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Increase in heritage tourism has led to interest in National Road

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NEWARK -- In his capacity as a Licking County commissioner, Doug Smith has to travel many roads.

But oftentimes he takes the road less traveled and you can find him on U.S. 40, or what is known as the National Road.

He organized and led the rolling cruise of the road during the weekend that traveled from Gratiot to Etna.

"I am one of those weird people that seem to take the road less traveled, literally and metaphorically," Smith said. "I like the old paths, old ways and old vehicles."

Smith has become so familiar with the National Road, its heritage and history that he co-authored the book, "The Historic National Road in Ohio: The Road That Helped Build America" with Glenn Harper, who is the preservation services manager of the Ohio Historic Preservation Office.

There has been an increased interest in heritage tourism as people want to experience the authentic places, artifacts, activities and stories that represent the past and present. The book is going into its fourth printing.

The National Road was the first federally planned and funded interstate highway in the nation, stretching 700 miles and crossing six states from Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. The road linked the older communities of the eastern United States with new settlements of the Northwest Territory and provided access for Ohio products to eastern markets. The National Road became an important corridor for the movement of goods and people. By 1840, Ohio was the third largest state in the union, mainly because of the National Road.

Ohio has more miles -- 227 -- than any of the other five states and Licking County has most miles in the state -- 32.

"The National Road is a story of our nation and state," Smith said. "If you look at the road literally and what surrounds it, there are several layers of history."

All along the road, there are remnants of 19th century brick and stone taverns that sprung up to accommodate the new auto traveler, called the "auto-tourist." There also are tourist courts, similar to a campground, where motorists spent the night under the stars on the ground.

"There is one of the tourist camps with one-room cabins in Etna Township, behind the Shamrock Motel," Smith said.

In the 1920s, the road became U.S. 40, but it doesn't always follow the exact path of the original

National Road, Smith said. East of Jacksontown, the old road meanders to the north and south of U.S. 40, crossing two stone bridges that both predate the Civil War.

"It's not Disneyland, it's the real thing," Harper said. "That is why Doug and I wrote the guide. The old bypass sections of the road, you might drive right by if you don't know about them. The purpose of the guide is to improve the travelers' experience."

The Ohio National Road Association was formed in 2000 to preserve, promote and enhance the Historic National Road in Ohio. The National Road is experiencing a rebirth as a cultural heritage landscape because of its inclusion as a National Scenic Bypass and its All-American Road designation by the Federal Highway Administration.

An interpretive display of the National Road presents the history on several large panels. The panels will travel along the road and will be in Licking County several times. The village of Hebron currently has the panels until early June, then they travel to Bowling Green Township for their bicentennial celebration June 13 to 16 at the Bowling Green Township Hall. The panels go out of county then return to The Works Museum from July 26 to Sept. 12.

"They call Route 66 the mother road," Smith added. "If that is the mother road, then U.S. 40 is the father road, because it started it all."
