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American Speech, Volume 76, Number 2, Summer 2001, pp. 221-224 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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## “THE” FREEWAY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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Visitors to southern California who rent a car and need to ask travel directions soon learn that an extra word is necessary. Residents of metropolitan Los Angeles use the article *the* preceding the number of an interstate highway, which is not true elsewhere, even in the northern part of the same state.

As the use of the automobile began to take over intercity transportation in North America, naming highways with numbers was not always our nation's general practice. As early as the first decade of the 1900s, a loose collection of streets, roads, and wagon tracks carried an official designation of *The Lincoln Highway* westward from New York City. Between those early days and World War II, states and counties began numerical route designations. The federal government also supported certain arteries under the old U.S. highway system, whereby north-south routes had odd numbers and east-west routes even ones. General conversation tended to use either the number by itself (no *the*) or the prefix *Route* (again, no *the*); hence, *The car died on 380 halfway between Greenville and McKinney*, and *I Get My Kicks on Route 66*.

For many small towns and cities, official names were shortened to *the road* or *the highway* (later *free-*, *express-*, and *thruways*). Today, you hear in many rural or semirural areas *It's four miles outta town on the interstate 'long towards Goshen*. Elsewhere, where toll roads were used, where there was but one, you'd hear *up the turnpike* or *down the pike*, but at the same time, when discussing a larger area, the usage required *the Pennsylvania Turnpike* or *the New Jersey Turnpike*.

Los Angeles 60 years ago invented *freeway*, a term clearly meant to specify divergence from the tollway concept, meaning 'free of charge', as in

'nontoll'. Especially car-conscious residents of metropolitan Los Angeles, the freeway city, long ago established themselves as a mobile community, with a hard loamy soil and reasonably dry, warm weather, where decent roads were cheap and easy to build. It was not unusual even in the 1930s for people to drive long distances within what was at that time America's most spread-out metropolis. A hundred years earlier, Richard Henry Dana observed in *Two Years before the Mast*, while traveling at breakneck speed in a six-horse coach from San Pedro north, that the Pueblo of Los Angeles could build roads wherever they wanted. In fact, travel so lacked barriers that the horses more or less raced along wherever they pleased across the flat terrain, merely needing to sense their destination.

In about 1941, just before the completion of the first of the famous freeways, intercity traffic came into Los Angeles on the north-south axis on U.S. 99, U.S. 101, or California Route 1. To and from the east, it was U.S. 66. Before the freeways were built, locals generally preferred the old, time-honored street or road names instead of numbers in conversation. So for 'U.S. 99' they said *San Fernando Road* because the highway followed that particular named street, as far as the distant end of "town." Likewise, 'U.S. 101' was *Ventura Boulevard* and 'Route 1' was *Pacific Coast Highway*. Eastward, though the eventual cross-country conduit ended up being Route 66, until leaving town (which could be a distance of 30–40 miles) a driver spoke of *Foothill Boulevard*, *Colorado Street*, *Valley Boulevard*, *Olympic Boulevard*, and so forth, which were the major east-west arteries before freeway days. And leaving from downtown Los Angeles or Hollywood to head up the coast, you took THE Pacific Coast Highway (from the Westside) or Cahuenga Pass or THE Cahuenga Pass road. *Route 1* or *Route 101* was not used in town.

So there was usage both with and without *the* in southern California, with dominance perhaps by those not using the article. But in 1941 or so, THE Pasadena Freeway (then baptized *THE Arroyo Seco Freeway* ['brook dry' in Spanish]) was staked out, and Los Angeles begat the freeway age. Whether they used the destination-town derivative or the Spanish given name, everyone said *the*.

By the time I was driving in 1964, THE Pasadena Freeway was merely the shortest, narrowest, and most antiquated of a burgeoning list of freeways. Every single one had a nonnumerical dominant name, whether official, unofficial, or both. By that time, you went east to Route 66 via THE San Bernardino Freeway, and Route 99 was THE Golden State Freeway and Route 101 was in some places THE Ventura Freeway, connecting to THE Hollywood Freeway and thence to THE Santa Ana Freeway and in its alternate route, THE Ventura to THE San Diego Freeway. By this time the

only common usage describing freeways in Los Angeles required the article *the*.

When the federal interstate system grew up, the southern California area got its share of funding and road numbers—for example, Interstate 5 followed the track of THE Golden State Freeway, which in turn followed the old San Fernando Road route. However, for the first 20 years of the interstate system, no one used the numerical designations. For Los Angeles, these first half dozen interstates had all preexisted the official interstate system. So for several decades, *the San Diego Freeway*—which was now officially designated *Interstate 405*—was never referred to as *405* or *Route 405* at all. This practice held for every other Los Angeles freeway that existed, until sometime in the 1970s. Nobody said *\*Take Route 405 south to Century Boulevard to get to LAX*; they contrarily said *Take THE San Diego Freeway and get off at Century*. Or, instead of *\*Route 405 is blocked by spilled soybean oil at Wilshire*, the radio and television would say *The San Diego is blocked*. And, you had to leave in *the*. The interstate routes around Los Angeles were called *the Ventura Freeway*, *the Hollywood Freeway*, *the Santa Ana Freeway*, *the Golden State Freeway*, *the San Bernardino Freeway*, *the Pasadena Freeway*, *the Glendale Freeway*, *the San Diego Freeway*, *the Santa Monica Freeway*, *the Harbor Freeway*, *the Riverside Freeway*, and *the Long Beach Freeway*.

The strange-sounding usage of *the* plus number, as in *the 118*, was the natural result of an amazing proliferation of new, minor interstate cut-overs, extensions, and bypasses that began about 1975. These came about so suddenly and so utterly without a precursor route—and thus without a colloquial name—that there was little time for or interest in giving these latest freeways a word-name. Now interstates that were extensions of old freeways, like Interstate 134, were referred to by the name of the freeway to which they attached, for example, *the Ventura*, or *the 134*.

This new tendency of *the* plus number was even more pronounced when new major Los Angeles interstates sprang up without having any precursors and without being extensions of earlier, nonnumerical freeways. The first one I remember in this category was *the 605 Freeway*. Not long after came *the 210*, *the 118*, and so on, to the point that now there are more than 30 different freeways in southern California. But they all have one thing in common: each has its little *the*. Angelinos don't say *Take the Interstate* because that wouldn't be specific enough in a city with 30 interstates. Nor are they called *thruways*, *expressways*, or *turnpikes*. They are called *freeways*. And since the major 10 or 12 original ones still go by their nonnumerical names, all the freeways in the greater Los Angeles region, even the comelately no-names, have retained their *the*.

In northern California, persons returning from a lengthy stay in Los Angeles all mention its *the*. The Bay Area, without any great history of freeways, has common usage like *Take 80 East to Vallejo*, without the article, as does the rest of North America except southern California. Oakland, San Jose, and San Francisco, unlike Los Angeles, seem to have had no overwhelming body of citizens in the 1950s and 1960s who grew up routinely driving cars all over the Bay Area. Outside their own cities and towns, more people took trains, buses, and ferries, which makes sense, considering the watery geography and ample public transit. For this reason, the Bay Area had only a handful of named freeways—Oakland had THE Nimitz Freeway (today's Interstate 880 from Oakland to San Jose) and THE MacArthur Freeway northwest from Oakland; Berkeley had THE Bayshore; San Francisco even had THE Embarcadero Freeway (since torn down)—which were not so dyed-in-the-wool. Locals knew and used *the* names locally, but they evidently weren't emblazoned Bay-wide in the minds and argot of northern drivers and direction-givers. No long tradition of regular, massive area-wide commutes by automobile presaged the interstate era in northern California. So when the Bay got its own large allotment of numbers, the *the* pattern to designate a modern superhighway was not so entrenched. As a result, nobody in the northern part of the state says *the 880*; it's just *880*, *Route 880*, or *Interstate 880*, for the long-winded.

But southern Californians represent the archetype of the car society; they have needed that article since the dawn of the freeway. Many regions have freeways with *the* names: the Henry Fords and Dan Ryans come to mind. But Chicagoans don't say *the 290*. Surely no other part of the country—certainly not San Francisco/Oakland—had such a long history and large quantity of nonnumerical *the* freeways. When the numbers arrived, *the 134 Freeway* and *the 605* and their many newer siblings just joined people's long, 50-year, tried-and-true list of *the* designations for highways.