

Iowa All Over: Preston's Station in Belle Plaine still a draw for passing drivers

Filling up, telling stories

BELLE PLAINE — As Mitch Malcolm sees it, the art of roaming from place to place, in no hurry to get from point A to point B, has been lost.

Years ago, though, cross-country drivers were more likely to stray off the beaten path and perhaps wind up at an intriguing stopping point— such as Preston's gas station in Belle Plaine, in Benton County.

“You have to think of how adventurous it was, the idea of going two or three states or across the country because literally you did not know what you're going to find,” said Malcolm, president of the Belle Plaine Historical Society. “They had a map, and they were hoping that was going to get them where they wanted to go.”

Although Preston's gas station isn't operational today, travelers regularly stop to see an original Lincoln Highway gas station in Belle Plaine.

The Lincoln Highway was the first U.S. transcontinental road for cars, Malcolm said. At one time, the highway had three different routes that went through Belle Plaine.

Preston's Station, as it's now known, was built by Frank Fiene in 1912, a year before the Lincoln Highway was dedicated. The business at first was located on the former Lincoln Highway route on 21st Street.

In 1923, George Preston Sr., a junk dealer, bought the station for \$100. The station moved to 13th Street to accommodate a change in the highway route.

Today the tiny station is almost completely covered in old road signs, with a blue-and-yellow Goodyear Tires hanging out the front.

The sides of the station are plastered with signs, too, including a red-and-white circular Texaco Motor Oil sign, one for Red Crown Gasoline and another for Phillips 66.

Preston, who died in 1993, loved to bend visitors' ears with stories and lore, Malcolm said. Local farmers, traveling salesmen and even guests at the motel would stop and listen to his stories, Malcolm said.

Although Preston's station was simply a small-town gas station, it was George who drew visitors in.

"It was really more about George and the ability that he had as far as telling a good story and history that he remembered on the Lincoln Highway," Malcolm said. "People knew that and would come and see him because of that."

Today, George Preston's granddaughter, Mary Preston, owns and is working to restore the station.

"People love to reminisce, they love to see how things were," Malcolm said. "I think that's Mary's mission."

"It kind of looks run down, it needs some paint, and her mission is to really do this and to get some things to bring it back so it's as though George is here and telling his stories again."

Next to the gas station is what used to be a three-room motel and a garage. The trifecta of buildings — the gas station, motel and garage— lend the stretch of road the nickname of Preston's Corner.

The nearby Belle Plaine Area Museum chronicles the town's history and also the significance of the Lincoln Highway. Inside the museum, the Henry B. Tippie Annex showcases the life of the philanthropist and Belle Plaine's son, who was born in 1927 near Belle Plaine.

The University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business was named for him. Belle Plaine is also home to King Theatre and a pool and aquatic center.
More on Belle Plaine

Belle Plaine, in Benton County, was founded in 1862. The town's population is 2,534, as of the 2010 Census. The name "Belle Plaine" means "beautiful plain." In the 1920s, the Lincoln Highway came through — the first transcontinental highway and brought many travelers into town, according to a history of the city.