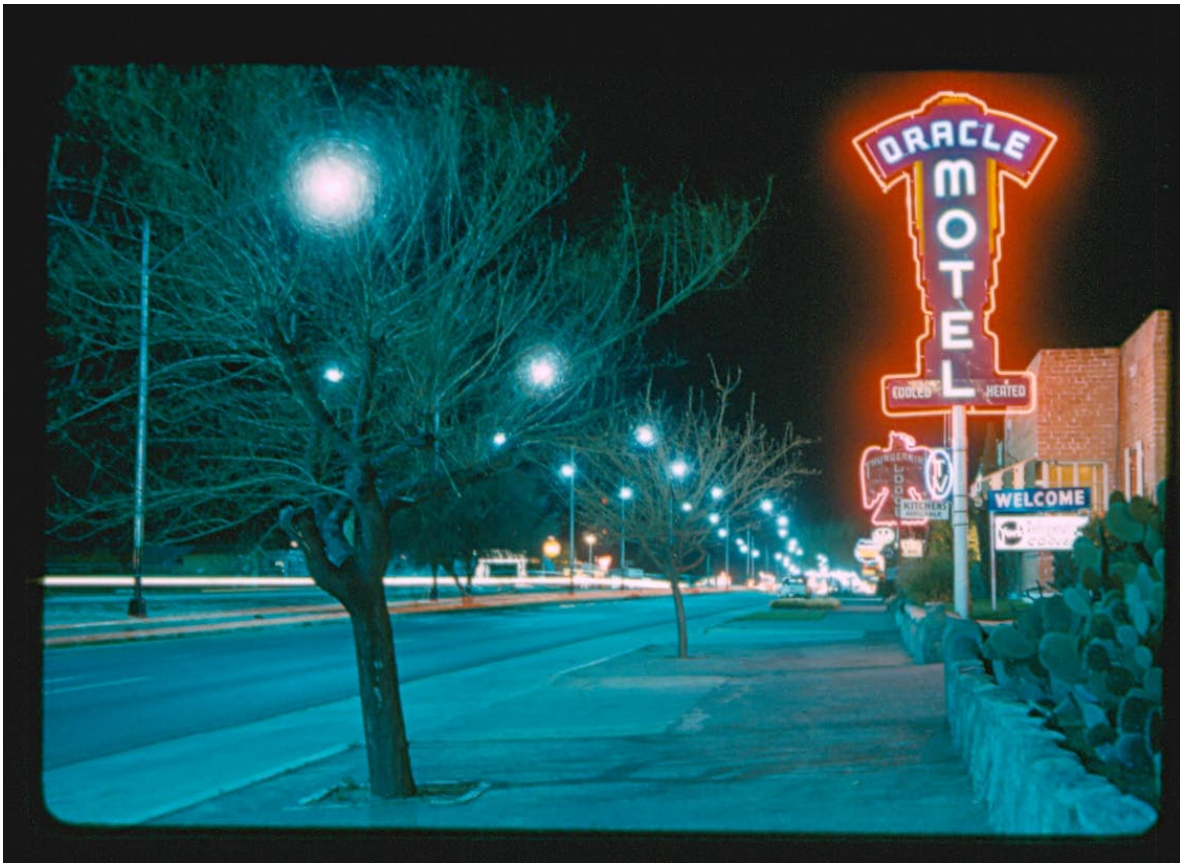


# Historic Miracle Mile Tucson's Northern Auto Gateway:

A Historic Context Study  
for the Oracle Area



North Oracle Road, 1958 (signs removed ca. 1970) Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie

*Prepared for the City of Tucson  
Historic Preservation Office  
Department of Urban Planning and Design*

*by*

*Demion Clinco  
Frontier Consulting  
Tucson, Arizona*

2009

Final Draft  
February 18, 2009



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Tucson is situated in beautiful mesquite riverbed country, over looked by the snowy Catalina range. The city was one big construction job; the people transient, wild, ambitious, busy, gay; washlines, trailers, bustling downtown streets with banners; altogether very Californian.

Jack Kerouac  
**On The Road**  
1957



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Tucson Lodging Brochure ca. 1930/1940 (unattributed publication)



## SECTION I

### Introduction

This Historic Context Project spans 1899 to 1973. The study was developed in 2009 as a resource for the Oracle Area Revitalization Project. Over 160 non residential properties within the project area were evaluated, and a period of significance was established, which extends from 1920, when the route began to be promoted (by local business interests) nationally for auto travelers, through the post WWII boom years, to its conclusion with the 1973 oil crisis.



North Oracle Road ca. 1938. (Arizona Historical Society/  
Tucson, AHS Photo Collection 180/F103 48)

A historic context provides a framework for evaluating historic resources relative to specific themes, time frames, and locations, and are useful for future nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, and many types of preservation planning. The development of Tucson's primary Highway, Routes 80, 89 and 84, the growth of commercial properties along its route, and its impact on the surrounding area is the primary focus of this study. This project was completed to support future individual, district and thematic National Register nominations developed to assist with the long-term management of these historic resources.

Building types along the corridor not only reflect national development trends, but also regional architectural styles. Included with this context study is a narrative inventory of all existing commercial properties developed in the "Oracle Area." by 1968. The study area is delineated by Miracle Mile to the north, Speedway Boulevard to the south, Stone Avenue to the east, and Fairview Avenue - Interstate-10 to the west.

Within the Oracle Area, the historic alignments of Route 80, 89 and 84 converge at Miracle Mile (originally named Casa Grande Highway) and Oracle Road. The resulting growth created a critical and significant impact on the development of Tucson's northwestern edge in the first half of the twentieth century. This corridor is the most important non-residential feature within the Oracle Area, and subsequent development along its edges defines the Area's eclectic mid-century historic character. The most prominent, recognizable, extant roadside property type within the Area is the Motor Court (motel). Examining the development and contemporary survivals of motels is critical to understanding the evolution of the Area, which also contains many excellent examples of early and mid twentieth century neon signage. Components of the 1937 traffic circle intersection between Oracle Road and Miracle Mile have survived.

The historic resources which fall beyond the border of this major corridor but within the Oracle Area, including Stone Avenue north of Drachman and Grant Road, draw their significance from many sources, including the general mid-twentieth century community development. Unfortunately, remodeling, renovations, additions, and demolitions have compromised many of these resources, diminishing the potential for future historic districts. These “off-route” resources are generally better understood in the context of residential neighborhood community development.

In order to clarify this distinction, Appendix B assesses the National Register residential neighborhoods in the Oracle area, but outside the Routes 80, 89 and 84 corridor. It is also worth noting that, bordering the project area, outside the purview of this study, are historic resources that contribute to the Area’s architectural environment. This includes properties on the east side of Stone Avenue, and along Miracle Mile west of Fairview; these excluded resources are important elements for a full and complete understanding of the historic resources of the corridor, and should be taken into consideration in future planning activities.

This historic context study provides a historical overview of Tucson’s transportation development, history, and the significance of U.S. Routes 80, 89 and Arizona State Route 84, the history of the Oracle Area, and the themes that emerged as part of its development, including the types of historic resources along and near the historic route.

## **Sources of Information**

The chief resources consulted were the Pima County Assessors Records, the Arizona Historical Society photo archive and ephemera files, the 1960 edition Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Tucson City Directories, and the University of Arizona Special Collection photo and document collections.

Images of historic postcards were graciously provided by the Tucson Postcard Club and obtained with the help of Sean Butts. Dirk Arnold generously lent photographs from the 1970s, and Steve Mathie lent historic family photographs of Oracle Road taken during the 1950s. Also enormously helpful were the memories of the Mehl family, early owners of the La Siesta Motel.

## **Summary of Historical Development**

Tucson, the seat of Pima County, is the largest city in Southeastern Arizona. At an altitude of 2400’ in the Sonoran Desert, the Tucson basin is encircled by four mountain ranges: the Santa Catalina Mountains to the north, the Santa Rita Mountains to the south, the Rincon Mountains to the east and the Tucson Mountains to the west. The city is approximately seventy miles north of the U.S.–Mexican Border, a hundred miles south of the state capital of Phoenix, and is the home of Arizona’s first university. Tucson’s economy is diverse. In 2006, the city’s population was estimated at 534,685.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Tucson courted an emerging tourist market while serving the country's transcontinental travelers. Tourism became a major component of the local economy during the early part of the twentieth century. Tucson was one of the first cities in the nation to formally launch an advertising campaign to attract visitors. Beginning in the 1920s, the northern edge of the city expanded, maintaining the formal citywide grid iron street pattern. Casa Grande Highway (Miracle Mile), Oracle Road, and Drachman Street were formally aligned, developed, and paved, becoming the northern gateway to the city. These roads were ultimately designated as part of U.S. Routes 80 and 89 and Arizona State Highway 84. Route 80 came south towards the city from Florence, merging with north south 89 and 84 southeast from Casa Grande, converging at the intersection of Oracle Road and Miracle Mile and snaking together through the urban core and heading outwards along Benson and Nogales Highway.

Dozens of motor courts, motels, and businesses, including restaurants and service stations, catered to these travelers, truckers and their automobiles throughout the Oracle Area over the next 50 years. By the mid 1950s, over 100 motels were operating in Tucson along the highway corridor.

The completion of Interstate 10 through Tucson in 1961 bypassing the historic routes to the west, was the first of numerous events that caused a decrease in traffic and the related deterioration of the Oracle Area and the surrounding vicinity, including the portion of U.S. Route 80 along Benson Highway. Numerous businesses were closed and motels demolished. The first iteration of the Interstate 10 Freeway through Tucson excluded major exits at Grant Road, Speedway Boulevard, and Saint Mary's Road; therefore, unlike other local highways throughout the region and country, Miracle Mile remained relevant as the primary northern entrance to the city for many years. By 1973, major alternative access points had been constructed, inexpensive air travel had been introduced, and automobile vacation travel had been brought to a halt by the 1973 oil crisis.

From 1973 onward the Oracle corridor and surrounding area declined. Nevertheless, changes in business operations and adaptive reuses enabled many properties to survive. Today, dozens of buildings built prior to 1973 along the highway corridor retain historic integrity. Interest in preserving and restoring these resources is increasing with a renewed emphasis on Tucson's mid-century architectural and historic heritage.



## SECTION II

### Early Automotive Impacts and the Shrinking Western Landscape: 1899 - 1920



Arizona, 1902. (Americans on the Road - Library of Congress)

#### Tucson Early Transpirations Routes

Inhabited since at least 2100 BCE, Tucson's prehistoric communities developed in close proximity to the watercourses running through the valley. These agrarian cultures developed irrigation systems, farming practices, and extensive overland trading routes.

The historical period of the region is defined by the arrival, beginning in 1694, of the missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino. Kino blazed new trails and established an extensive chain of missions throughout northwestern

Mexico and what would later become Arizona. Father Kino extended El Camino Real to San Xavier del Bac and Tucson.

Tucson became an important military outpost in 1775 with the establishment of the Presidio San Agustín del Tucson. With the establishment of the Presidio, Tucson became a major stop on El Camino Real, the alignment of which has survived as Main Avenue.

Franciscan missionaries under constant threat of Native American raids supervised the construction of a defensive wall and chapel at the San Cosmé de Tucson mission visita, close to the protection of the Presidio. The continued military significance of the city can be seen in the later creation of Fort Lowell for the U.S. Cavalry, and the Davis Monthan Air Force Base.

The demands of the 1849 California gold rush "Forty-Niners" motivated the creation of supply chains throughout Arizona. With the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, southern Arizona was acquired by the United States with the explicit purpose of creating an all season transcontinental railroad.<sup>1</sup> From 1857 to 1861, the Butterfield Stagecoach stopped in Tucson twice a week en route from San Francisco to St. Louis.

The City of Tucson was incorporated in 1877 with a population estimated to be 7,000. The 1880 arrival of the transcontinental railroad in Tucson, along with a later spur route to Mexico, brought dramatic social and architectural changes to the city, transforming the rugged outpost. Eastern architectural tastes and influences transformed the flat roofed Sonoran buildings to Arizona Territorial style. Queen Ann Revival and a series of other early twentieth century revival styles shaped Tucson's post 1880 built environment. However, more than architectural styles arrived via the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Tucson resident Dr. Hiram W. Fenner, after seeing an automobile in a circus, ordered one, and it arrived by rail in 1899. Tucson's first automobile managed to travel a few blocks from the station before running into a saguaro cactus. In 1905, Dr. Fenner was issued Tucson's first driver's license. <sup>ii</sup>

During the early twentieth century, the undeveloped Oracle Area bordered the original Tucson city limits. The map of the "City of Tucson and Additions" compiled and drawn by J. B. Wright civil engineer in 1909, reveals that the southern half of the Oracle Area from Grant Road south was owned by Albert Steinfield, C.F. Schumacher, and J. Campini. The undeveloped property was bounded by undeveloped land to the north, the city cemeteries and the Mountain View Addition to the south, the platted streets and parcels of Feldman Addition and Tucson Heights to the east, and to the west, the primary ingress egress of the city, Yuma Road, and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks.

In 1909, the cemetery to the south was closed and began to be redeveloped into neighborhoods. Some human remains were relocated to the area the north of the Oracle Area that was developed as the Evergreen and Holy Hope Cemeteries. The rest were left in place and forgotten.

The area adjacent to the Santa Cruz River and the Oracle Area was flat, undeveloped land whose northern edge bordered agricultural development prior to the rise of automobile culture infrastructure. This northern area was the Tucson Farms Company, owned by Chicagoan Douglas Smith and promoted in 1917 by George Wharton in his book *Arizona, the Wonderland*:

The Tucson Farms Company owns and operates the largest and most modern dairy in Tucson, known as the Flowing Wells Dairy. The chief object in operating the dairy is to supply to the people of Tucson the best milk obtainable, and incidentally to furnish an outlet for the farmers who have bought lands of the Tucson Farms Company [...] the company proposes to assist its purchasers of land in disposing their crops and other products to the best advantage possible. On inquiry, I found that the land is sold, with sufficient water rights, at very reasonable prices, when one considers the enormous crop that may be produced, and the excellent home market. The selling price is from two hundred to three hundred dollars per acre. The comparatively small acreage in this portion of Arizona that can ever be supplied with irrigation water, and the great developments in mining in the immediate vicinity of Tucson, providing a local demand for all sorts of products of the soil, present a desirable combination to the farmer, equaled by few localities. <sup>iii</sup>

The Tucson Farms Company was not a financial success, and in 1922, the newly formed Flowing Wells Irrigation District took control of the wells and water distribution system. Remnants of the Tucson Farms Company Irrigation Ditch appear to be extant along the southwestern edge of the Oracle Area. This water source was one factor leading to the development of the Pascua Village.

As the area developed and subdivisions were platted, new roadways were aligned. The northern entrance of the city shifted east. The Yuma Road, bordering the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, connected with Main Street and continued through downtown Tucson. The Yuma Road was abandoned, and traffic was shifted to the new Casa Grande Highway which ran southeast into the city, turned east onto Miracle Mile, then south onto Oracle Road, east onto Drachman Street, and finally south onto Stone Avenue.

This realignment, providing developable land along roads with significant and increasing traffic, created tremendous economic opportunity for entrepreneurs. As the automobile proliferated, becoming a necessity to every household, the roadway developed to accommodate the new and rapidly growing automotive culture.

### **The Automobile and the Development of a Highway**

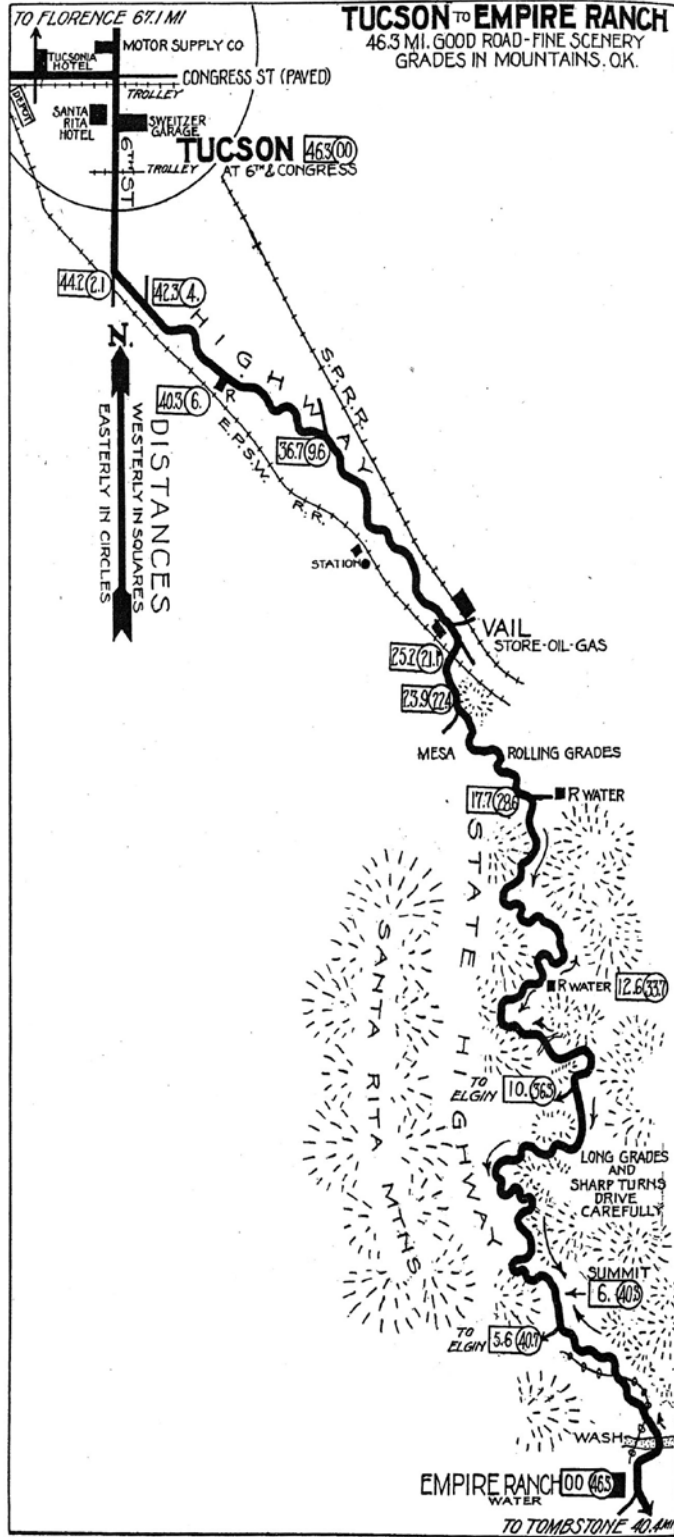
Tucson's Automobile Age had begun. For the first time, the nimble automobile allowed travelers, in mass numbers, to enjoy independent adventures. The first vehicles were built for the wealthy and little infrastructure existed to support long distance travel. This changed in 1908, when Henry Ford introduced assembly line industrial construction, reducing costs, enabling the Model T to be offered for \$850. Over 19,000 Model Ts were sold by the end of the first year.<sup>iv</sup> Tucson's first organized automobile race took place in 1911 on Speedway Boulevard.<sup>v</sup> Traversing the vast Arizona landscape was still an arduous task. Rough, irregular roads, in some cases barely suitable even for equine travel, were poorly equipped and hazardous for the car.

The "Automobile Blue Book for 1912, Volume 5 Mississippi River to Pacific Coast" provided detailed turn-by-turn directions from Tucson to Phoenix:

The distance from Tucson to Phoenix is listed as 127.1 miles...Ahead of the careful directions is a statement the 'the following route matter is written from data taken by representatives of the Ohio Motor Co. on their transcontinental trip in the fall of 1910 [...] Tucson, Santa Rita hotel on right. Go one block to trolley and turn left; keep straight ahead. Cross bridge. Cross RR. And bear left with tracks on left. Bear right and pass small adobe house on right. Take left fork. Turn right, bearing left 6.1 miles; again left 6.3 miles. Cross irrigation ditch. Turn right – RR. again on left. Bear right away from RR. Bear right. Turn left. Bear right thought Mesquite Road, coming back to RR. Go through wire lane. Turn left at wire fence corner, passing Rillito Station; buildings and tank over the left. Bear left at the corner of three fences, around stone ground tank and wind mill.<sup>vi</sup>

This truncated excerpt from the page long complicated route demonstrates the region's need for infrastructural highway investment.

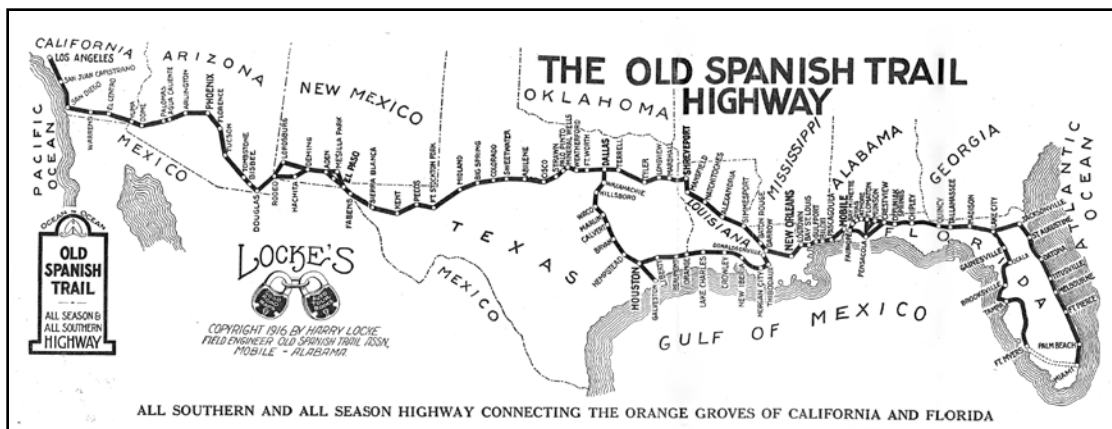
During the same period, several private companies invented artificial groupings of southern American cities, including Tucson, into patterns of connected highways extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific.



Automobile Blue Book for 1912, Volume 5 Mississippi River to Pacific Coast



In 1916, the Old Spanish Trail was established, evoking the romanticism of colonial Spanish history. Cities along the route benefited from cross county travel, capitalizing on cultural tourism. <sup>vii</sup>



Old Spanish Trail Highway map. ca 1918.

On the northern edge of Tucson, the Old Spanish Trail merged with other routes to create a serpentine path through the city. The prolific development of motor courts, motels, and roadside businesses along these corridors served the increasing numbers of cross country and regional travelers.

After substantial federal investment, the basic route would officially become U.S. Highway 80 commissioned in 1926, passing through Douglas, Bisbee and Benson. U.S. Highway 89 from Mexico, passing through Nogales, Tumacacori and Tubac, also entered the city from the south. These two roadways merged on the southern edge of Tucson, and snaked together through the city heading north through Florence and Globe towards Phoenix. State Highway 84, the Casa Grande Highway (today’s Miracle Mile), split off at Tucson’s northern edge heading north to the cities of Casa Grande, Phoenix and Gila Bend. <sup>viii</sup>

Dave Devine’s essay “Dreaming of Autopia,” published by the Tucson Corral of the Westerners in the journal *The Smoke Signal*, provides a concise look at Southern Arizona highway development:

Highway 80 was called several names before, and even after, it received its numerical designation. It was part of the “Broadway of America” which stretched from New York to southern California. It was included in ‘The Old Spanish Trail’ reaching from Florida to San Diego. It was also called the ‘Bankhead Highway’, ‘Dixie Overland Highway’ and the ‘Lee Highway.’ <sup>ix</sup>

These names, intended to evoke glamour, were created solely to attract tourists to the communities involved and their sponsoring business associations, only incidentally promoting a particular cross country route. Again, Devine:

‘Old Spanish Trail’ is merely a name intended to fire the popular imagination and lend a touch of romance to an otherwise practical engineering venture.

Under Managing Director Mr. Harral Ayres, the “Old Spanish Trail Association” established this route as an all year highway. As a result, the federal government allocated \$80,000,000 between 1923 and 1929 for bridges and road construction. <sup>x</sup> The federal investment in this transcontinental highway would lead to its formal designation of “U.S. Highway 80” in 1926. Known as the Broadway of America and The Old Spanish Trail linked and promoted the southern portion of the country and its rich history. This excerpt from the 1929 Old Spanish Trail Guide Book illustrates this historic allure:

Florida was Spanish until 1819; Spain sold Old Louisiana back to France in 1800, and France ceded it to the United States in 1803. The independence of Texas was won in 1836 and the State was annexed by the United States in 1845. The New Mexico-Arizona-Southern California territory was ceded to the United States by Mexico in 1848, and the Gadsden Purchase of part of southern New Mexico and Arizona was consummated in 1853. Route 80 and 90 today bind together all of these Spanish territories of the United States.

According to a contemporary account published by the Old Spanish Trail Association, the route had:

[a] total length of 2,671 miles, of which 798, or about 30 percent, are paved with brick, concrete or bituminous macadam, according to figures of the Bureau of Public Roads of the United States Department of Agriculture. More than half the mileage, or 1,472 miles, is surfaced with gravel, sand clay or topsoil. Climatic conditions in the Southern States are favorable for this lighter construction, which is proving adequate for present traffic...On the route there are 315 miles of graded and drained earth roads and 86 miles of unimproved highways...Of the total mileage, 1,502 miles have been improved with Federal aid, at a total cost of \$23,372,305 of which the Government contributed \$11,041,351, or about 50 per cent.” <sup>xi</sup>

The same 1929 document describes Tucson:

About 81 miles beyond Tombstone, lies Tucson, in a high desert valley surrounded by mountain ranges. It is one of the oldest cities in the country and originated as a small presidio garrisoned by a detachment of 50 soldiers. San Xavier del Bac Mission, on the outskirts of the town, dates the foundation back to 1687. Near Tucson is Old Fort Lowell, founded in 1862; Colossal Cave; the Picture Rocks in Tucson Mountains; Tumacacori National Monument, and three Indian reservations.” <sup>xii</sup>

By the 1920s, the car was no longer a luxury but a necessity. Frank Lloyd Wright poignantly noted in his article “America Tomorrow,” published in *American Architect* in May 1932:

It is in the nature of the automobile that the city spreads out and thus and far away.

The accessibility of popularly priced automobiles ushered in a period of infrastructure investment and expansive growth, leading, within a few decades, to paved and well maintained roads which connected ever expanding cities. Southern Arizona became an easy destination for drivers and their passengers. The city expanded in all directions with subdivisions and houses designed to accommodate the car.

Until the early 1920s, travelers were limited to traditional multi storied hotels in the downtown Tucson commercial district, built in close proximity to the railroad during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The “Pioneer Hotel” and the “Santa Rita Hotel,” as well as smaller establishments equipped with restaurants and luxury facilities, catered primarily to the train traveler and therefore provided minimal parking space.

Early motorists would camp overnight on the roadside. Municipalities encouraging regional tourism opened the first Auto Camps, and Tucson was no exception.



Pioneer Hotel, Downtown Tucson ca. 1930. (Arizona Historical Society)



Santa Rita Hotel, Downtown Tucson ca. 1930. (Courtesy The Tucson Post Card Club)



## SECTION III

### From Roadway to Highway: the Growth of Roadside Businesses: 1920 - 1937

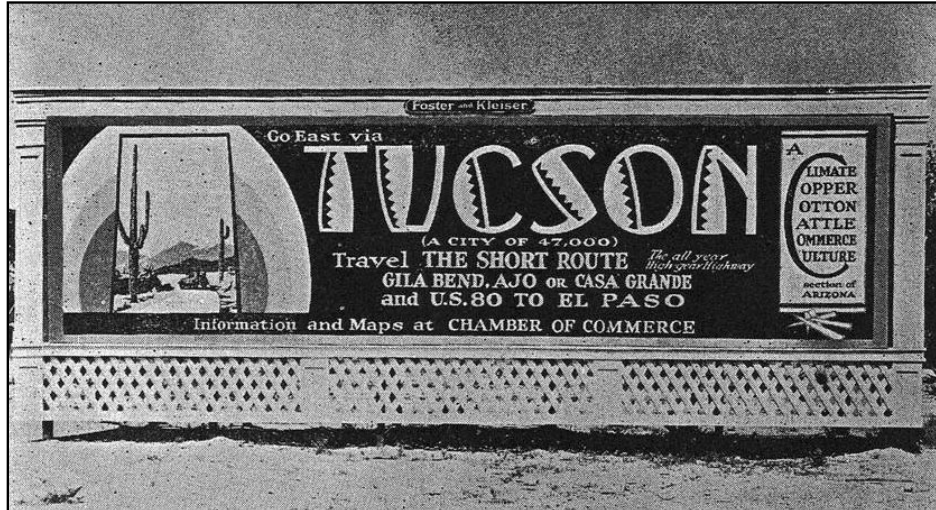


Arial view, Oracle Road looking south. ca. 1935.  
(Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, AHS Photo Collection 177/F100 391)

#### **Tucson's Marketing Campaign and Auto Camping**

With the new freedom provided by the car, Tucson grew east and west of the railroad and along the vehicular ingress and egress of the city. As mining claims in the region began failing, Tucson became famous for its tuberculosis and respiratory clinics. A group of industrious businessmen created the “Tucson Sunshine Climate Club” which launched a national marketing campaign in 1920 to increase tourism in Tucson. The campaign capitalized on ideas from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century national advertising which had targeted and mystified the southwest region of America. The Santa Fe Railroad, in tandem with Fred Harvey and Mary Coulter, created a boom in the “Old West” tourist destination market. Tucson was the second city in the nation to develop such a campaign.

The highly successful advertising actively conjured images of cowboys and Spanish missions while promoting the health benefits of the desert climate, resulting in robust growth in tourism and immigration. The quantifiable economic benefits determined that tourism would quickly become a staple of the Tucson economy. The campaign was continued for decades to follow. <sup>xiii</sup>



“One of Nine Highway Signs Directing Travel to Tucson” Magazine: Tucson, October 1929, page 15.

The Tucson Sunshine Climate Club promoted Tucson’s Auto Camping, a growing popular activity. Warren Belasco discusses this early camping mentality in *Americans on the Road*:

Autocamping began as a vacation alternative for the relatively comfortable middle classes. Although no longer just a rich man’s toy, an automobile was the prerogative for fewer than 500,000 owners in 1910. Even in 1920 with over eight million passenger cars registered, most Americans still relied on rail transportation when leaving home. This era of mass motoring served by an elaborate commercial infrastructure lay just ahead, but autocamping originally appealed to affluent individuals for whom the very lack of an established infrastructure was its major attraction.

At first they parked by the side of the road and set up camp for the night. In remote areas their “roadside hotel” might be an alluring clearing, perhaps with a good view and a nearby stream for bathing, drinking and fishing.<sup>xiv</sup>



Auto Camping in Tucson ca 1928.



Auto Camping in the Desert, University of Arizona Special Collections Library

Tucson, like many communities across the country, quickly opened locally subsidized Auto Camps to attract these early affluent adventurers. Tucson's first three Auto Camps were listed under their own heading in the Tucson City Directory of 1924:

“Tucson Auto Park” on 644 Saint Mary’s Avenue,  
“The Sunshine Auto Camp” at 900 West Congress, and  
“Auto Park” on South 6th Avenue.



Tucson Auto Camp Park, 644 Saint Mary’s Ave. 1920s (demolished)  
(1920s Tucson Sunshine Climate Club Brochure)

By the early 1920s, 3,000 to 6,000 auto camps had been established in the nation.

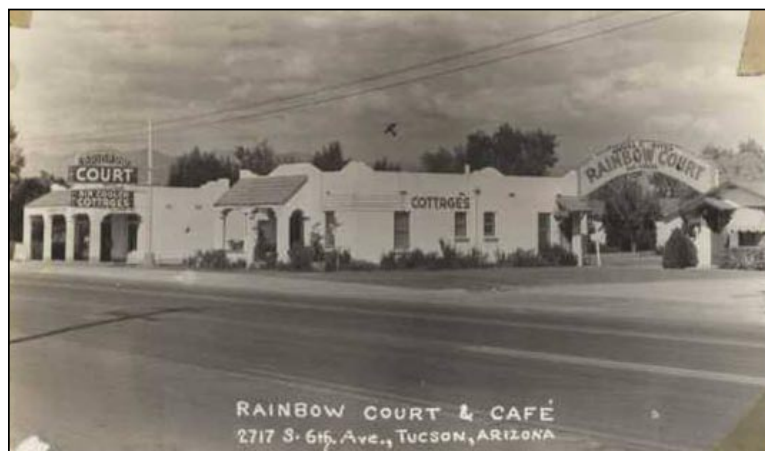
Belasco:

The free municipal autocamps were even more short lived than the roadside camp [...] It was free, open, accessible to all travelers who happened to be passing through. Tourists took their chances with the types of people camping nearby. [...] [Automobile] registration quadrupled from 4.6 million in 1917 to 19.2 million in 1926. Although many of these car buyers were middle class others were more economically marginal people for whom the auto camp was the only place to stay. As a result, the camp population became a bit too proletarian for certain tastes.<sup>xv</sup>

Communities found some guests were staying for long durations becoming permanent, unwanted fixtures. These Auto Camps were closed, to be replaced with competitive private businesses.

Within the Oracle Area, three of these early auto camps were established. By 1927, “Stumble Inn Auto Camp” was in operation on the corner of Drachman Street and Oracle Road, and “Roosevelt Auto Camp” was open at 1920 North Oracle Road, one mile north of Speedway Boulevard. In 1928, “All States Auto Camp” was established at 2650 North Oracle Road at Jacinto Street.

As the automobile industry flourished, “Auto Camps” evolved into “motor courts” explicitly designed for the automobile equipped tourist. An example is the “Paradise Motel” on South 6th Avenue is an example built on the site of the “6th Avenue Auto Camp” of 1927. The three Auto Camps in the Oracle Area, although all are now demolished, had been transformed into formal cabin and auto court configurations by the early 1930s. Small courts provided space to park and reasonably priced accommodation. By 1929, nine Auto Camps were thriving along south 6th Avenue on the southern side of the city and the first two “courts” in Tucson had opened: “Midway Auto Court” and “Rainbow Court.” Other “mom and pop” entrepreneurs followed in the first wave of Tucson’s automobile specialized lodging enterprise.



Rainbow Court and Café, ca. 1929 (demolished) (Courtesy Tucson Post Card Club)



These businesses competed to offer the best amenities, promoting their comforts and the unique qualities of their business.

Along these roads, and in other towns throughout the southern Arizona, auto courts began to appear after 1925. [...] Between 1925 and 1940, many of the auto courts of Southern Arizona would transform from shacks to pleasant rooms with every convenience the traveler could want. Courts had to keep changing and improving in order to stay competitive. <sup>xvi</sup>

In a description of the 1930s, Tucson

[is] the only large city in the county, has a population of 45,000 people, a health and dude resort, as a university city, cattle ranch center, center of mining, center of history, reminiscent of Spanish conquerors and of Padre Kino building his chain of missions. <sup>xvii</sup>

The evolution of the American roadside served as a template for Tucson's own roadside culture. The era which produced most of the area's roadside artifacts was heralded by the post war boom. <sup>xviii</sup>

## **Early Motor Courts**

Guest ranches, hotels, and by the early 1930s a new hostelry of "motor courts" boomed.

Mild winters, natural desert resources, and easy accessibility made Tucson an obvious vacation destination. Increased tourism stimulated increasing numbers of guest ranches, Auto Camps, and motor courts, all of which catered to adventurers seeking a glimmer of the "Old West." Entrepreneurs happily appropriated iconic saguaro cacti, decrepit relics such as wagon wheels, and a movie flavored Southwestern vernacular language to promote this western image.

Privately owned, independent motels clustered along the highway's edge, predominately on the outskirts of the city. These small courts and motels were developed and sometimes built by the owners. Characteristics, styles and design motifs varied according to taste, but the common interest was to evoke "The Southwest." This was articulated by architectural style and romanticized by colorful names.

Cabins were developed, and then small sized "auto courts" in a U or L shape. Individual rental units were often separated from neighboring units with covered carports. Housing for the owner or manager was usually integrated into the main building, adjacent to the office. Auto court owners advertised swimming pools, shuffle board courts, "refrigerated air," and garden areas to draw customers.

Proximity to Mexico, rich Spanish Colonial history, and distinctive architecture distinguished Tucson from other cities in Arizona and the greater Southwest. <sup>xix</sup>

Following World War I, Tucson developed Davis-Monthan Field, the municipal airfield dedicated on 23 September 1927 with the landing of Charles Lindberg in his famous airplane, "The Spirit Of St. Louis." Popularity of the transcontinental routes through Tucson surged during the 1930s and 1940s.

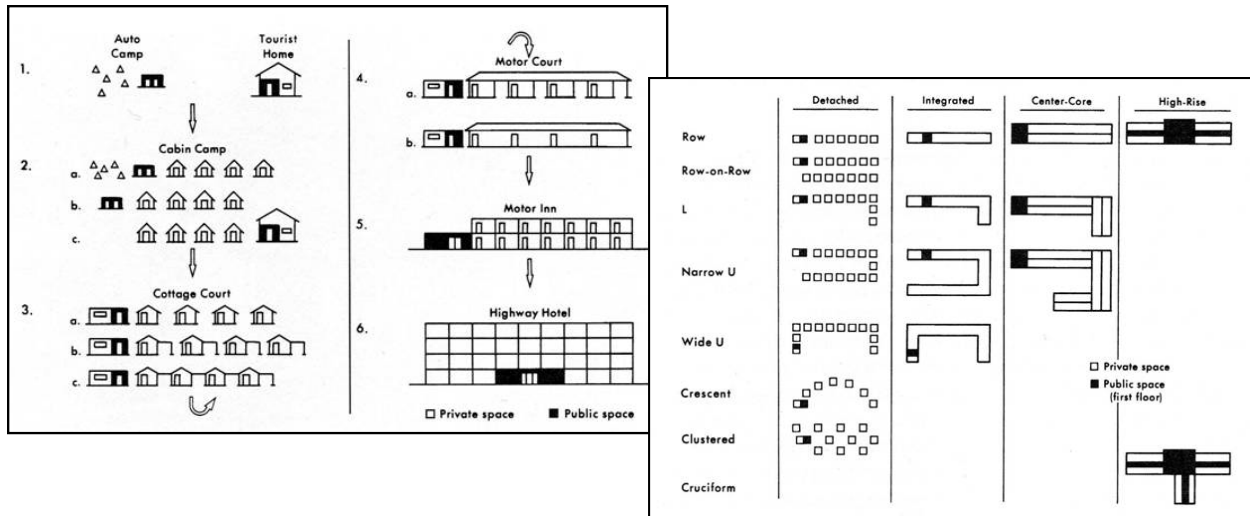
<b>LEADING TUCSON AUTO COURTS</b>	
<p><b>Sunset Villa Court</b>            "Cottages New, Clean and Modern to the Last Minute"            2720 So. 6th Ave.</p>	<p>A Clean Place For People Who Care.  <b>Linger Longer Tourist Court</b>            2545 So. 6th Ave., On U. S. 80            Telephone 3675            22 strictly modern cottages            Furnished or unfurnished,            reasonable rates            Amusement grounds and fine            modern laundry            Where  <b>"TOURISTS LINGER LONGER"</b></p>
<p><b>Close-Inn Court</b>            Forty 1-2-3-Room Cottages            Hot running water, hard wood            floors, tile baths and sinks,            Inner-Spring Mattresses  <b>A GOOD PLACE TO STOP</b>            1521 So. 6th Ave. Phone 36-J</p>	<p><b>Sunshine Tourist Court</b>            J. A. PARKER, Prop.            30 Double and Single Cottages            Simmons Beds with Beauty-Rest            Mattresses            1809 So. Sixth Ave. on U. S. 80            Phone 3443-W</p>
<p><b>Pepper Tree Tourist Court</b>            Individual Homes of Comfort            Strictly Modern New Cottages            Phone 3648            Cleanliness and Courtesy            Reasonable Rates            A. THRANE, Prop.            2023 So. 6th Avenue            On Route U. S. 80</p>	<p><b>Arizona Tourist Court</b>  <b>JOHN YUNT</b>            Owner            Tucson's Coolest Court            1749 So. 6th Ave.</p>
<p><b>RAINBOW COURT</b>            2717 So. 6th Ave.            Tucson            Phone 3644            " 1585</p>	<p><b>REX MOTOR COURT</b>            On U. S. Highway 80            Bus Service            So. 6th Ave. and 34th St.            STRICTLY MODERN            Hotel Service if Desired            MR. and MRS. M. RIDDELL            Singles Doubles</p>

Tucson Auto Court Advertising 1935 (Tucson City Directory)

Tucson regional map showing original Highway alignments Tucson Magazine April 1930.

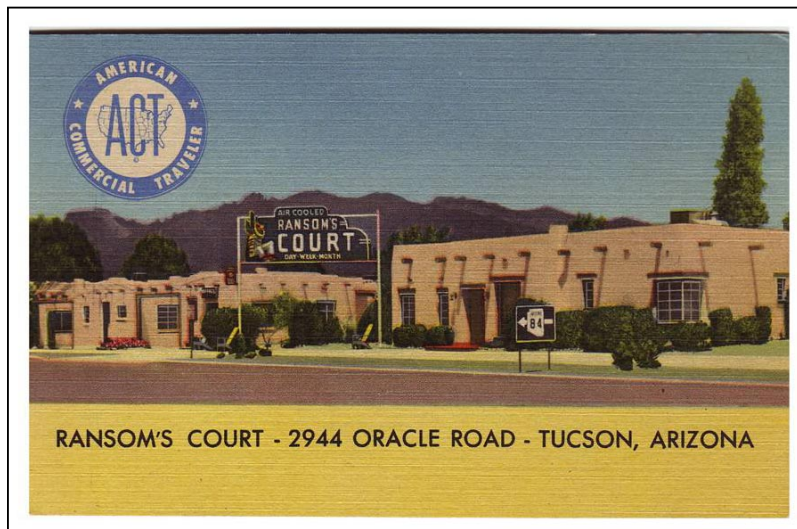
"Motor Hotel" soon contracted into a new English word: "Motel."

In 1931, "Vida's Place" at 2412 North Oracle was the first auto court constructed in the Oracle Area, followed in the late 1930s by the extant Spanish revival "De Luxe Motor Court" at 1650 North Oracle. The "De Luxe Motel" was unique to Tucson as a member of the first association of motor hotels.

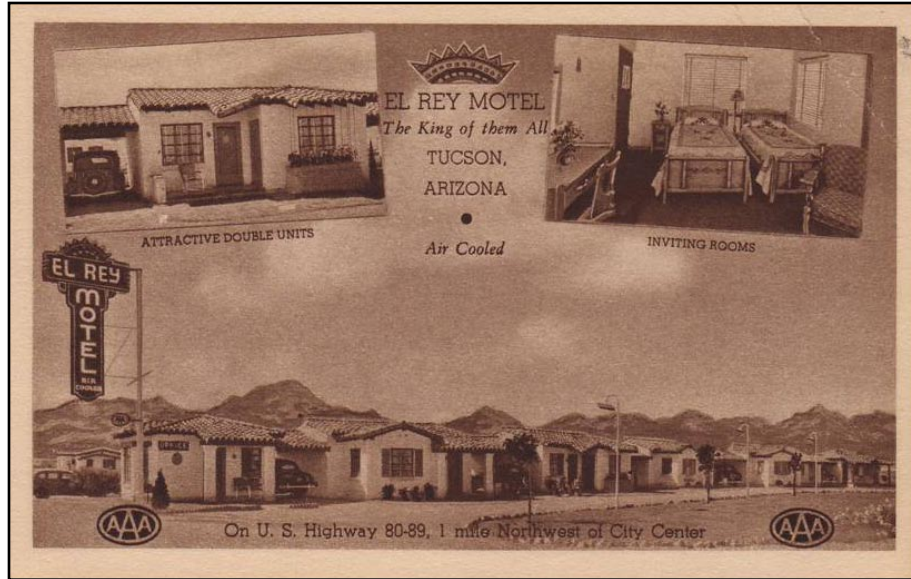


Common arrangements of Motels. The majority of Motels in Tucson were built on a L or U plan.  
(The Motel in America, p.37)

Motel associations were open to all, which made it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain standards, let alone raise them. Consequently, small groups of motel owners began to cooperate in upgrading properties, the idea being to create networks of high quality motels through which business could be referred. Each member of a system was pledged to maintain agreed upon standards and to display the group's identifying emblem. One of the earliest of the referral chains was the Deluxe Motor Courts, administered initially from Los Angeles. Promoters drove major highways to identify appropriate motels and sell owners on the benefits of affiliation. Deluxe Motor Courts were located primarily in California, Oregon, and Washington, although in 1936 salesmen added motels along U.S. 70 and U.S. 80 in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in anticipation of that year's Texas Centennial Exposition at Dallas. <sup>xx</sup>



Pueblo Revival Ransom's Court, 2944 Oracle Road 1929 – 1947 (demolished)  
(Courtesy Tucson Post Card Club)



El Rey Motel, Oracle Road ca.1942 (demolished)  
 (Courtesy Tucson Post Card Club)



Mobile Motel, Oracle Road ca 1950. (demolished)  
 (Courtesy Tucson Post Card Club)

## Neon



Thunderbird Lodge neon sign. 1958. (sign lost) Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie

A significant feature of the Oracle Area is the abundance of original mid-20th century neon advertising signage designed and constructed for the original businesses lining the corridor. The art of neon signage was developed before the rise of the Oracle Area. The Area's earliest businesses used neon.

There are 28 extant neon monument signs

contributing to the area's visual fabric, of which 26 are along the original highway alignments of U.S. Highways 80 and 89, and within one block of these corridors. Generally, these signs retain an association with the businesses they front and contribute to the historic quality of the individual property. In some cases, however, the building originally associated with the sign is gone or has been significantly modified, yet the sign remains as an artifact of the area's glittering past. These colorful luminescent structures are important character defining features of the Area; they activate the night environment, create visual continuity, exemplify the dying art of neon tube sculpture, and provide a tangible link to the past. The condition of these signs varies from excellent to poor, from full functioning as originally intended to painted over sheet metal shells. In some cases, functional signs have been redesigned, as owners, uses and businesses have changed, leaving intact only the primary form and structure. (See Appendix A.)

The U. S. Department of the Interior Technical Preservation Services, Preservation Brief 25 The Preservation of Historic Signs written by Michael J. Auer outlines the importance and issues surrounding the preservation of neon signs:

Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner's tastes and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for a illustrated listing of these signs.

Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic "box" signs, historic signs often attract by their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.

Yet historic signs pose problems for those who would save them. Buildings change uses. Businesses undergo change in ownership. New ownership or use normally brings change in signs. Signs are typically part of a business owner's sales strategy, and may be changed to reflect evolving business practices or to project a new image.<sup>xxi</sup>

Monument signs of glass tubes filled with electrically excited neon gas, although ubiquitous icons in the American commercial landscape, were invented in Europe, a product of the electrical revolution of the late 1800s. Scientists and visionaries including Francis Hawksbee, Johann Winkler, Heinrich Geissler, and Nikola Tesla invented new technologies that allowed the bombardment of gases with high-voltage alternating current to make them glow, a process immediately joined to glassblowing. Mixtures of gasses produced a wide spectrum of available colors. Rudi Stern, in his book "Let There Be Neon," credits the electrical infrastructure developed by Thomas Edison with making the neon revolution possible.

The outdoor electric spectacular, which would transform city centers all over the world into nighttime wonderlands of kinetic excitement, was born in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. Thomas Alva Edison had made possible through his invention in 1879 of the first commercially practical incandescent lamp. By the early 1880s he had developed all of the equipment and techniques for a complete electrical distribution system leading to the first electric light power plant in the world, on Pearl Street in New York City. By 1900, electricity was flowing into nearly 1,500 incandescent lamps arrayed on the narrow front of the Flatiron Building to form America's first electrically lighted outdoor advertising sign.<sup>xxii</sup>

As electricity was harnessed and sold as a commercial commodity, French entrepreneur George Claude patented and marketed this invention, the neon sign, on a mass scale, holding a virtual monopoly on the industrial development and manufacturing of such signs. Claude exhibited the first neon sign at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1910. Two years later, the first neon sign was installed in Paris. In 1923, the first American electric advertising sign shone over Earl Anthony's Packard dealership in Los Angeles, California, stopping traffic and ushering in the American Neon Age.

In 1924, Claude's neon sign franchise opened its first U.S. office in New York City, followed by Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Neon, which was to play a very important part in urban nocturnal spectacles, was introduced to the United States in 1923. By virtue of its flexible luminosity, neon could produce effects beyond the capacity of earlier light sources. It could create startling

silhouettes, whether of figures or letters, in a range of color combinations that seemed infinite. In an advertising brochure of Claude Neon, the French firm of George Claude that held a virtual monopoly on neon tube manufacture in its early years, neon tubes were described as “the latest and most artistic forms of electric advertising and illumination. The light given is continuous, very distinctive, and peculiarly attractive. It has been described as a ‘living flame.’ ” A European hybrid of art and technology, neon’s elegance and refinement came from France, then the undisputed international arbiter of taste. However, neon soon became symbolic of American energy and inventiveness, its Continental roots giving rise to a spectacular flowering of American showmanship in the late 1920s and early 1930s. <sup>xxiii</sup>

The use of neon signs exploded throughout the middle twentieth century. Tucson’s commercial strips, downtown district, and highways were all lined with large neon monument signs.

From the beginning there were problems with infringements. As the popularity of neon spread, small one-man shops proliferated. Owing to the tubes’ fragility they did not ship well, so even small towns began to have a need for neon shops. <sup>xxiv</sup>

The first Tucson sign company explicitly listed for the production of electric signs appeared in the Tucson City Directory in 1929: the “National Sheet Metal Mfg. Co.” at 353 Toole Avenue. In 1930, under the city directory heading “Neon Sign,” only one company was listed: “Arizona Sheet Metal Co.”

Between 1939 and 1940, six Tucson companies created Neon Electric signs. Many other sign production companies were active during this two year period but there is no evidence of their involvement in neon.

Neon signs manufacturers in Tucson included those listed below. The year indicates the company’s first appearance in the Tucson City Directory):

1930	Arizona Sheet Metal CO.	135 South 4th Avenue
1933	Tubular Neon Co.	821 North 9th Avenue
1934	Isadore Posner	17 South 6th Avenue
1936	Acme Neon Co.	210 North 4th Avenue 1028 East Broadway
1938	Modern Sign Shop	161 ½ east Broadway
1940	Hearn Signs and Neon Products Co.	545 North 4th Avenue

By the end of the 1930s,

[...] motorists drove faster cars, and motels used everything at their disposal to stop them. Neon signs became much more specialized and most motel operations featured distinct names [...] Building became part of the sign itself [...] The motel sign was recognized as a regional interpretation of the vacation fantasies expected by the motorist. <sup>xxv</sup>

By 1950, over 17 neon sign production companies were active in Tucson. Over the next decade, colored plastic and fluorescent displays begin replacing neon, and this specialized industry as a whole began to fade away. Today, neon sculpture (as well as repair and refurbishment) is still practiced by sign makers and artists as an obscure technological endeavor. Some of these companies are still active in Tucson.

Little is known about the individual craftsman and artists who produced these glowing nighttime highway monuments. Few records from that period have surfaced; the primary source material is limited to visual documentation in old postcards and photographs from this era. The work of these craftsmen was fundamental in shaping the visual character of Tucson's highways. Their design cues came from architecture, "Western" sensibilities, and nostalgic marketing trends.

Isadore Posner is one of Tucson's neon artists known to have been active from 1934 onwards. Isadore was the son of early Tucson sign maker Philip Posner, who established Tucson's first sign painting store in 1913. The Russian-Jewish Philip Posner immigrated to New York in 1899, moving to Los Angeles three years later. With his wife and seven children, he moved to Tucson in 1913.<sup>xxvi</sup> Isadore created a new company to manufacture neon signs for Tucson businesses in 1934.

Like the motel industry, the shape and character of neon signs changed to reflect new American tastes and sensibility. During the 1950s, the American preoccupation with space influenced sign design. The "Linda Vista Motel" signage demonstrates this shift from "Western/Frontier Revival" to "Neon Moderne."



## SECTION IV

### Miracle Mile and the Entrepreneurs: 1937 - 1941



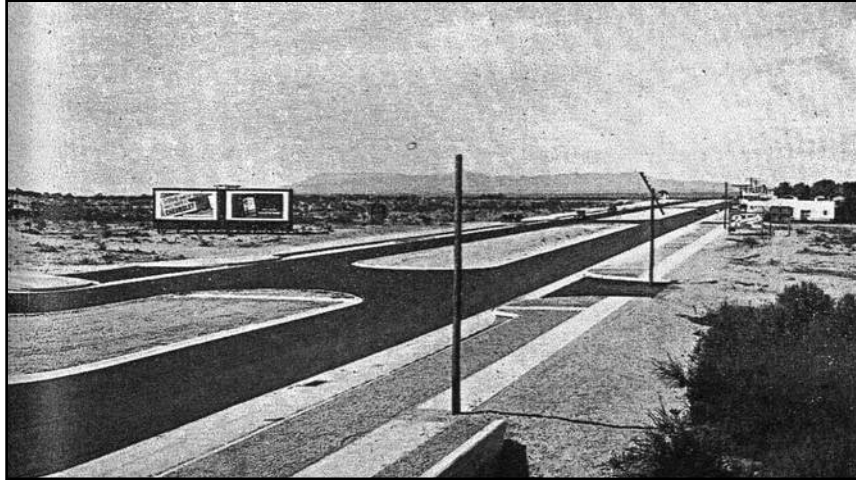
1937 Miracle Mile improvements under construction.  
(Arizona Historical Society/Tucson AHS Photo Collection 180 F103 54)

### Miracle Mile

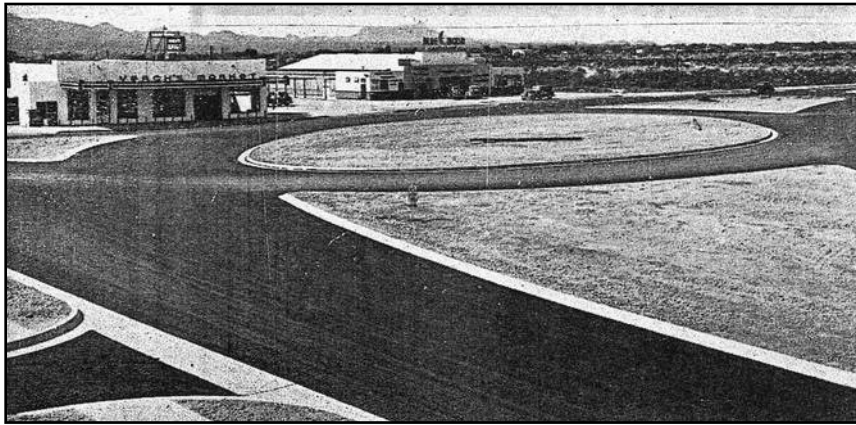
In 1937, substantial highway improvements were made within the Oracle Area. *Arizona Highways* magazine coined a modern name for these improvements and the new road: “Miracle Mile: Safety Plus Thoroughfare.”

Arizona is to have a “Miracle Mile” – an almost perfect piece of roadway that will be fool proof! It will be the only safety-plus thoroughfare in the West, and as such will put the state in the spotlight of national highways.

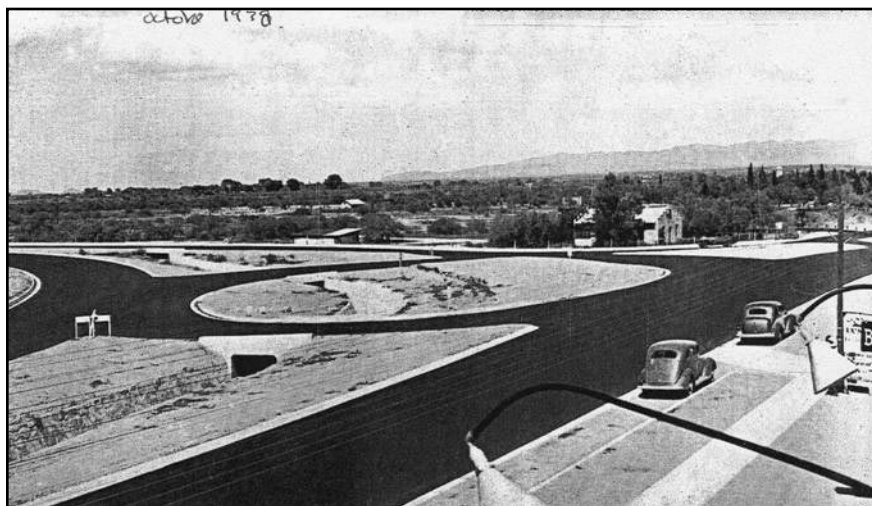
Beginning at the city limits of Tucson, the road will extend for 1.75 miles toward the Florence Casa Grande Junction on U.S. Highway 80 and 89. It is to be an ultra modern construction unit with 22-foot roadway divided by a center separation strip 38 ft wide. This center parkway, it is believed, will eliminate whatever hazards have existed in night driving, and with a bordering five inch curb will allow emergency access to the center zone. <sup>xxvii</sup>



Miracle Mile, Tucson: Arizona's first divided highway 1938



South traffic oval of the Miracle Mile. Oracle and Drachman, 1938. (demolished 2007)



North traffic oval of the Miracle Mile, Oracle and Miracle Mile, 1938  
(Arizona Highways Magazine, Arizona's Divided Mile of Safety, October 1938)

In addition to the center median, two streamlined traffic circles were constructed at each end of Oracle Road by Tanner Construction Company. In 2007, the southern circle at the Oracle Road – Drachman Street intersection was eliminated and replaced with a generic “T” intersection controlled by a traffic light. The remaining northern circle at the intersection of Oracle Road and Miracle Mile is an important component of the Oracle Area.

### **The Changing Streetscape.**

In 1937, J. W. Angle, vice chairman of the State Highway Commission, in conjunction with “the mayor and city council, the board of supervisors of Pima county, the Chamber of Commerce, Realty Board, the Sunshine Club, other members of the highway commission and the Federal Bureau of Public Roads,” successfully initiated the \$200,000 “Miracle Mile” construction project.



Miracle Mile at Oracle Road looking north, ca. 1950. (Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie)

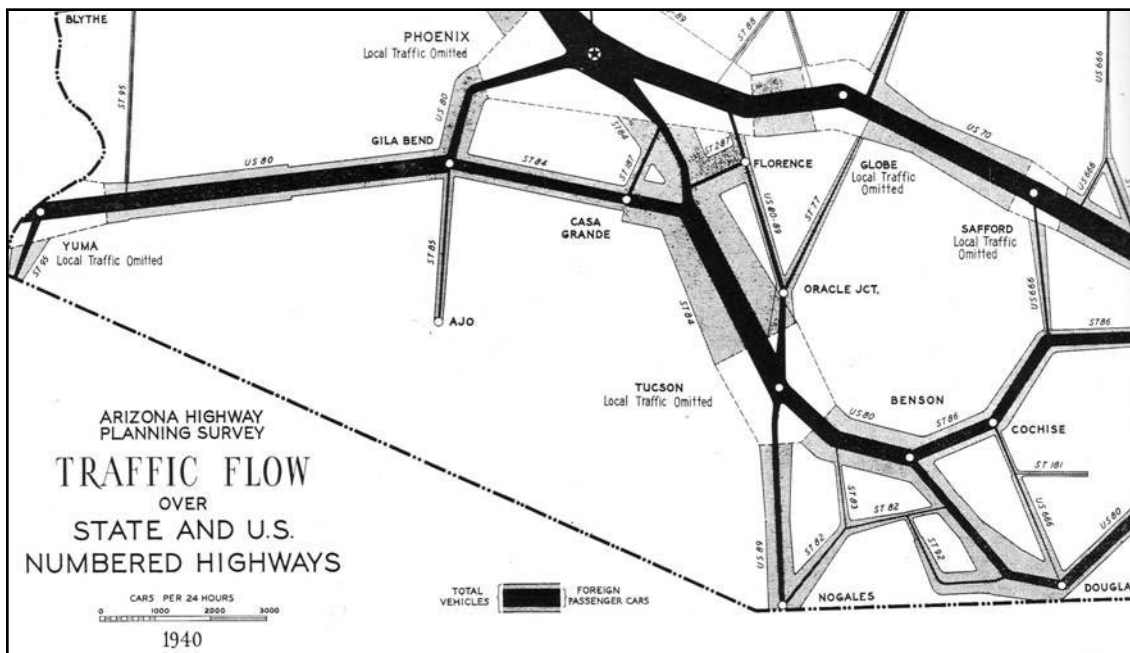
Along the new roadway,

[t]he imagery that enticed travelers and provided an informal marketing strategy for most of these road-side businesses was a conscious response to regional preferences. [...] In the southwest, the image was that of the “Wild West”. The real “Wild West” was not a canned concept, but a drive to exploit the economic possibilities of a vast frontier [...] The idea of the West became the pre eminent when the real West had exhausted its supply of cowboys, Native Americans, gunfighters and wagon trails. By the early 1900s, a Wild West conjured by pulp writers and tourist-brochure descriptions had become a fictional truth. When applied to signs, drive-in theaters, gas stations and

other commercial enterprises, the new West was realized. Part fact. Part fiction. In creating this illusion, a fundamental ploy of advertising, travelers were served a liberal dose of mythology. Western imagery in the American Southwest was instrumental in convincing travelers to chose one business over another. xxviii

During this period, warehouses for commercial trucking developed along Main Avenue between Drachman Street. and Speedway Boulevard. These large brick buildings, part of the Tucson's highway infrastructure, should be evaluated as possible contributing properties to any historic designation recognizing the historical significance of the cross country routes.

The WPA Arizona State Guide published in 1940 reported that Tucson had “25 hotels and 45 tourist courts on principle highways,” although 50 auto courts were listed that year in the City Directory. During the same year, “out of state cars traveled 271,140,615 miles over the state highway system, setting a new record.” xxix



Traffic Flow Map, Arizona Highways Magazine 1940

They [the auto courts] represent the golden age of Tucson [...] Their signs represent a new age of exuberance. They were neon icons of the confidence of the automobile era. [...] Their building styles reflect the mania for all things Southwestern, design motifs that coalesced into what (Brooks) Jeffery calls “funky roadside vernacular.” After a long day of driving, you pass innumerable glowing neon sculptures of cacti and Hispanic cultural images or stereotypes, each inviting you to stay in a cowboy-style lodge with heavy wood beams on the main house, or a Pueblo Deco design with curves and angles on a roofline, evoking Native American traditions, or most popular of all, modest Mission-style casitas, complete with red-tile roofs, adobe bricks, and porches. xxx

## SECTION V

### WWII to the Development of Interstate-10: 1941 – 1958



Oracle Motel Ca. 1940. (Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie)

#### The Boom Years

Following the substantial improvements to the roadway, the Oracle Area experienced a building boom. In 1940, a number of motels were constructed, including: “Catalina Court” at 2221 N. Oracle, “Coronado Court” at 2537 N. Oracle, “Jo-Ann” at 2419 N. Oracle, “Major Motel” at 1635 N. Oracle, and the extant “Oracle Motel,” renamed “Tiki Motel” in the 1960s 1970s. Before the onset of World War II, another fifteen motor courts opened along the Oracle Area strip. During this period, restaurants, taverns, and service stations developed along the corridor. Most of these early 1940s motels were designed in regionally contextualized architectural Revival styles.

Tucson motels of the pre World War II period clustered along 6th Avenue, Stone Avenue, Drachman Street, and Oracle Road. Tucson was rapidly expanding, and by 1948, there were 121 motor courts along its highways, with dozens of guest ranches providing the “Western Experience” to the tourist market. Returning from World War II, GIs who had been stationed in the area flocked to Arizona’s warm climate.

Sixth Avenue, from 22nd Street south for two miles, was lined with over 25 auto courts, including the “Close-Inn,” “Sunshine Tourist Court,” “Pueblo Lodge” (extant), “Dreamland Auto Court,” “Linger Longer,” “Midway Auto Court” (extant), “Howards Jett’s”, and the “Rainbow Court.”

Continued improvements to the streetscape added a pedestrian environment, including extant two tone overhead streetlights, broad sidewalks, crosswalks, and trees.



Miracle Mile at Oracle Road (looking south), ca. 1950. Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie.

During World War II, the demand for auto court rooms in Tucson increased as military personnel flooded the city in large numbers. New auto courts were built along the Benson Highway section of U.S. Highway 80 to serve travelers, including troops at Davis Monthan Air Force Base.

Despite the prosperity of many Arizona auto courts resulting from the patronage by military personnel during the war, the industry as a whole faced severe problems. In 1942, “Business Week” reported a nationwide assessment that “[p]otential business casualties as a result of the tire-gas shortage [...] included, particularly, the nation’s tourist courts.”

In southern Arizona, however, auto courts continued to be built during and after the war. The state’s growing tourist business and the influx of new residents in the late 1940s meant that rooms were in high demand.

There are literally hundreds of auto courts doing rushing business in Phoenix and Tucson, and in them thousands of winter visitors have a pleasant sojourn in the sun [...]<sup>xxxii</sup>

Their designs, traceable stylistically decade by decade, began with type and figurative imagery, evolving into post-war boomerangs and palette shapes. In between were all the familiar attention-getting devices for travelers passing by at 35 mph. Arrows, stars, zigzags. Type styles were hodgepodge. San serif and sexy script. Novelty fonts evoking old wooden hand-set type or vaguely “Indian” lettering, a choppy Pueblo style suggesting Native American handiwork.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

By the end of the war, all of the courts in Tucson would again compete for tourist business, and by the late 1950s they faced the prospects of Interstate 10 replacing Highway 80 as the major route through town. Most of the auto courts did not survive.

## **Development of Interstate 10 through Tucson**

The present-day Interstate 10 alignment along the Santa Cruz River was laid out after a city bond issue passed in 1948 to build a riverbank-side boulevard with room for a four-lane freeway in the median to follow. The first section of bypass artery, from Congress Street north to Miracle Mile West, was opened in 1954 but had no overpasses or interchanges at Grant Road, Speedway Boulevard or St. Mary's Road. The freeway was finally built after the state took over the bypass and promised it interstate status in 1958, and parts of it obliterated the original road. <sup>xxxiv</sup>

Championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower the as a part of the country's national defense The Federal-Aid Highway act of 1956 authorized the Interstate Highway System. Surface transportation from coast to coast, over two lane blacktop U.S. Highways, was considered insufficient in case of military necessity. The Tucson segment Interstate 10, which opened in 1958 and was fully completed in 1961, bypassed the city core and severely curtailed in town through traffic. The popularity of many motels collapsed, and these failed businesses were demolished or architecturally compromised during this national construction project. The new freeway instantly made the old U.S. Highways and Arizona State Highways irrelevant for long haul travelers. Few "automobile culture" motels survived. These economically devastated old corridors would evolve to articulate the hidden poverty and alienation of post World War II America.

The concept of a highway bypass was initially rejected by the community and the local businesses lining Routes 80 and 84. The Interstate:

[...] was opposed, when it first was proposed by numerous responsible people. When a big oil tanker was hit by a railroad train at one of Tucson's crossings, the fire that resulted awakened many Tucsonans to the danger of these and other big trucks passing though the center of the city. <sup>xxxv</sup>

The growth of Tucson and the astounding increase in automobile traffic though the city core gave an added impetus to the proposal to build a freeway. Transcontinental traffic became so heavy that it seriously interfered with those who wanted to shop downtown. <sup>xxxvi</sup>

Interstate 10 in Arizona was laid out by the Arizona Highway Department in 1956-58 roughly paralleling several historic routes across the state. Particularly east of Eloy, it follows the Butterfield Stage and Pony Express routes, and loops south to avoid the north-south Basin and Range mountains prevalent in the state. In fact, the route from its junction with Interstate 8 east to New Mexico is almost exactly the same route used by the old horse-drawn stagecoaches, which had to go from waterhole to waterhole and avoid the hostile Apache Indians. This is why I-10 is more of a north-south route between Phoenix and Tucson than east-west. The Southern Pacific Sunset Route line

had to take the route of least hills, and in the 1920s highways were laid down next to the trains across southern Arizona.

The road from Coolidge to Tucson was originally Arizona routes 84 and 93, and when it was rebuilt as a freeway in 1961-62 it was cosigned as Interstate 10 and routes 84 and 93 through 1966, when 84 was truncated at Picacho. This section of interstate was completed in 1961, and forced the demolition of the town center at Marana, which has never really recovered. The freeway through Tucson (being rebuilt in 2008) was originally signed as State Route 84 from Miracle Mile to Sixth Avenue. <sup>xxxvii</sup>



Miracle Mile Oracle Road street lights, ca, 1950. (Photo courtesy of Steve Mathie)



## SECTION VI

### End of an Era and the Decline of the Corridor: 1958 - 1972



Tropicana Motel, Miracle Mile ca. 1975 (demolished)  
(Photo courtesy of Dirk Arnold)

#### The Miracle Continues

Miracle Mile-Oracle-Drachman remained the northern gateway of Tucson through the 1960s. Covered in billboards, festooned with aging neon signs, the corridor was maintained and large scale investment flowed into the Area. In 1955, the large “Tucson Inn” was constructed on Drachman Street, and in 1961, Del Webb’s 80,000 sq ft “Hiway House Motor Hotel.”

The pinnacle of Oracle Area commercial investment was achieved with the 1963 construction of the 17 story, 409 apartment luxury residence, “Tucson House.” It was featured in “Time Magazine” and “TV Guide.” Units had views to either the north or south. The entire exterior living room walls opened with sliding doors to balconies. Brochure copy described this high-rise apartment house as “a city within a city.” Amenities included limousine service, game, recreation, and arts and crafts rooms, beauty shop, barber shop, laundromat, Olympic sized swimming pool, sauna, ornate lobby, three elevators, extensive security measures, and the 17th floor “penthouse indoor-outdoor solarium.” U.S. Congressman Morris K. Udall was a resident for 2 years during the 1960s. <sup>xxxviii</sup>

But the changing marketplace dramatically transformed the area within a decade. Cars were traveling faster and further than ever before. The Speedway Boulevard, Grant Road, and Saint Mary’s Road exits off Interstate 10 made it possible to circumvent the Oracle strip. Airline travel became inexpensive and convenient, an increasingly frequent alternative to driving. According to oral histories with early owners of motels, the oil crisis of 1973 was the final blow to the Area, effectively ending leisure travel. The Oracle Area never recovered.

Miracle Mile, however, still clung to its identity as Tucson’s northern gateway and glowing neon entrance to the city, despite the 1970s 1980s demolition of motels in the Oracle Area, including the “Marilyn Motel,” “Tucson Biltmore,” “All States,” “El Ray,” and “M Motel.” Others, for example the “Thunderbird” and the “El Sol,” were modified beyond recognition. The result is empty lots and inexpensive and often non compatible infill.

The deterioration of the Arizona motor court hey-day was explored in two major movie studio productions. Each won an Academy Award. Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Any More* (1974) was filmed on Tucson’s Miracle Mile, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) was centered on a bypassed highway motel in Arizona. These stories both engage the depressive

erosion and economic impact of the freeway on “mom and pop” highway commerce. A smaller film, *Two Lane Blacktop*, was an existential look at the U.S. Highway transcontinental system made obsolete by the Interstate Highway system

In the mid 1970s, “Tucson House” occupancy declined as the Oracle Area deteriorated and the federally insured mortgage was foreclosed. The property was auctioned in October 1976 to HUD, which provided a grant to the City of Tucson to purchase it. By August 1986, \$4 million renovations were completed, creating 100 subsidized apartments. The building continues with this use today. <sup>xxxix</sup>

The motels, once the commercial backbone of the area, became overrun with prostitution, crime, and drugs. Some motels capitalizing on this shift embraced the changing market, choosing ironic new names such as the “No Tel Motel” (now itself a minor Tucson icon), or giving up the last pretense of Auto Court tourist culture and renting rooms by the hour. By the early 1980s, Miracle Mile was famous as a locale for scandals, and sank into economic quicksand. Despite these failures, the patronage of less affluent snowbirds, as well as prostitution and other criminal activity, afforded the marginal survival of the many businesses in the Oracle Area.

On 2 February 1987, attempting to distance the community from the now infamous roadway associated with blight and crime, the Tucson city council voted 4-2 to rename the “North Miracle Mile Strip” to “North Oracle Road” in yet another attempt to rehabilitate the area’s image. <sup>xl</sup>

New competition developed during the 1980s as large, franchise-driven single and multi storey highway motels with large numbers of rooms were constructed along the edge of the Interstate highway. This eliminated the last possibility for any resurgence of authentic “auto culture” hostelry, other than a very small sector of the traveler population who might be inspired by nostalgia.

The issues plaguing the area continued until the early 2000s. Changes in the market, increased police presence, and a gradual overall improvement lead to a perceptible rise in the Area’s reputation and an interest in preservation. Today, many auto court properties manage to continue as motels, while others are finding re use as apartments or community service centers.



Film Still “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Any More,” 1974.



Film Still “Psycho” 1960.

## SECTION VII

### A National Register Historic Context for Commercial Properties



Tucson Biltmore Motor Hotel, advertising brochure. ca. 1960. (Demolished) (Courtesy Dirk Arnold)

The built environment of the Oracle Area articulates the historical development and importance of Tucson's primary and original northern vehicular transportation corridor. Within this area are some of the best extant examples of Tucson's mid-20th century motor courts, roadside businesses, and neon signs. The "Historic Miracle Mile – Tucson's Northern Auto Gateway" context begins with the arrival of Tucson's first automobile, delivered to Dr. Hiram W. Fenner in 1899, follows the impact of the automobile on southern Arizona through the development of a new roadway through the Oracle Area and the ensuing architectural expansion, apotheosis, and decline of classic "auto culture," which ended in 1973.

This study has examined the development of the automobile corridor in the Oracle Area through five periods, each period marked by rapidly changing automotive culture and cross county travel, as well as by a variety of architectural styles, design approaches, and new materials. The following summarizes the themes of each period of development.

#### *Early Automotive Impacts and the Shrinking Western Landscape: 1899 - 1920*

The first automobile arrived in Tucson in 1899, commencing a dramatic change in the long term development of the community. The automobile allowed the city to expand and sprawl in every direction; the ability to travel long distances between cities connected the region and the country like never before. Henry Ford's Model T made the automobile accessible to the American middle class. The car provided freedom; Americans, including Tucsonans, began exploring the country and the landscape. Early promotional campaigns created cross county driving routes. The Old Spanish Trail (1916), Broadway of America (ca. 1920) and others promoted auto routes through Tucson along their way from coast to coast.

### *From Roadway to Highway and the Growth of Roadside Businesses: 1920 - 1937*

In 1920, Tucson launched the second nationwide marketing campaign to promote the area as a tourist destination and cultural center. Tucson, like municipalities throughout the country opened free “Auto Camps” to attract these new middle class visitors empowered by the freedom of the car. The Auto Camps unintentionally also attracted the less affluent who stayed longer than communities wanted. The concept was privatized. Auto Camps developed all along early highways; competition led to improved amenities. Gas stations and roadside restaurants also developed in large numbers during this period. Some of the most spectacular service stations in Tucson were developed close to downtown, but were ultimately sacrificed to urban renewal in the 1960s. Increased traffic clarified the need for massive road improvements. Motor courts along the Routes 80, 89, and 84 punctuated the dark night sky with glowing neon signs in regional architectural styles to attract rushing motorists.

### *Miracle Mile and the Entrepreneurs: 1937 - 1941*

In 1937, the segment of highway within the Oracle Area was reengineered with large traffic circles at the intersection of Miracle Mile and Oracle Road, and at Oracle Road and Drachman Street. Development of roadside business greatly increased throughout this period. Roadside motor courts and other businesses embraced Art Deco, Pueblo Revival, Spanish Revival, and Mission Revival architectural styles. With the entry of the country into World War II, construction throughout the Oracle Area stopped.

### *WWII to the development of Interstate-10: Boom Years: 1941 - 1958*

During World War II, Tucson was a strategic point with Davis Monthan Air Force Base and Hughes Aircraft in the city. Although scaled back, motels and businesses continued to operate. After the War, architects, including Arthur T. Brown, worked in the Modern Style, designing properties such as the Tucson Biltmore in 1948, now demolished. During this period, President Eisenhower originated the Interstate Highway system. Tucson embraced the concept of a new freeway, Interstate 10, outside the core of the city, after a train collided with a tanker in the downtown area. Miracle Mile remained the northern entrance to the city and continued to prosper.

### *End of an Era – the Decline of the Corridor: 1958 - 1973*

Economic investment in the Area continued through the 1960s. In the 1970s, numerous factors contributed to the beginning of the decline of the Oracle Area. Faster cars were developed to travel longer distances, negating the need for overnight stops; air travel became less expensive and more widespread; new mid-town Interstate exits shifted traffic off Miracle Mile; and the 1973 oil crisis curtailed leisure driving. The Area slipped; the once glamorous motels and road side business shut off their neon and faced deterioration, demolition, and the alterations of adaptive reuse.

## **Criteria of Significance**

This historic context study does not formally evaluate each resource for designation on the National Register of Historic Places, although a cursory eligibility assessment was made. This study suggests that individual property development within the “Oracle Area,” design characteristics, and each property’s relationship to the evolution and development of Route 80 should be among the chief evaluation considerations.

National Register of Historic Places Criteria A (associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history) and C (embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction) provide a framework for future evaluation.

The Areas historic properties include: 1930s picturesque Spanish Revival and Pueblo Deco auto courts with decorative brickwork, roofs of Spanish tile, and hand carved details all shaded by small islands of mature vegetation; large brick warehouses for the emerging trucking industry; motels representing slick forms of 1950s Modernism with glass, cast concrete, and rhythmic layers of block expressing a bygone automotive age; classic examples from the Golden Age of Neon Signage, and the massive concrete and brick International Style “Tucson House,” originally constructed in 1963 as luxury apartments, which towers over the streetscape.

## **Period of Significance**

This study finds that the total time span of development, which encompasses all of the remaining buildings and infrastructure, is 1899-1973. For the historic context developed in this study, the Period of Significance is 1920, the beginning of local promotion of the route for auto travelers, to the 1973 Oil Crisis. This narrower interval, including both pre and post World War II properties, encompasses the construction dates of almost every extant historic property lining U.S. Highway 80 and a majority of properties within the Oracle Area.

## **Adaptive Re use and Integrity**

Many of these buildings, constructed to entice and serve travelers through the corridor, have been altered, expanded and changed. Teetering on the edge of obsolescence, they have adapted. Some have changed more gracefully than others. Some, such as architect Arthur T. Brown’s “Tucson Biltmore Motor Hotel,” were razed.

This study also includes an evaluation of exterior historic integrity, assessing construction date, appearance, and the impact of additions and alterations to the property’s original design. This was completed using historic postcard images, photographs, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps, and onsite evaluations. The evaluation of each property includes a Historic Commercial Property Inventory Form. Throughout the area are a number of unaltered examples of various properties, including warehouses, motor courts, and signs.

Throughout the history of individual properties, many have been upgraded. Although the overall plan and form remain intact for the majority of motels and other businesses, some exteriors were changed with new windows, doors and lobbies. Although many of these alterations are not visible from the street, some properties are so transformed as to have lost the historic integrity of the original design. These buildings no longer meet the National Register eligibility requirements.

## **SECTION VIII**

### **Historic Preservation, Opportunities, and Recommendations**

A variety of next step recommendations and opportunities may assist with the long-term historic management of the Oracle Area and its segment of “Historic Miracle Mile, Tucson’s Northern Auto Gateway.” Because of the unique qualities of the Area and its significance in the development of Tucson’s transportation and economic history, further steps should be taken to preserve this cultural heritage and the unique place. Among the possible planning options are nominations of districts or multiple properties to the National Registry of Historic Places.

#### **Possible National Register Historic Districts**

The majority of uncompromised contributing commercial resources related to Tucson highway development within the Oracle Area cluster together in two distinct sections at the north and south ends of the project area. The result is the viability of two possible National Register Historic Districts: “Miracle Mile North” and “Miracle Mile South,” each eligible under National Register Criteria A and C at the local level of significance. Both potential historic districts are significant in understanding Tucson’s highway history. Designation to the Historic Register is not regulatory but provides tax incentives for property owners, creates awareness of resources, and insures governmental review of public projects.

The North District is generally defined by the alignment of Miracle Mile and Oracle Road from Fairview Avenue to Jacinto Street, with the majority of historic resources extant on the south side of Miracle Mile and the west side of Oracle Road. Other potential contributing properties to this district extend beyond the Oracle Area west along the original Highway 84 alignment and should be included in future nominations. This North District retains numerous auto courts and other highway specific commercial properties that define the late commercial development of highway 84 and 80.

The South District is generally defined by the alignment of Drachman Street and Oracle Road between Stone Avenue and Rillito Road, with the inclusion of Flores Street and Main Avenue between Speedway Boulevard and Drachman Street. This area reflects the earlier development along the corridor.

#### **A Multiple Property Nomination**

The commercial historic properties within the Oracle Area are only part of a larger set of historic properties along the historic highway alignment running through Tucson. A National Register Multiple Property Nomination should be developed for the 70 extant motor court properties lining Tucson’s Historic Highway Corridor: Miracle Mile – Oracle Road – Drachman Street – Stone Avenue – South Sixth Avenue – Benson Highway. Other property types along this alignment are worthy of evaluation, including service stations, auto sales buildings, and trailer courts.

## **A Local Neon Sign District**

The creation of a local Historic Neon District throughout the Oracle Area but specifically along the highway corridor (similar to the new Portland, Oregon “Neon Sign District”) can help retain significant contributing neon signs and promote preservation of historic properties.

A local zoning overlay district has the potential to provide incentives and standards for historic preservation, and could include Design Guidelines, a corridor specific sign code, and allow replicas of historic signs. These actions would promote the repair and retention of existing signs, allow other unique historic Tucson neon signs to be relocated to the area, and allow the creation of new, compatible neon signs. This approach could also encourage future relocation of other auto specific resources including drive-in movie theaters, miniature golf courses, and automobile museums.

## **Design Guidelines for Infill and Transportation Developments**

A strategy should be developed for simultaneously accommodating new development and preserving the intrinsic qualities of the corridor’s unique mid-century highway vernacular. This can be through combinations of design review, zoning, easements, and economic incentives. Substantial losses of historic resources between the northern and southern quarters of the Oracle Area, and near the intersection of Grant Road and Oracle Road, provide substantial infill opportunities. The development of incentive based architectural design guidelines in conjunction with a local zoning overlay has the potential to foster positive long-term corridor development which promotes the unique architectural expression of this area and its sense of place. Historic setbacks, building heights, proportion, and rhythm should be consistent with the historic resources. New development should not detract from the Area’s historic fabric.

Examples of Contemporary Modern architecture that compatibly blend into the mid-century streetscape have recently been constructed just west of the Oracle Area on Miracle Mile: 1310 West Miracle Mile (City of Tucson Police Station) and 870 West Miracle Mile (La Paloma Family Services). Design guidelines should extend not only to new architectural development along the roadway, but also to any proposed modifications of the roadway, addition of a streetcar line, or any other transportation development that may affect the intrinsic historic character of the corridor.

## **Old Spanish Trail Auto Highway Centennial Celebration**

A San Antonio based organization named OST100 is in the early stage development of a decade long centennial celebration of the 1920s Old Spanish Trail Highway, to conclude in 2029. As part of the original Old Spanish Trail Alignment, there is opportunity for the Oracle Area to participate in this educational and celebratory event. The OST100 long-term goals include: working to revitalize and beautify the scenic original Old Spanish Trail, transforming it into a pleasant alternative to Interstate-10 for travelers interested in recapturing the historic ambiance of the gulf and southern border states. ([www.oldspanishtrailcentennial.com](http://www.oldspanishtrailcentennial.com)) This has the potential to facilitate long-term cultural tourism and economic reinvestment.



## **Historic Roadway Designation**

Special designation or recognition of this corridor as a Historic Roadway, at the local, state or federal level, can raise awareness, secure protections, and help generate funds. For historic preservation, a Historic Corridor Management Plan should be developed, and designation of the corridor should be pursued at all three governmental levels, including the National Scenic Highway designation. A signage plan that supports the visitor experience should be developed in conjunction with this designation. The City of Tucson should consider returning the name the roadway to its designation during its auto culture hey-day: “Miracle Mile.”

## **Interpretive Signage and Restoration of Historic Streetscape Elements**

The development of interpretive signage throughout the district should be explored both at the vehicular and pedestrian levels. Street improvements should take into account the historic character of the roadway, with particular sensitivity to preserving and returning original streetscape elements, including extant original street lamps, which should be repainted to reflect their original two tone quality. Long term planning for the Corridor should consider reducing the lanes to the originally designed four, providing street parking as originally conceived in 1937, creating larger sidewalks, and planting trees from the originally chosen species palette.



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