the backroads' best is only five miles away at Cave City, where 18 gleaming white concrete tepees beckon travelers to rest for the night. "Sleep in a Wigwam," orange neon invites.

Fifty-five years ago, when Frank Redford designed his Wigwam Village, he envisioned weary travelers coming together on the grassy lawn, sharing the joys of being on the road. He designed the village with fifteen sleeping tepees that look like

stretched buffalo hide over supporting poles piercing tepee peaks. Rolled back tent flaps flank each little door that opens to face the sunrise. Redford furnished the tepees with hickory "twig furniture" inside, and comfortable wooden lawn chairs and grills outside.

Although the Indian village is an unusual scene, the coziness and privacy of detached sleeping units was not unusual in the 1920s and '30s. Once cars became readily available, Americans "took to the road" with passion and pride. A frenzy of road building and business openings followed, but Americans toured faster than supporting services could be provided.

The first sleeping facilities for tourists were simple "auto-camps" — empty fields with rest rooms and a bathhouse. Then came clusters of cottages that looked like children's playhouses (some in the side yards of roadside residences), which motorists could rent for a dollar or two. In such simple quarters travelers enjoyed life on the road years before the word "motel" was born.

Commerce finally caught up with the market, providing ample stations for gas, food, lodging and amusement. Businesses became competitive, and the "gimmick" was born. Businessmen like Frank Redford created fantasy environments and flaunted bright colors to entice customers off the road. Tin rockets, neon Kentucky Colonels, and towering bourbon bottles like those on Dixie Highway 31W in Louisville, became roadside landmarks.

Perhaps the Wigwam Village gift shop best sums up the simple pleasures of yesteryear. Standing in the shadow of a 52-foot tepee, visitors feel like little kids at play time. Inside, plastic tomahawks, bears and snakes tempt grown-ups to buy the things they longed for as children. And Coca-Cola still tastes better out of the little bottles dispensed by a red cold-drink machine.

Beside the cooler, next to a petrified tree trunk, a big black question mark draws an adventurous sojourner onto an old porcelain scale. For one copper penny, it mysteriously looks into the future and reveals fortune and weight. For $15 or $20, the lady behind the counter will hand over a room key, a bargain price for an overnight stay in a Nationally Registered inn. For only a dollar extra, visitors can take home a three-inch plaster replica of their own private tepee.

There used to be seven Wigwam Villages around the country. Bulldozers have buried four. The ones still standing in Arizona and California don't look much like Frank Redford's dream. The only place to still experience Wigwam magic is on Kentucky's Dixie Highway.

Wigwam Village no longer sells food; but Hal's Restaurant near the Barren/Hart county line pleases hungry motorists daily. Hal and Mary Carpenter polished knotty pine paneling to a lustrous sheen, scrubbed Bedford stone and scoured stainless steel restoring their roadside eatery, built about 1948. Mary's western omelet is superb, and she keeps coffee cups filled while Hal chats with customers.

The warmth and friendliness of Hal's Restaurant are hallmarks of a good tour. Good tours today are off the beaten path; they take you past clothes drying on a line, past yard sales, past children playing.

And when you find yourself stopping at a lemonade stand; pausing to appreciate a sunset; and lamenting the decline of car hops, hot dog stands, drive-in movies and "service with a smile," you've mastered the lost art of touring. □