

Lincoln Highway gets 'Post' marked

By Rob Baxter

ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

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ROCHELLE — Before she became widely known as the grand lady of etiquette, Emily Post spent several days in 1915 in what she described as the “charming” community of Rochelle, an early pioneer on what was then America’s only coast-to-coast highway.

In 1919, the U.S. Army moved hundreds of troops in dozens of vehicles across the same meandering, mostly unpaved roadway. Along the way, they had to take the tops off covered bridges — then rebuild the bridge tops — before moving on.

Now tabbed the Lincoln Highway National Scenic Byway, the road has its share of stories.

It cuts a 179-mile path through northern Illinois. In its entirety, the Lincoln Highway spans more than 3,300 miles and 12 states, beginning in New York City and ending in San Francisco.

To commemorate some of the memorable moments in the road’s earliest years, organizers hope to place murals in 43 spots along its Illinois path. The murals and some 20 interpretive gazebos will offer travelers the road’s history, its neighboring communities’ roles in its development and insight into part of their community’s cultural heritage.

Three murals have already been placed, the most recent on May 28 in Rochelle. Forty more are planned as long as expected federal funding comes through.

“It’s a unique way to bring the stories of Illinois’ role in the nation’s first coast-to-coast highway into people’s lives,” said Bonnie Heimbach, executive director of the Northern Illinois Tourism Development Office.

Heimbach said even though gas prices are higher, families often look for unique day-trips or other family-friendly travel options.

This can fill that niche, said Diane Rossiter, associate director of the Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition.

“There are so many people willing to get off of Interstate 88 or I-90 and travel into these little communities and discover the history and the heritage of these places,” Rossiter said.

The murals, painted on aluminum-faced foam board and mounted on the walls of buildings, are being created by expert wall artists like Jay Allen of ShawCraft Sign Co.

Allen was a driving force behind the creation of Belvidere’s murals and is helping bring other sign artists to reach the goal: 40 more in three years. They’ll be able to be designed and painted most anywhere and shipped by crate back to Illinois, Allen said.

“I’ll need to go to each location and ask the business owner to show me (their) walls,” said Allen. “We’ll have to take photos, do site measurements. Some will be more expensive and larger than others. It’s a major undertaking logistically but one that, when finished, would leave a legacy. ...”

Ross Freier, director of the Rochelle Tourism and Visitors Association, said the Emily Post mural in Rochelle has set the stage for up to six more to depict the community’s history.

“I have heard nothing but positive feedback, how beautiful it looks,” Freier said. “This is the first step in creating something people will want to come to Rochelle to see.”

Today, the highway is marked with red, white and blue route signs.

Rossiter said she and her husband have traveled the highway in less than a day. She’s looking forward to the time when all the murals and gazebos are in place and taking the trip again.

Rossiter recalls a tidbit of history about the highway and one of many stories she enjoys sharing. Ultimately, she believes it will boost tourism in Illinois.

“Malta is where the first paved (concrete) mile of the highway was built (in 1914),” she said. “There is a historical marker on the Kishwaukee College campus that denotes that. Before that, the story goes farmers would sit out there on the Sabbath collecting money from those who would get stuck in the mud (before it was paved). Their wives would get really mad at them.”



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The new Lincoln Highway National Scenic Byway mural of Emily Post at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Lincoln Highway in Rochelle.