

Highways & Byways

By Mike Prero

Here's yet another idea for a fun-filled, nostalgia-packed category, and you learn geography and history in the process! *[I should have my students do this!]* The late Pete Varvis, Fresno, pointed this one out to me a number of years ago. Come on in and take a look...



If you're in this neck of the woods *[Northern California]*, you already know that I-5 gets you to Mexico and Oregon and that I-80 takes you through California to Nevada, and, of course, you know the local highways and routes in your own area, but chances are if you're going to tackle collecting covers advertising the nation's highways and byways you're going to have to at least brush up on national, state and county roads....What's a route? What's a highway? What's an interstate? And, is there any rhyme or reason to the, at first glance, bewildering maze of numbers?

Well, you'll be glad to know that it's all quite an organized system, and it *does* make sense...you just have to know the basics. For example, highway numbers have been strategically assigned to designate both the direction and placement of highways and interstates within the state and country. In 1925, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials set the guidelines for numbering interstates and U.S. highways. The rule of thumb is that north-south routes have odd numbers and east-west routes have even numbers. Here are other defining rules:

- Interstate highway routes have one- or two-digit numbers. Even-numbered routes run east and west,

- With numbers increasing from south to north. North-south routes are odd numbers increasing from

west to east, with our own I-5 here on the West Coast being the lowest.

- North-south interstates ending with a 5 and east-west interstates ending with an 0 are typically major cross-country routes, while other numbers indicate regional routes.
- A three-digit interstate always ends with the two-digit number of the main interstate it loops off from, with the exception of the two-mile-long I-238 in Northern California, which connects I-580 and I-880.
- Three-digit road numbers beginning with an even number are either beltways that go around a city or freeways that go through a city, such as L.A.'s I-405. Ones that begin with an odd number, like Nevada's I-515 from I-15, branch off the main interstate.
- U.S. highways follow the same directional rule for even and odd numbers. However, the numbers for east-west routes increase from north to south, and the north-south route numbers increase from east to west.
- U.S. highways don't have a system distinguishing major and minor routes, but east-west routes ending in 0 tend to be cross-country routes, such as 20, 30, and 40.
- Three digit U.S. routes also contain the two digits of their parent route, but the first digit does not designate direction. For example, the three-digit routes that branch off U.S. 61 would be numbers 161, 261, 361, etc. There's no even and odd number system.

Using Pete's collection, let's take a look at one way you could collect such covers. Pete looked for only 20-strike covers which have a road designation on them. He only kept one cover for each road. He had over 320. Also, if a cover shows more than one route, the Interstate route prevails, thereby cancelling out a U.S. Route or a State Route. Similarly, a U.S. Route prevails over a State Route. Pete, since he was a California resident, also only collected State Route numbers for California rather than all the states.

You can make your own modifications to the category—collecting only pics of the road signs, collecting other sizes, etc. It's certainly a great way to learn about the nation's road system.