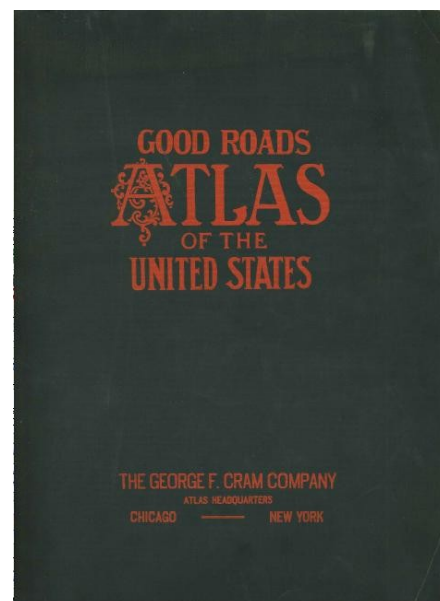
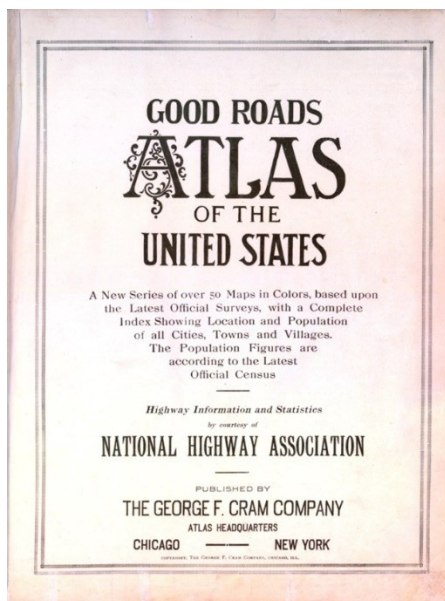


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The Earliest U.S. Road Atlas – Another Contender by Carl Liedholm (RMCA #836)

Who produced the first U.S. road atlas? Stan de Orsey has argued persuasively (Legend # 31) that the two leading contenders are George F. Cram's "Auto Trails and Commercial Survey of the United States" and the National Survey's "The Official Map of the United States Sectionalized Edition," both of which appeared around the year 1921. This article argues that there is another contender for the title.

This new contender is the little known "Good Roads Atlas of the United States" produced by the George F. Cram Co. This road atlas, which, according to the title page, contains "a new series of over 50 maps in colors based on the latest official surveys," is quite scarce and appears to have had a short life. Known copies can be found at the Library of Congress as well as the libraries at the University of North Carolina, Brooklyn University, and the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.



Although not dated, the most plausible date for this atlas would seem to be early 1921. Three pieces of evidence support this contention. First, the title page still retains the Chicago address and copyright of the George F. Cram Co., which was sold to the National Map Co. of Indianapolis in May, 1921. Second, the atlas contains the final state population data from the 1920 census, figures that were not available before early 1921. Third, on the national parks page (p.59), the date 1921 appears in the lower left-hand corner of the U.S. map.

The Good Road Atlas of the United States contains individual road maps of the 48 States, arranged in alphabetical order, as well as a one of the entire U.S. Surprisingly, it also includes individual maps of Alaska (but not Hawaii) and the Panama Canal Zone. Four large states (California, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas) are divided, so that each of these is represented by two road maps. There is also a town index, a gazetteer, as well as separate pages devoted to national monuments, national parks, and public roads and national highways. The atlas contains 100 pages and measures 11.5 by 15 inches.

The roads are crudely depicted on the individual maps in this atlas. Following the typical practice at this time, the roads are simply overprinted in red on top of Cram's already existing state commercial (railroad) maps. The maps are in full color with the counties as well as the railroads delineated. The road detail provided, however, is minimal at best. There are no indications of road quality and no distance between town information is provided. For most states, there is only one type of road depicted, which depending on the state is variously referred to as a "state trunk highway," a "main highway", a "main auto road," a "main traveled road" or a "main traveled highway." For a few states, however, two types of roads are listed, typically labeled as "main roads" and "secondary roads," but these are hard to tell apart. For some states, the names of the major auto trails are also posted over the roads. In the Michigan state map (detail pictured below), state route numbers are also indicated along with the major auto trails.

How does this Good Roads Atlas compare with the 1921 edition of Cram's more widely known "Auto Trails and Commercial Survey?" Both atlases depict the roads as red overprints, use the same base maps, and contain the identical, national monument, national parks, and public roads and national highways pages. Yet, there are important differences. The base auto maps in the Auto Trails and Commercial Survey are printed in blue ink only rather than in full color and the auto trails are indicated by numbers, rather than by names on the individual maps. In addition, the atlas maps are organized from east to west, rather than alphabetically, and the actual roads depicted by the red overprint often differ. Most importantly, the Auto Trails and Commercial Survey is, as the name indicates, not really a pure road atlas. For each state, there is not only a road map, but also a second commercial map highlighting the counties, steam and electric railways. This more comprehensive, 136 page publication continued to be published by the National Map Co. for the remainder of the decade, while the more narrowly focused Good Road Atlas evidently did not survive beyond the initial year.



In summary, George F. Cram's Good Roads Atlas of 1921, both in name and content, would seem to be a strong contender for the title of the first 48-State Road Atlas of the United States. Unfortunately, like the other early contenders, it, too, was crudely produced and did not include the important road details that a few years later would be incorporated into the more automobile traveler friendly, initial road atlases of the Clason Map Co. (Best Roads Atlas, 1923 - See Liedholm and Greaves, Legend #39) and Rand McNally (Junior Auto Trails Atlas, 1924). In these later atlases, the maps were freshly drawn as road maps. Yet, the George F. Cram Good Roads Atlas was among the very first, and for this it deserves to be recognized.

