

Culture of the Wisconsin Official State Highway Map

Wood and Fels (1986) strikingly reveal that even a cartographic product as "taken for granted" as a road map is as much a tool of the maker as of the user. Indeed, a highway map comprises a sophisticated package of messages. In this paper, a series of State of Wisconsin official highway maps is examined to illustrate that each is a product of the culture in which it is produced. Map messages reflecting state institutional cultures are communicated through the principal state map image as well as through other map elements. Examples are selected from the 1920s to the present to highlight a changing transportation and mapmaking culture, appropriation of the official state highway map as a tool of tourism and gubernatorial promotion, and the presence of certain persistent and disturbing depictions of women and minorities. Wisconsin's official highway map is found to include both deliberate and unintentional reflections of the changing (and in some aspects, unchanging) state of the state.

In their 1986 article, "Designs on Signs/Myth and Meaning in Maps," Denis Wood and John Fels state that highway maps are "accepted as inevitable, as about as natural a thing as can be imagined," and even a cartographic product as "taken for granted" as a highway map "trades in values and ambitions," and "is politicized" (Wood and Fels 1986, 63, 72). Whether beneath unpaid parking tickets in the glovebox or unpaid bills in the desk drawer, the highway map is more than likely the most used map by the typical state resident. Even though Robinson and Petchenik (1976, 14) include the "common road map" as an example of a "less sophisticated" tool of study, there is no doubt that highway maps are indeed sophisticated and multi-purpose. They are full of messages and meanings and are used by both motorist and maker alike.

Wood and Fels' (1986) deconstruction of a single edition of the 1978-79 North Carolina official highway map was a springboard to an incisive discussion of cartographic conventions and map messages. One might ask what would a series of road maps from a single state reveal about the cultural contexts of their makers? To gain a perspective on this issue, fifty-one Wisconsin official state highway maps, spanning a seven-decade period were examined. The discussion which follows is based on a longitudinal reading of these maps in an attempt to discern agendas of the makers (whether intended or not), and to discover how these agendas may (or may not) have changed.

For its 70-plus year history, Wisconsin's official state highway map has portrayed how the state is, and in some ways how it should be, to those who map it. Three dominant "cultures" can be identified as factors influencing the map product: a transportation/modernization culture, a culture of promotion, and a subtle, beneath-the-surface culture of dominion. A deconstructionist view is adopted for this examination. Harley describes the deconstructionist approach as a "search for the social forces that have structured cartography and to locate the presence of power—and its effects—in all map knowledge" (Harley 1989, 2). Examples are drawn from various editions of Wisconsin's Official State Highway Map

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INTRODUCTION

CULTURE OF
TRANSPORTATION/
MODERNIZATION

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in order to highlight how these cultures influenced the map products and messages.¹ The focus here is primarily on the map products, and the ideas presented are not intended as an in-depth analysis of all aspects of Wisconsin's political or transportation culture.

Wisconsin formally entered the transportation business in 1911 when the Wisconsin State Highway Commission was established to administer state aid for roads. Up until that time roads had been a local government responsibility. With the passage of the Federal Highway Aid Act of 1916 the federal government became a highway transportation player and the state agency became receiver and distributor of these funds (Beimborn 1987, 209). Wisconsin produced its first road map in 1918, becoming one of only a handful of states to do so before 1920 (Bender 1991). This first real "highway" map was a railway map adapted for road transportation use.² The mapped railroads were omitted by the 1920s and the Highway Commission's products became much more of its own creation.

The manually-drawn, black-line, single-sided, onionskin maps of the "State Trunk Highway System" published in the early years are technologically a vastly different product than the computer-assisted, text-processed, double-sided, full-color counterpart of 1991-92. Yet each map appears to have been sophisticated in its day, conceived "under the banner of cartographic science" (Harley 1987, 279). These maps were not just the products of an advancing technology of cartographic methods, but also products of a culture of a progressing transportation technology within an increasingly important state transport bureaucracy. The 1926 map boasts of the state's growing transportation network with the statement, "It's harder to get lost in WISCONSIN than to find the way in many states." This was also the first issue to include city inset maps and show the newly-established "U.S. Highway System" (this numbering scheme was adapted from the Wisconsin Highway Commission, which was apparently the first state to number rather than name highways (Bomkamp 1991)). Evident on this map is a sense of pioneering and pride in achievements of the state's transportation culture, representations of which appear repeatedly through the years.

The flip-side spread on the 1952 map focuses on highway construction technology and shows before and after photos of road projects, touting "Highway Planning Does This." Governor Gaylord Nelson's message on the 1964 map, "This map does all but steer for you," and the reverse-side spreads of the editions of the mid-1960s heralding Wisconsin's ties to the expanding "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways," all extol pride in transport achievements. The 1968 map message "TRANSPORTATION - The key to progress," and the remarks which follow it on "50 Years of Mapping" (Figure 1) make explicit the linkage between advancements in transportation and the state's maps. Photographs of other modes of modern transportation are included on this map and part of the message reads: "Highways unite the rails, harbors and modern

¹ Although one cartographic designer has called non-map image elements on highway maps (e.g. illustrations, text, and photographs) "non-substantive" and "peripheral" (Sullivan 1984, 17, 18), these elements seem indeed to shoulder much of what Wood and Fels call the "burden of myth" in the map (Wood and Fels 1986, 63) and, for this reason they are included in the examination presented here.

² It is interesting to note that while the 1918 map legend describes red lines marking "state trunk highways," one of the two copies examined did not contain this linework on the map itself. That same map did have a myriad of rail lines in black, but with no mention of them in the legend.

airports into a thriving, comprehensive transportation system." It was just at this time that the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) had formed as a result of the Administrative Reorganization Act of 1967 which combined the Highway Commission with the Aeronautics Board and the Motor Vehicle Department (Beimborn 1987, 212). The symbols and text on the 1968 map did a good job to announce the enhanced bureaucratic stature and autonomy of this newly initiated branch of state government.

With the 1987-88 edition of their highway map, the Wisconsin DOT was again a national leader by being one of the first state highway departments to produce a computer-generated version of their state map.³ Automation of the state map image was followed by computer renditions of the city inset maps in the 1991-92 issue.

Automation appears to have influenced Wisconsin DOT cartographic design. Recent maps lean toward less clutter and cleaner lines in an effort to get rid of the "old-fashioned look" (as an unidentified DOT cartographer put it). The results, however, appear to be uneven. Comparing legends before automation (1978-79, Figure 2a) and after automation (1991-92, Figure 2b) show the more recent to possess cleaner-looking typography, yet with a more "classic" appearance. Paradoxically, the newer legend actually appears more elaborate and complicated than the older version, perhaps owing to the extra boxes categorizing more map symbols.

The automation of Wisconsin's official mapmaking is also visible in other common map features such as the north arrow. For decades, the directional indicator

³ There seems to be some dispute of this claim in that Larry Bender (1991) reports that South Carolina was the first state to produce a computer assisted highway map.

50 YEARS OF MAPPING

This map marks the completion of a half-century of production for the official Wisconsin highway map. The first map in 1918 showed the original 5,000-mile network of state trunk highways as marked for federal-aid purposes. Identical sections, at right, of the original and current maps emphasize changes and improvements in both map-making and the roads themselves during the past 50 years. The 1968 map, for example, carries additional route markings, symbols for wayside or public facilities, and accurate designations of roadway surfaces.

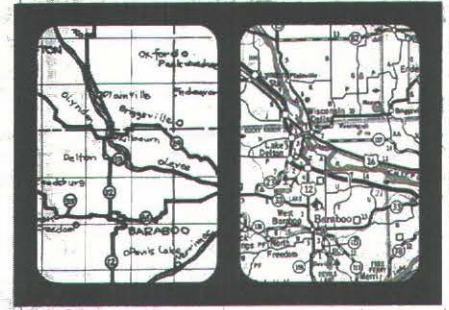


Figure 1: Excerpt from the 1968 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

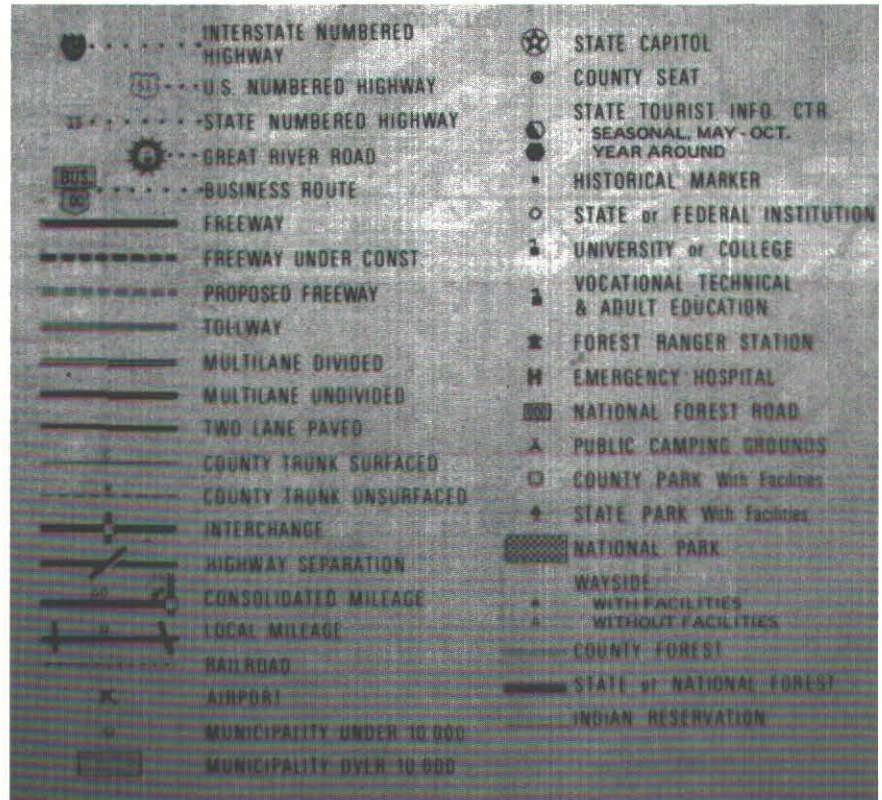


Figure 2a. Legend from the 1978-79 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

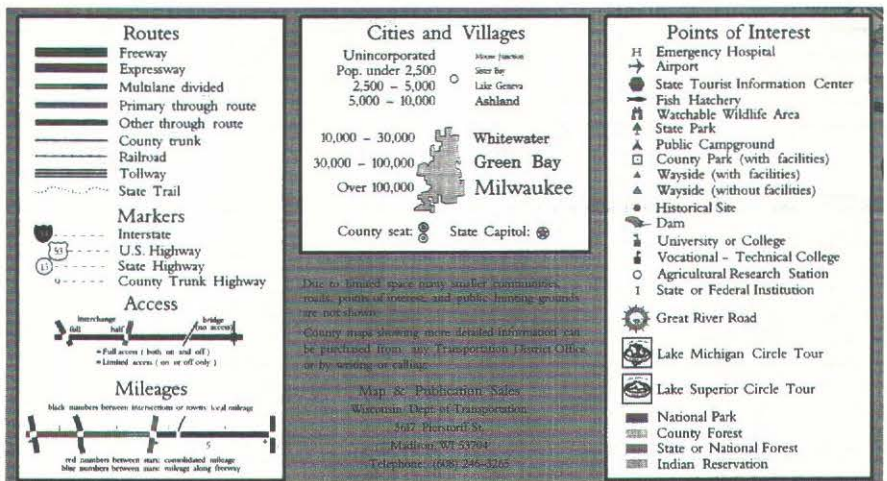


Figure 2b. Legend from the 1991-92 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

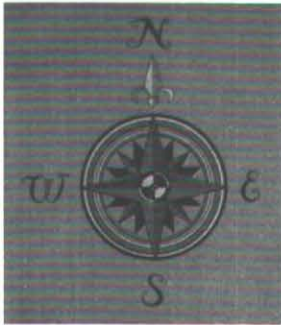


Figure 3a: Directional indicator from the 1976 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

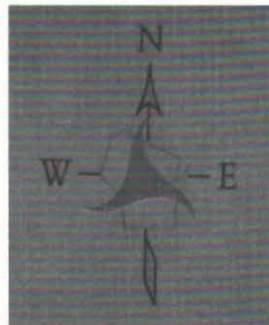


Figure 3b: Directional indicator from the 1991-92 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

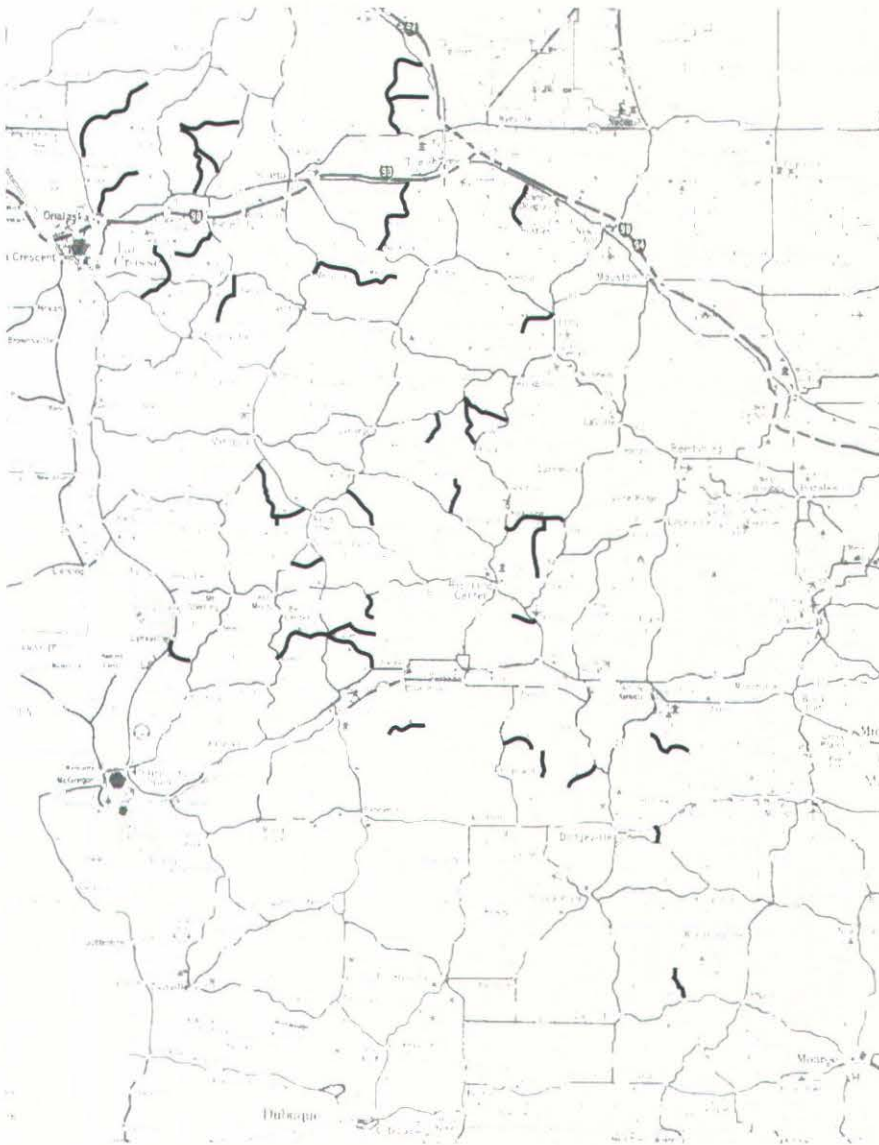


Figure 4: A portion of the 1984 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map. The bold black lines are roads that appear on the 1984 map but do not appear on the 1989-90 edition.

of the manually-created highway maps had a classic compass-rose look (Figure 3a). The last three automated editions have sported the modern, Wisconsin DOT logo as the center of the north arrow (Figure 3b). This change may merely suggest that the old compass rose was too complicated to replicate in digital form, or it may be that this simple iconic shift reflects the modernizing transportation culture in which the agency sees itself.

There are also evidences of "silences" (a term explained in a cartographic context by Harley (1988)) on the highway map. Silences tend to "challenge the apparent honesty of the image" (Harley 1988, 58), and it is interesting to make note of their "presence." For decades, each issue of the Wisconsin state highway map has employed a disclaimer about its silences by stating the inability to show all roads and towns. A comparison of an eight-county area on the 1984 and 1989-90 editions of the map illustrates how some roads have "disappeared." At least 45 segments of surfaced, lettered county trunk roads present on the manually-drawn 1984 version are missing from the 1989-90 automated edition (Figure 4). In this same area the 1989-90 edition includes four segments previously not shown on the 1984 edition. Neither the presence, status, nor the per-county mileage of these county trunk highways have changed during this period (Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau 1985, 1989).

These missing roads have become invisible to the user of the later map. The consequences of such map silences are well stated by Stickler (1990) in his study of South African Black township silencing: maps "enjoy a long standing reputation as unbiased and neutral sources of information about the world. Such is the

power of the map that if authoritative, official maps and atlases . . . fail to map places, the impression is given that those places do not exist" (Stickler 1990, 329). What applies to towns applies to roads. If not shown on the official state highway map, it will surely be "the road less traveled."

These decisions to eliminate selected road segments may have been based on sound principles of generalization, choices to eliminate road segments which carry less traffic, or a quest for a cleaner, less cluttered mapped road network. Whether this is a "good" or a "bad" cartographic change is not the issue—the result is a silence and a practice in DOT mapmaking that reflects a modern transportation agency intent on getting us from here to there by encouraging travelers onto the freeways through emphasis of the interstate system on its maps.⁴

In 1952 there were a half million copies printed of the Wisconsin highway map; a million by 1972; and 3.5 million copies printed of the 1991-1992 biennial edition (Bomkamp 1991). These numbers parallel increases of similar magnitude in state motor vehicle registrations (Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau 1989). In addition to increased map production, there is little doubt that the purposes of the state's official highway map have gradually changed. The map has evolved from its beginnings as a tool for the highway commission to manage and maintain its road network and as an aid to the hardy motorist who dared to drive about the state's early twentieth-century roads, to become a promotional device. An array of state agencies over the decades have jockeyed for space on the map through cooperative interagency agreements with the Department of Transportation. These include agencies or agency divisions of business development, tourism, and recently the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

State economic development issues have been given space on many editions of the state's highway map. The state's economic soundness was stressed in the Depression Years, and the 1947 issue included a photo and text which explained, "Wisconsin trucks, used extensively by the War Department, were part of the state's war effort." The ensuing two decades exhibited even greater business-promotion efforts, often on the map's flip-side tableau. An "Industry Fact Kit" was advertised in the 1960s. Governor Nelson's 1961 message states in part, "But this is more than just a highway map. It is a catalog of pleasure and beauty, a directory of business and profit." By 1975 the business pitch included the Department of Development address; by 1978-79 its address and phone number; and by 1987-88 its toll-free "800" phone number. Most recently, the map has contained less direct mention of business or economic messages and there was no inclusion of a business-promotion message in the 1991-92 edition of the map.

But it is tourism (and more recently, a natural resource-based tourism) that has appropriated an increasing portion of the Wisconsin map sheet. Attention to tourism was also evident in a survey of 46 state highway maps by Sullivan (1984) in which he found that "the importance placed on tourist trade appears to influence the design of many [highway maps]" (Sullivan 1984, 17). While some have negatively criticized highway map design for an excessive tourism "focus" (Bender 1991, 77-79), there is no doubt that tourism in Wisconsin, like most states, is big business and was worth \$6.3 billion to the state in 1991 (Wisconsin Department of Business

CULTURE OF PROMOTION

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⁴ Interestingly, it seems that at the request of even a single citizen, through his or her state representative, a "silent" road segment can be re-entered—"given voice" on the next map issue (Bomkamp 1994).

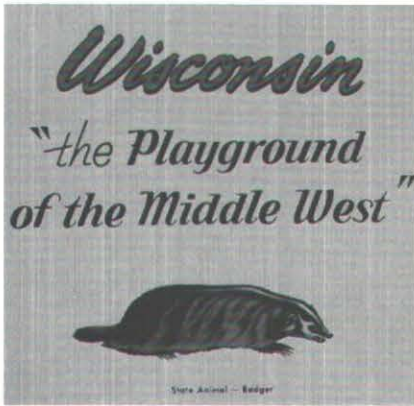


Figure 5: From the 1936 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

Development 1991, 1). The promotion of tourism on such a widespread product as the official state highway map is to be expected. From 1918 to the late 1940s each Wisconsin highway map examined included somewhere the phrase "Playground of the Middle West" (Figure 5). In the early 1960s, a large flip-side recreation map appeared, with gaudy tourist postcard-like icons of assorted outdoor activities, state parks, and fish and wildlife. A "family vacation land" slogan appeared in the early 1970s. Oddly enough, the maps of the late 1970s (particularly the 1978-79 map) contain virtually nothing of parks and tourism.

The early 1980s, however, saw a resurgence of the recreation agenda. The Wisconsin DNR (the state's largest owner-operator of tourist attractions), has incrementally monopolized nearly all of the non-transportation space on the DOT map. This is evident in the increasingly large, expanding, and detailed tables of state-owned tourist destinations and the listing of all DNR public facilities. It is also evident in the recent prominent

advertisements for the DNR's "official magazine" appearing on the first panel as one unfolds the map (Figure 6). This is an attempt to "put the best face" on an agency responsible for environmental and game enforcement which many state residents find objection to.

Wisconsin's highest elected officials haven't missed the chance to appropriate the "official" state highway map as a tool of promotion. Somewhere, on all but two of the maps examined since 1931 is an innocuous-looking "Governor's Message."⁵ All but one governor has availed himself of the opportunity to endorse chosen aspects of the state, his ideological agenda, and often his ambitions (with an accompanying photo since the late 1930s). Governor Julius Heil employed tourist boosterism in 1941, inviting all to his state, "truly a land of milk and honey" (though he modified his message for a country at war in the following year's issue). Governor Lee Dreyfus preached conservation to highway users in energy-conscious 1982: "Travel only as often as necessary so there may be fuel for all reasons in all seasons." Governor Thomas (Tommy) Thompson showcased himself and a Duesenberg replica (Figure 7)



Figure 6: From the 1989-90 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.



Figure 7: From the 1989-90 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

⁵ The 1984 and 1985-86 maps are the exceptions. They have a photo and synopsis of the State Capitol instead of the governor.

produced in his hometown of Elroy, Wisconsin on the 1989-90 edition of the map. The Thompson photograph appears to be a contradiction to a statement on the face of the map that states that this "official" map is "not intended for private promotional use." While the "private promotional use" statement is obviously intended primarily as a warning to map sellers, it is certainly a debatable practice to use the official map as advertising space for promotion of clearly private agendas or products.

These Governors' messages, tourist slogans, and business promises are sure to be seen repeatedly by millions each year. Though there is no question that the official state highway map is a handy reference for an increasingly recreation-minded public, it should also be recognized as an implement of everyday propaganda, a trusted tool of a culture of promotion.

Overlapping and embracing the transportation/modernization and promotional cultures is a third set of map-borne agendas in the form of cultural rule. They are carried out in both designed and unintentional ways in order to maintain control of the state. These include "educational" messages which serve both to inform and to control highway map users, as well as other official "messages" of a less certain, yet ultimately disturbing character which show manifestations of Wisconsin's social order.

As one would expect, the Department of Transportation has all along used the official state highway as a teaching tool. In the 1930s and 1940s the DOT's predecessor agency endeavored to instruct generations of people getting behind the wheel for the first time about Wisconsin's "rules of the road." The highway maps of this period included various illustrations and text about road signage, lane markings, and pedestrian protection. The 1946 map contained the caution, "Old folks do not always move fast and they do not always see or hear you." Vignettes on "Restrictions on Heavy Vehicles," "In Case of Accident," and "Prevent Forest Fires" were present for decades. These and other omnipresent warnings about speed, and more recently on littering, seat belts, and driving under the influence also bear the unwritten, yet clear message, "make no mistake about it, the Department of Transportation controls the roads of Wisconsin." It should be noted that these safety and traffic-law messages have been greatly reduced in the last several editions of the map.

Some messages were initiated, not from state-specific agendas, but from national ones. For example, from 1978-79 until 1984 the DOT promoted the short-lived "move to metric" through a flip-side doubled "mileage kilometer log." At about the same time a small inset route map of AMTRAK, the national passenger railroad, rolled onto the state highway map as a national political agenda item. Like the move to metric, it departed a few years later.

Patriotism has also been encouraged via the state highway map, particularly in the 1948 Wisconsin Centennial "anniversary" issue which focused on state accomplishments. A photo (also used a year earlier) of General Eisenhower and his brothers with their catch of muskellunge (Figure 8 on page 24) ably serves several agendas by linking Wisconsin to a war hero who likes to fish here, and who happens to be on the rise as a national politician. The 1976 United States bicentennial issue was built around the theme "out of the past . . . into the future," heralding how far we've come as a nation and a state. A recent example of a strong patriotic presence on the map (and on the roadways) is the prominently featured "veterans memorial highways," linking selected segments of state high-

CULTURE OF DOMINION

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Figure 8: From the 1948 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.



Figure 9: From the 1949 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.



Figure 10: From the 1952 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

ways with recognition of state armed forces. These examples demonstrate how the official state highway map has done its small part in what Foucault termed the "implanting and inculcating [of] the civic and patriotic spirit" (Foucault 1980, 62).

The overt and expected social agendas mix with other unintended ones on Wisconsin's official state highway maps. There is evidence of what Harley has identified as "rules of the social order" (Harley 1989, 6). These are portrayed by photos and drawings which are plainly those of a white male-dominated society. Among the most common and prominent images appearing on the state highway maps through the years are those of women in swim suits and fishermen. Nearly all of the photos of people enjoying Wisconsin fishing (and there are many shown over the decades), are of white men. When fisherwomen are in photographs, they are generally shown in bathing suits or comparably skimpy clothing. Especially from the late 1940s through the 1950s, map verso layouts regularly included sexist photos of young women in bathing suits (Figure 9). These women seem to be part of the package of "pleasure" offered to white men in Wisconsin.

Photographs that include minorities may be interpreted to occasionally contradict the written words on the official state highway maps. While a laudable human rights statement appeared for almost four decades that guarantees "full and equal enjoyment" of Wisconsin public attractions to "all persons of every race and color" (Figure 10), these statements contradict the lack of, and type of accompanying images of minorities. Only two maps (1991-92 and 1987-88) of all those examined included photographs of African-Americans. The 1991-92 photo

shows several African-American men depicted as tourists, however, the 1987-88 map shows an African-American as a dancer and "cast" as an attraction. While it is true that African-Americans have constituted just a small, yet increasing percentage of the state's population (about five percent in 1990), it is only recently that we see their inclusion in tourist imagery on the official highway map. The situation is a bit different for Wisconsin's Native American population. They have been featured quite heavily in photos on the maps, but all of the images of them in the entire series examined are those in which Native Americans appear as icons and tourist attractions (Figure 11).

The sexist use of images of women as objects, the "silencing" of minorities or their depiction as tourist icons, and messages of highway use and jurisdiction on the official state highway maps suggests where the power has resided in Wisconsin, and how those in control have viewed their state. There is surely no evidence on these maps that such portrayals or oversights are intentional, however, there have been disturbing overtones of sexism and exclusion (just as there is a flavor of impropriety in governors' use of the official maps for private commercial promotion).

"...while our eyes should always be open to human foibles and latent social messages hidden beneath the scientific veneer of maps, we must surely admit that being able to make and use maps to show where things are physically located has great practical value. The two positions are not irreconcilable; a map can be considered a product of both scientific objectification and of the social and cultural circumstances in which it was made" (Woodward 1992, 69-70).

Highway maps are everyday essentials and the efforts to make them more effective tools for travel and recreation are worthwhile and appreciated. Although this longitudinal examination only briefly illustrates selected agendas of the cultures of transportation/modernization, promotion, and dominion borne by Wisconsin's official state highway maps, it is clear that these maps are much more than utilitarian tools for their users. They are implements of their makers and bearers of a multitude of messages. Some of these messages are deliberately placed on the map, whereas others are unintentional or subtle. All of them, however, are real and they reveal the "state" of the state.

Each official state highway map, as well as every other map, is set in its cultural context whether composed at the drafting table six decades ago or at the workstation just this year. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has long been a leader in producing effective transportation maps and the agency has justifiably taken pride in all of its achievements. They have communicated that pride through their maps. The DOT and other state agencies and offices have quite logically used this ubiquitous medium to advertise, inform, and educate. Most of the messages seem planned and clear in their intent, however, some might not be intended and may need to be rethought and changed.⁶ In any case, these maps present an interesting mirror and record of state history. They can be used to speculate about the attitudes and images of the cultures that influence the map and the message it communicates to others.

⁶ Indeed, the DOT does field and respond to complaints about the official state highway map through a map committee composed of state DOT, DNR, tourism, and public relations staff.

CONCLUSIONS



Figure 11: From the 1948 Wisconsin Official State Highway Map.

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* two-year edition.

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END NOTE

En 1986 Wood y Fels revelaron que inclusive un producto cartográfico "tan sencillo" como un mapa de rutas es una herramienta muy importante tanto para el que lo hace como para el usuario. Verdaderamente un mapa de autopistas contiene un sistema muy sofisticado de mensajes. En este trabajo, se han examinado una serie de mapas del sistema de rutas del Estado de Wisconsin, para ilustrar que cada uno el producto de la cultura en que se produce. Los mapas que reflejan culturas institucionales del estado son comunicados a través de la imagen del mapa principal del estado, como también a través de otros mapas. Algunos ejemplos han sido seleccionados desde los años 20's hasta el presente para notar: el cambio en el transporte y en la elaboración de mapas, la apropiación oficial del mapa de autopistas del estado como una herramienta de turismo y promoción gubernamental, y la generalización persistente y molesta de la mujer y las minorías. El mapa físico de las autopistas del Estado de Wisconsin en general es muy completo. Sin embargo, a veces hay omisiones deliberadas o sin intención.

RESUMEN

Wood et Fels (1986) révèlent de façon frappante que même un produit cartographique "admis" comme carte routière est un outil de l'auteur comme de l'utilisateur. En fait, une carte de grandes routes porte un ensemble très étudié de messages. Dans le présent mémoire, on examine une série de cartes routières officielles de l'État du Wisconsin pour illustrer que chacune est un produit de la culture dans laquelle il a été façonné. Les messages cartographiques reflétant les cultures institutionnelles de l'état sont communiqués au moyen de l'image cartographique principale de l'état ainsi que par d'autres éléments cartographiques. Des exemples ont été choisis entre 1920 et le présent pour souligner : une culture évolutive des transports et de la cartographie, l'appropriation de la carte routière officielle de l'état comme outil pour le tourisme et la promotion officielle, et l'existence de certaines descriptions persistantes et troublantes des femmes et des minorités. On remarque que la carte routière officielle du Wisconsin reflète de façon à la fois délibérée et involontaire l'aspect évolutif (et non-évolutif à certains égards) de l'état.

SOMMAIRE