We trace our history to a 1900 meeting of car buffs at San Francisco’s famed Cliff House. Recognizing the need for better roads, signage and auto-friendly laws, these car owners formed the Automobile Club of California (ACC) to deal with barriers that hindered acceptance of the automobile. In 1907, ACC merged into the newly incorporated California State Automobile Association (CSAA), which formally affiliated with the American Automobile Association (AAA).

Today, as AAA Northern California, Nevada & Utah, we continue to provide services to millions of Members. And we’re proud to be a leading advocate for safe and responsible transportation and a provider of traffic safety education to diverse and underserved communities.
1900s: The Age of Innovation

The early 1900s marked the beginning of a new age in technology. People had a new toy to play with—the automobile. The general population was annoyed with the automobile and tried to pass laws to control automobile usage. In response, San Francisco Cliff House proprietor Jim Wilkins and nine automobilists formed the Automobile Club of California (ACC) in March 1900.

The Club’s goal was to increase the pleasure of motor vehicle travel by providing a strong voice for Membership, passing reasonable legislation and promoting better roads.

Scattered local automobile clubs in northern and central California merged and affiliated with the American Automobile Association (AAA) to form the California State Automobile Association (CSAA), now known as AAA Northern California, Nevada & Utah. By 1909, the new club published its first map, a highway map of California and Nevada.

1910s: Rise of Auto Touring

Progress throughout the 1910s sparked growth and development. We worked to help pass bond measures to finance new roads. New president David Watkins invited Members to come into the Association’s office because he wanted “to meet every Member and find out what could be done for each individual.”

We lobbied the insurance industry to provide reduced rates to our Members. When the insurance industry refused, we started our own Inter-Insurance Bureau in 1914. It was a financial success that initially saved Members 30 percent on standard rates charged by private insurers.

With more roads and better automobiles, touring became a popular pastime. We established a Touring Bureau in response to motorists seeking information on touring conditions. The decade came to a close with our Membership at nearly 14,000.

Our Legacy of Community Service: 1910s

With brooms in hand, our Broken Glass Patrol sweeps city streets of potential hazards. The Touring Bureau assists 15,000 motorists visiting the Panama Pacific Exposition. We sow our first seeds of environmentalism by raising funds to purchase 20,000 acres of redwoods that become part of Humboldt Redwood State Park.
We began our Inter-Insurance Bureau in 1914, offering auto insurance to Members at cost.
1920s: The Road Funding Debate

The 1920s began with branches stretching from Eureka to Fresno. The poor condition of roads prompted a study of California highways, which found inadequate funding, poor construction and administrative bungling as the root causes for the destitute state of the roads. In response, our Good Roads Bureau Manager devised a formula for federal funding of western highways. In addition our Director, State Senator Arthur Breed, authored the gas tax legislation that would provide a reliable funding source for future road maintenance and construction. We worked with the Highway Commission to establish a blueprint for road construction for the next 20 years.

Many of the services that are the hallmark of our tradition began in the 1920s. After two seasons of successfully offering towing services near Yosemite, the board voted to introduce Emergency Road Service throughout our territory.

Our Legacy of Community Service:

1920s

Our Good Roads Bureau campaigns for millions of dollars to improve roads and highways. To encourage traffic safety, we present Pedestrian Safety Awards to cities with the safest record and create the AAA School Safety Patrol to protect children walking to and from school.

We set up a tow camp in Yosemite before rolling out Emergency Road Service in San Francisco in 1924.
For over 60 years, AAA crews installed more than 300,000 signs on roads and highways.
Advocacy Spotlight

AAA in the Community

“Association road sign trucks traveled 121,168 miles during the year on sign repair and maintenance work and on city and county orders for installation of 19,222 signs.”

– CSAA Annual Report, 1950

Signing, Funding Roads & Improving Traffic
At the turn of the century when paved roads were a dream more than a reality, AAA took shovels in hand to repair roads, erect road signs and fund the first highways. In the 1920s and ’30s, AAA surveyed roads and traffic in urban areas, providing recommendations to cities on how to improve traffic flow. Such public works set the precedent for ongoing AAA community service, ranging from our Wartime Motoring Bureau during World War II to our Gas Watchers program of the ’70s energy crisis.

Commute Reports & Car Checks
In 1954, we pioneered commute traffic reports directing drivers to the dedication of the San Francisco Airport. The positive feedback motivated us to outfit a fleet of cars with two-way radios to report on traffic. By 1967, KCBS broadcast AAA traffic reports every 15 minutes during commute hours. In the 1970s and ’80s, we shared gas-saving tips and offered free car engine checks from our diagnostic van.

Hybrid Training, Reliable Transportation & Volunteers
AAA turned to other endeavors in the 2000s. We launched the Greenlight Initiative in 2005, offering free hybrid-drivers training classes. We also championed a host of regional measures that invested billions in highway, local road, transit and mobility improvements. Today, AAA employees receive paid time off to volunteer for community outreach initiatives. Our employees clean up debris on trails at Zion National Park or serve lunch at San Francisco’s Glide Memorial Church.
Advocacy Spotlight

Keeping Children Safer

“More than 5,000 students from Modesto and surrounding areas will be bussed to Safety Town in the Montgomery Ward parking lot...[the] Objective of the program is to help youngsters become safe pedestrians and eventually safe drivers.”

– AAA Press Release, September 1968

School Safety Patrol
In 1922, a growing number of automobiles on city streets led to a sudden jump in traffic accidents in San Francisco. Pedestrians hit by cars accounted for more than two-thirds of the accident rate. Even more appalling, during the year, 20 children were killed going to or from school. AAA responded by creating a Public Safety Department in 1923 that focused first on child safety. Working with schools, parent-teacher associations, and the San Francisco Police Department, AAA formed the School Safety Patrol—one of the first in California and the nation.

Safety Poster Contest & Otto the Auto
Students learned safety, drawing pictures of people crossing at crosswalks or wearing white at night for visibility, in our annual Safety Poster Contest. Our Otto the Auto robotic car captivated youngsters during assemblies where students chanted, “Look all ways before crossing.”

School's Open, Sober Grads & Buckle Up Baby
Other child safety programs ranged from Safety Town—a mini “walk-through” town that reinforced pedestrian safety—to our fall School’s Open Drive Carefully campaign with yellow bumper stickers warning drivers of children near school streets. AAA also sponsored bicycle rodeos teaching bike riding safety and the importance of wearing helmets. Teen drivers learned safety and gas efficiency in our Youth Safety Economy Runs. We also reminded teens that drinking and driving don’t mix, through our Sober Graduation program. Today, our free Buckle Up Baby events train parents in how to properly secure children in car seats.
Our School Safety Patrol, formed in 1923, continues to keep children safe today, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to community service.
We expanded to Nevada during the 1930s after years of collaboration on highway maps and other projects.
1930s: The Great Depression

AAA services depend on healthy Membership, and as a result of the Wall Street collapse in 1929, we lost 30 percent of our Membership within four years. Directors and employees struggled loyally through the bad times, and we never had to administer layoffs.

Even through the hardship, the company was able to accomplish several important feats. In 1933, we expanded our territory to include northern Nevada. Also in 1933, we removed all territorial limits on Emergency Road Service, extending service worldwide. When the California state legislature tried to divert the gasoline tax from its mandated purpose of road construction to fund other state projects, AAA helped push through the anti-diversion amendment to the state constitution. In addition, AAA endorsed the construction of both the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridge.

Our Legacy of Community Service: 1930s-1940s

The newly created Wartime Motoring Bureau keeps drivers informed of government-mandated gas rationing, dim-out policies and more. To further support the war effort, we offer auto mechanics classes and driver training to women war service groups.

During the 1930s, we extended our Emergency Road Service worldwide.
1940s: World War II

The 1940s brought World War II, and President Roosevelt declared the nation’s 20 million autos vital transportation resources and asked auto clubs to help owners keep them on the road.

The nation’s factories had been retooled to manufacture war materials, and few cars were being built. We urged voluntary observance of a 40-mph speed limit to conserve gasoline and rubber, and to extend the service life of cars. AAA also promoted a ride-sharing program for workers in large plants and began the Wartime Motoring Information Bureau to keep Members informed of changes in federal regulations and rationing procedures.

After the war ended, roads were in awful condition. In 1947, we collaborated on the Collier-Burns Highway Act, a comprehensive state highway plan. While the United States economy prospered in the postwar era, Europe experienced a more difficult transition. The State Department requested our assistance to stimulate Europe’s postwar economy by encouraging European travel, so we formed a Worldwide Travel Department. At the end of the decade, the alarming rate of automobile accidents prompted us to assist when the California Assembly made driver education compulsory for those receiving a driver’s license.

1950s: Tourism Becomes California’s #1 Industry

The company continued to experience unprecedented growth during the 1950s—more than doubling Membership from 200,000 to 500,000 Members at the end of the decade. During this era, tourism outgrew agriculture as California’s major industry.

During this period, we faced increasing service requests and overcame these challenges and installed new technology, such as a radio dispatch system to better serve Emergency Road Service demands.

This provided Members with greater convenience of calling the dispatch number rather than contacting the nearest Emergency Road Service garage.

In December 1955, a series of storms and floods ravaged Northern California. Even as waters raged, the Inter-Insurance Bureau arrived at the scene ready to issue drafts on the spot. This prompt service set new standards for response in the industry.
1960s: Environmental Concern

The 1960s marked an era of awareness and concern to keep the environment clean. We backed the efforts of the California Air Resources Board to reduce auto emissions. When Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) faced financial obstacles, we urged the legislature to allocate $133 million in bridge tolls for the construction of the BART Transbay Tube. This proved to be a worthy undertaking as the close of the decade brought a new problem to California automobile transportation—smog.

Our board called on the California legislature to pass a bill that would add a one-time $1 fee to vehicle registration to set up a smog research fund. We continued to offer more services and benefits to Members, including making our automobile insurance available to Nevada Members. In addition, we began offering personal liability insurance, AAA travelers checks, free vehicle inspections and an auto diagnostic clinic. In 1969, we celebrated the enrollment of our one-millionth Member.

Endorsement of BART legislation by AAA was a key factor in securing funds to develop the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit System.

Our Legacy of Community Service:
1950s-1960s

We do our part to help keep America beautiful and launch our highway cleanup program. Our Safety Film Library supports approximately 1,000 showings to 75,000 people annually. Local radio stations begin airing AAA commute-time traffic reports.
1970s: The Energy Crisis

During the 1970s, we continued our commitment to combating smog and traffic congestion problems. The fuel shortages in 1973 caused long lines at gas stations. Undeterred, we proposed fundraising for smog abatement research and sponsored a fuel gauge program to report gas availability and price. In addition, we helped found RIDES, a carpooling program for Bay Area commuters.

Car maintenance became a hot issue in the mid-'70s, when the number of full-service gas stations declined. We responded by establishing Member services, such as classes on reducing gas use, a mobile diagnostic unit and a community gas savers van.

The Inter-Insurance Bureau offered homeowner’s insurance for the first time in 1974. And it was also in this decade that the company grew to be 1.5 million Members strong.

Our Legacy of Community Service: 1970s

As gas shortages hit, the Community Gas Watchers program shares tips to encourage Members to conserve fuel. Another conservation program, RIDES, helps facilitate carpooling by matching local residents who need rides with potential drivers in the area.
Advocacy Spotlight

Making Driving Safer

“At AAA, Safe Driving is our Business, but if you think about it, safe driving should be every driver’s business. That’s why we developed this guide.”


Driver Education
Throughout our history, a focus of our advocacy and public programs has been to make driving safer. In the 1950s, we lobbied for mandatory driver education in schools. We drafted curriculum and then partnered with local car dealerships for vehicle loans to schools for on-the-road training. We ran Skilled Driving Competitions in the 1970s. In 2000, we successfully advocated for Graduated Drivers Licensing to give teenage drivers valuable time to gain experience on the road.

Senior Safety
Our driver training went beyond educating teenagers. During the 1980s, we introduced Senior Safety Seminars to arm mature drivers with defensive-driving techniques, offering insurance discounts to those who completed the class. More recently, our free CarFit events at senior centers and other locations provided retirees with a 12-point check to ensure comfort, free movement and improved visibility while driving.

Tips, Tipsy Tow & DriverZed
We promoted safe driving in rain or shine and safe driving assistance during holidays. We shared tips on how to safely maneuver through winter weather in our wet-weather driving guides. Today, Tipsy Tow offers a free ride and tow after a holiday party to ensure that drunk drivers stay off the road. Our DriverZed DVD teaches teens safe driving and encourages parents and teens to develop a safe driving agreement. We continue to support distracted-driving legislation in an effort to improve a drivers’ focus by putting away cell phones and other distractions while at the wheel.
Advocacy Spotlight

Ensuring Safer Travel

“Here’s a traffic tip from the California State Automobile Association: Keep out of situations where you have to do anything suddenly. No jackrabbit starts, no abrupt stops, no quick swerves into another lane. Keep out of trouble by allowing an extra margin for safety.”

– AAA Radio PSA, January 1963

Road Reports & Simple Signs
From our early road condition reports to consistent signage, AAA has long been committed to ensuring safer travel. Before radio and television, AAA hired a crew who reported on road conditions to AAA branches, passing information on to Members. In November 1919, George Grant of our Touring Bureau reported, “Mr. Stoddard, our representative at Merced, sent a gentleman to Yosemite Valley on November 7 and he telegraphed Mr. Stoddard as follows, ‘Roads just fine. No mud. Little snow. Use no chains.’ ” In the 1920s, we played a major role lobbying for uniform, clear and easy-to-see traffic signs.

Safety Signals & Safety Announcements
On the road, AAA shared safe-driving tips and erected signs to warn drivers of perilous conditions. In the 1920s, for example, we erected reflector nighttime warning signals on dangerous curves. A decade later, we broadcast Safety First messages on KGO Radio sharing tips like “When you haul any equipment it must be within proper limits.” In the 1960s, public safety announcements predicted high accident rates over holidays. We responded with our Bring ‘em Back ALIVE! campaign to make drivers aware of the need to drive safely on long, getaway weekends.

Seat Belts & Speed Limits
In support of mandatory seat belt laws in the 1980s, AAA encouraged people to take the Safety Belt Pledge. We took our Safety Belt Convincer, a mock car with seat belt on an inclined track, to schools and fairs. The convincer demonstrated the need for seat belts to teens and others who lurched forward when the convincer came to a sudden stop. We distributed educational materials on the 35 miles per hour speed limit during the 1930s and supported the 55 miles per hour speed limit during the 1970s.
1980s: One of the World’s Largest Auto Clubs

The 1980s brought increased prosperity and growth. We became one of the world’s largest auto clubs, with 58 branches. Member services included an Approved Auto Repair program, which guaranteed quality automobile repairs to all Members.

The ‘80s also marked an era of natural disasters. Following severe floods in 1982, we responded by approving a retroactive extension of homeowner’s coverage, which allowed a payment of additional living expenses and limited contents benefits to the insured—even if their losses were caused by perils not covered under the basic policy.

Our Legacy of Community Service:

1980s-1990s

With full-service gas stations on the decline, we advocate for auto mechanics education with Youth Auto Skills & Auto Troubleshooting Contests and Free Car Care programs. The “Bring ‘em Back ALIVE!” driving-safety awareness campaign launches.

1990s: Expanded Access

With the state’s transportation system deteriorating, we fought for adequate funding and long-range transportation planning. In the early ‘90s, voters increased the gasoline tax to ensure the state an enduring solution for transportation improvement.

In 1995, we expanded our territory to include Utah.

Motorland, the Member publication mailed to more than 2.5 million households, was redesigned and relaunched as VIA. We entered the online world with an award-winning website. Safety services were developed to help Members manage a safe journey, from the infant seat to the driver’s seat. The Otto Club website won awards and attracted young visitors from around the globe.

We welcomed AAA Utah in 1995.
The New Century

In an effort to provide more convenience to Members, we continued to expand our online presence as we began the new millennium. In 2000, through a joint effort with the California Department of Motor Vehicles, we offered Members with AAA Auto Insurance the convenience of renewing their automobile registration via the Internet. That year also saw the launch of an online version of VIA magazine. And in 2001, we completed a 12-year effort to digitize our entire library of maps.

Committed as always to developing new ways to help keep our Members on the road, we launched AAA Battery Service, providing roadside battery diagnostics and new battery installation right on the spot.

As a leading advocate for road safety, we responded to the increasing instances of “road rage” with a survey to help us identify the region’s “Rudest Roads” and offered instructions on how to deal with aggressive drivers.

The public’s embrace of environmental concerns grew more intense as the 2000s continued. In response, we established the AAA Greenlight® Initiative to help Members make sense of new alternative fuels and green transportation options.

As the century progresses we continue to look for new ways to bring value to our Members. And based on our history, we will never lack for innovation.