

Lost Highways

Majority of Indian Country traffic casualties concentrated in five key states

By Jeff Hinkle

AFTER TWISTING THROUGH THE Purcell and Flathead Mountain Ranges of western Montana, U.S. Highway 2 straightens out and begins a long northeastern reach across the flatlands of the Blackfoot Indian Reservation and on up through eastern Montana. The road covers hundreds of miles and eventually crossing into North Dakota. But it is a small segment of that long drive — a 13-mile strip that runs from the town of East Glacier to Browning, Mont., where the Blackfeet's tribal offices are located — that remains the most troublesome to state highway officials.

"It's as straight as a stick," says one state safety specialist. "It's wide. It's freshly paved at yet it's been the sight of many, many accidents. We've never been able to figure that out."

There are many such roads — and such mysteries — on Indian land, tracks of pavement that connect key towns but are marked by an excess of fatal wrecks. Some of these roads are easily identified on maps, others Rand McNally may not even know about.

There is "17-Mile Road" on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, which links Riverton, Wyo., to the reservation bordertown of Hudson. Tribal Safety Director Raphella Runningaround says it's a "winding, mountain road and a lot of people have died there." Many of those accidents have been attributed to al-

cohol, she says, but it is a dangerous drive even for sober motorists.

BIA Law Enforcement Director Bob Ecoffey cites State Highway 407 — which runs from Pine Ridge, S.D., to the tiny bordertown of Whiteclay,

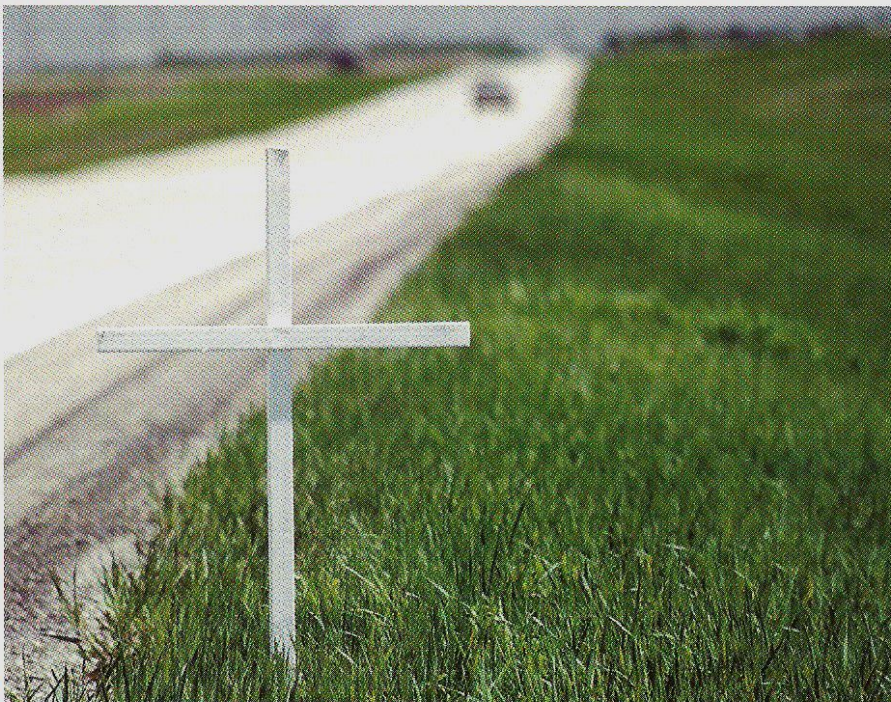
There is no denying the fact that alcoholism is a major problem on many reservations and that bordertown merchants have long had a keen grasp of supply and demand. Also impossible to deny is the deadly combination of drinking and driving. For years activists on the "dry" reservation of Pine Ridge have been trying to shut down the Whiteclay beer peddlers, saying that they are exploiting the reservation's rampant alcoholism and contributing to high DUI rates.

But they are not the only ones.

In northeastern New Mexico two communities, Gamerco and Gallup, tempt the locals from the dry Navajo reservation to the north. Gamerco has only one bar, but just a few minutes south of there is Gallup, which has, says one observer, "more than its share of liquor stores and bars."

The main artery that slices through the New Mexico portion of the

Navajo land, connecting it to those two towns, is the ominously labeled U.S. Highway 666. Duane Beyal, editor of the *Navajo Times*, says countless fatal accidents have occurred along that route in recent years. And although New Mexico highway officials decline to provide a road-by-road analysis of fatal crashes or alcohol-related wrecks on their roads, they can point to a page on their Web site where Highway 666 is garnished with numerous tiny red



A lone white wooden cross stands at the side of N.D. Highway 23 near New Town, N.D. The cross represents the site of a fatal traffic accident, and is one of 180 now in place along roads on the Fort Berthold Reservation, in memory of those who have lost their lives.

AP Photo/Minot Daily News, Eloise Ogden

Neb. — has a particularly bad reputation. Six years ago that route gained a slice of infamy when a reporter dubbed it the "Most Dangerous Highway in America." Since then there have been repairs to the road to make it safer, but it remains a hotspot since it is the most popular route to Whiteclay's four beer-only shops. In 2000, those four stores sold more than 4 million cans of beer, and it was Pine Ridge residents who bought most of them.

arrows, like specks of blood, marking annual “alcohol[-related] crash locations.”

New Mexico is not alone when it comes to less-than-specific breakdowns of highway fatalities or dangerous roads. State and federal highway officials say it would be nearly impossible to identify exactly which freeways and two-lane blacktops qualify as the “most deadly roads” in Indian Country. But identifying the states that have the highest number of auto fatalities on tribal land can be measured and, in some cases, the reservations where frequent pile-ups are occurring can be pinpointed.

New Mexico is just one of the five states where the tally of fatal auto accidents on Indian land appears disproportionately high. The others are Arizona, South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration there were 231 fatal collisions on Indian reservations in the United States in 2000, resulting in 773 fatalities — 548 of the dead were American Indians. Out of those 231 deadly pile-ups, nearly 200 happened on reservation roads in those five states.

Although those states are home to many tribal residents and millions of acres of Indian land, such considerations alone do not explain the high rates of carnage. Oklahoma, a state with the second highest amount of Indian land in the country and where nearly 8 percent of the residents identified themselves as “Indian” in the 2000 census, reported no traffic fatalities on its reservation roads in 2000. Likewise, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and Wisconsin — states with notable Native populations and lands — each reported 2-or-less traffic deaths on reservation roads in 2000.

On the other end of the spectrum is Arizona, where 28 percent of the state is designated Indian Country. Of the 891 fatal accidents that occurred in Arizona in 2000, 100 of them happened on reservation roads. That translates into 11 percent of the state’s fatal accidents on tribal lands happening in a state where only 5 percent of the population is Indian. And though that number is down slightly from 1999’s 106 reservation-based wrecks, it still puts Arizona in the top slot when it comes to lethal collisions on reservation roads.

Indians were by no means responsible for all of the wrecks in Indian Country. In the 100 accidents that were tallied in Arizona in 2000, for instance, 389 people were killed, but only 66 of them were Indians. On the other hand, alcohol played a part in the lion’s share of the mishaps. Arizona officials blamed 48 of the wrecks on alcohol, while another 33 were inconclusive. In only 18 of those fatal incidents did police rule out alcohol entirely.

Although the 2000 figures for Montana were

also down from their 1999 levels, the Big Sky State still ranked number two for both years when it came to fatal collisions on tribal land. In 1999, there were 41 lethal car wrecks on Montana’s reservations. Forty-three people died in those accidents and 25 of them were Indians. Alcohol was blamed in 25 of the crashes.

Things improved slightly in 2000. Twenty-nine of the state’s 203 fatal accidents on Montana roads happened on reservations. Although the most current statistics do not record how many of the fatalities were Indians and how

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many involved drinking, it is worth noting that 14 percent of state’s fatal collisions occurred on Indian land, while only 6 percent of the state’s population is Native.

Contrasting Indian demographics to fatal accident reports on Indian land is not an exact science, but it does suggest the severity of problem. When charting the figures for New Mexico — the state with the third highest rate of traffic-related fatalities on Indian land in 2000 — the comparison paints only a slightly less somber picture than in other states. While nearly 10 percent of New Mexico is Indian, just fewer than 9 percent of the state’s 384 fatal car crashes happened on tribal land. But police said 27 of those 34 reservation-road accidents were the result of drinking and driving.

South Dakota ranks fourth when it comes to most fatal accidents on Native roads. Thirteen percent — or 20 — of South Dakota’s 150 fatal collisions in 2000 happened on Indian land. One state official said what her colleagues found most troubling about the statistics was that 15 of those wrecks happened on just two reservations. Pine Ridge accounted for seven of the accidents, while the Rosebud Reservation was the site of another eight deadly encounters. The numbers from the previous year were worse. There were 25 fatal accidents on South Dakota reservations in 1999, with Pine Ridge and Rosebud each accounting for six of those tragedies.

But these numbers were not easy to come by, says the state traffic official interviewed. Tribal officials are slow in reporting the information to her agency.

“In several cases, it’s not until our office gets a copy of the death certificate that we even know there was an automobile fatality on the reservation. We then have to call the tribe and say we need an incident report. Even after that, it takes months to get all the information,” she says.

That is not a problem unique to South Dakota or South Dakota tribes. State and federal officials from across the country complain that traffic information coming out of Indian Country is scattered at best (see related story, page 10). But tribal officials are quick to counter that their underfunded and overworked police are hard pressed to collect and disperse the data.

Like their neighbors to the south, officials from North Dakota are able to highlight which reservations were the sites of the most traffic fatalities in their state.

North Dakota is fifth on the list. Out of the 80 lethal accidents that occurred in the state in 2000, 10 of them happened on tribal roads. That translates into almost 13 percent of the accidents in a state where less than 5 percent of the population is Indian.

Eight of those 10 collisions were blamed on alcohol. And nine of the 31 people who lost their lives in those wrecks were Native Americans.

Standing Rock Reservation was the site of four of those accidents. Fort Berthold witnessed three crashes, while Turtle Mountain saw two fatal incidents. Spirit Lake Reservation was the site of one more.

Those numbers were down slightly from the previous year when 14 fatal crashes that killed 45 people happened on North Dakota reservations, but they still troubled Daryl Hall, tribal safety officer at Fort Berthold.

By his count there have been 177 traffic deaths at Fort Berthold since 1955 and alcohol played a part in at least 90 percent of the incidents. Hall recently began to document the wrecks in hopes of identifying trouble spots on the reservation roads. As he compiled his research he uncovered at least 10 fatal accidents that had never been recorded on state ledgers. He then took his investigation to the tribe’s transportation manager, and they used the numbers to apply for grants aimed at curtailing traffic problems and began to build a database.

Hall told reporters that after he began his project, he had little choice but to turn it into a crusade.

“We’re one-half of one percent of the state’s population,” Hall explains, “but we account for 5 to 10 percent of the annual [traffic] death toll.” □