

# NEWSLETTER

SPRING 1997

## WHO GAVE AWAY

### THE FIRST FREE ROAD MAPS ?

By Dave Cole (#72)

There's that question again, this time posed on the back page of that undated R.C.M.A. Newsletter you received last September. Who published and distributed the first road map? Presumably, we will have to insert "free" in the description of the map, too, if one of the contenders for the honor is the Gulf Refining Company, which issued such maps in 1914 free of charge, and another is the Union Oil Company of California, which gave away map booklets as early as 1910, all as mentioned in the Newsletter.

If we limit our search to oil companies, then probably it was Union Oil, as speculated in the Newsletter and illustrated therein. Gulf, as most map collectors know, has always claimed to have been the first to give away road maps free of charge, but Walter Ristow's article, "A Half Century of Oil-Company Road Maps" (Surveying and mapping magazine, Dec., 1964), mentioned in the Newsletter, also describes some other earlier free maps given out by oil companies. One was the Monarch Oil Refining Company, of San Francisco, which tried giving away little road atlases titled Auto Road Maps for California & Nevada as early as 1911.

Ristow does not mention Union, but the illustration from the Union Oil Company history book, which was reprinted in our Newsletter, is identified as being from their 1910 map booklet. No other oil company is known to have given away free road maps any earlier than that, so it appears that Union Oil had the distinction of being first.

And anyone familiar with early 20th century auto road maps of California can tell, just by looking at that illustration, what it was that Union gave away in 1910. It was a version of Thorpe's Illustrated Road Map, as it has all the hallmarks of Thorpe's work--tiny photos of key turns scattered along a crude line representing the road, with tick marks labeled "M" to indicate miles along the road, and NORTH, SOUTH, EAST and WEST printed around the edges so the map could be oriented properly.

Thorpe's maps were all like that, and nobody else's quite matched them.

Thorpe's earliest maps date from 1908, but it appears that his first book of maps was not published until 1909. It was

described in the March, 1909, Touring Topics magazine, published by the Automobile Club of Southern California, and advertised in that periodical in later issues. The Newsletter notes that this is not what we think of today as a road map, owing to its peculiar style, but there was no such doubt in the mind of W.G.Thorpe, who concocted this layout. His title for the road atlas was THORPE'S AUTOMOBILE ROAD MAPS, and later, THORPE'S ILLUSTRATED ROAD MAP AND TOUR BOOK OF CALIFORNIA. The 1909 book had 60 maps in 96 pages, and later editions had more of both. The 1910 book had well over a hundred maps, and if Union's version included all of them, it was most generous of them, as even the earliest Thorpe road books were made to sell for about \$2., which was a lot of money at that time.

So Union appears to have been the first oil company to hand out free road maps, but even so, other companies involved in the automobile trade were giving away such road maps much earlier than 1910. In the second part of this series, we'll review some of them.

ATTENTION!

WHEN TRAVELING OVER ROADS  
YOU ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH USE

THORPE'S AUTO ROAD MAPS

PRICE  
AT  
THE  
DEALERS

\$2

PRICE  
SENT  
BY  
MAIL

\$2

THE ONLY PICTORIAL  
ROAD MAPS OF CAL  
SHOWING PHOTOS OF TURNS  
HOTELS, INNS, GARAGES AND  
POINTS OF INTEREST TO TOURISTS

PUBLISHED BY THORPE ENGRAVING CO. PHONE A1687  
LOS ANGELES, CAL.

PRONOUNCED BY THE PRESS  
AS BEING THE MOST  
COMPREHENSIVE AUTO  
ROAD MAP EVER PUBLISHED.

W.G. Thorpe ran this ad for his road map booklets in Touring Topics magazine in the spring of 1909.



## THE OFFICIAL MAPS RESEARCH PROJECT

by Mark Greaves (#39)

When I first started seriously collecting road maps a few years ago, I decided to concentrate on those issued by state and provincial highway departments. One of the main reasons for this decision was that I felt completely overwhelmed at the prospect of trying to collect and categorize oil company maps. There just seemed to be too many different companies out there, and with each one publishing many different titles each year, the number of potential maps for my collection would very quickly reach into the tens of thousands. With official maps, there would be only 50 states (I later expanded to Canada) **with no** more than one map per year. Or so I thought! I soon came to realize that many states issued more than one map a year, such as summer and winter editions, and that many varieties exist within a given year. What would be really nice, I thought, would be a checklist of all known issues and varieties. After talking with fellow collector Dave Schul, we decided to compile just such a list,

The Official Maps Research Project was devised as a means of cataloging all known "Official" maps, for the purpose of providing collectors a check list on what is available. It is not intended to provide detailed descriptions for each map, but simply a quick reference for collectors to identify what they have, and see what else is out there. For this project, official maps are defined as those maps issued by highway departments or similar entities, to be distributed to the general public (usually for free), for the purpose of travel and tourism. All states and territories of the US and provinces and territories of Canada are included in this project. There have been many quasi-official maps published, such as state park maps, and variants on highway departments maps. For example, Zephyr oil company used the Wisconsin and Michigan highway department base maps with their own covers. For the most part, these peripheral official maps are not included in the Official Maps Research Project (OMRP). Certain issued, such as the Illinois Secretary of State maps, are included due to their wide acceptance amongst the official map collector community.

### Beginnings

The first step in this project was to define what exactly we wanted to record for each map, and establish conventions so that each list would be consistent with others. With the goals of the project in mind, we decided on listing four main attributes for each map. First, the year of issue. This is usually printed somewhere on the map, such as the cover or the legend, but sometimes must be inferred by comparison to other maps. We identify multiple issues

within a single year by adding the letter "A" after the year for the first variety, "B" for the second variety, and so on. The second item on our lists is the location where the date is found. Many maps have dates in multiple locations. We only list the most prominent one. In cases where there are two (or more) different dates, this is noted as well. The third feature on our lists is brief description of the cover design, taking care to note whether it is a photograph or drawing (or other), and whether it is in color or black & white. Finally, we give dimensions of the folded map, to the nearest quarter of an inch. Having decided on what to list, we then established rules to follow for each listing. These rules include standard abbreviations to use, dating conventions, and so forth.

### Compiling the Lists

Now that we had our strategy intact, we were ready to actually start doing the work. We began by each taking a group of states, and going through the maps in our own collections. Having listed out everything from my collection, I would then send my list to Dave, who would add notes from his collection. Likewise, Dave would send me the lists he started for my additions. This turned out to be a very time consuming process. It varied considerably depending on the state or province, but on average, it has taken probably two hours to compile a new listing and between one and two hours to add to an existing list. We have included indications of what maps are reported by other sources. Several people have given us listings of their own collections, and we have some reports from state highway departments. Until we can get the full details about these maps, however, we simply list them as "Reported by..."

### The Internet and the OMRT

This project has benefited tremendously by making use of the Internet. First of all, Dave and I have been able to quickly exchange listings via email, and discuss different strategies without running up large phone bills. We also announced the project on the road map collectors news group, and asked for any volunteers interest in helping out. A number of people responded, and the Official Map Research Team (OMRT) was born. Several collectors have already sent in additions from their own collections and other sources. With enough people responding, we should be able to compile a fairly complete listing for each state and province. Dave has posted all of the lists on the [web site \(http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~dschul/rmca/rmca.html\)](http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~dschul/rmca/rmca.html) so anyone with internet access can quickly and easily view them.

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