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On the Road Again

The nation's second transcontinental auto route, the historic Bankhead Highway still links communities across Texas

Text by **GENE FOWLER**

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, RETIRED METEOROLOGIST

Dan Smith of Fort Worth was riding his bicycle on backroads near Aledo when he discovered something that piqued his curiosity and launched him on a quest that continues today. "I rode up to an old bridge that was closed and abandoned," he recalls. "A sign there identified the road as the 'Old Bankhead Highway.'"

Smith later learned that he had found the nation's second transcontinental auto route. (The first was the 1913 Lincoln Highway.) Made possible by the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 and named for Senator John Hollis Bankhead of Alabama, the Bankhead Highway ran from Washington, D.C., to San Diego, California. Opened for traffic in Texas in the early 1920s, the Bankhead—known at one time as "the Broadway of America"—entered the state at Texarkana, passing through Sulphur Springs, Dallas/Fort Worth, Abilene, and Midland/Odessa before leaving the state at El Paso.

Largely forgotten as newer highways—US 67, US 80, US 180, I-20, and I-30—were built over its path or diverted travelers from its small towns, the Bankhead today is enjoying something of a renaissance as communities commemorate its convoluted pathway with historical markers and

Travelers motoring the Bankhead Highway through Fort Worth in 1928 marveled at the new Montgomery Ward store, an architectural icon that now houses loft apartments.

PHOTO: KEVIN STILLMAN

other signage. Bankhead scholars debate details about its route, and websites like bygonebyways.com chronicle its twists and turns, nurturing a nostalgic fervor reminiscent of the affection shown for Route 66. The state's Historic Roads and Highways Program, initiated by former state representative Carol Kent in the 81st Texas Legislature in 2009, proclaimed the Bankhead the first official Texas Historic Highway.

"The idea was suggested by constituents in Garland," says Kent. (As has occurred in many towns along the route, the Bankhead in Garland was long ago renamed Main Street.) "Communities all along the Bankhead see the official designation as a great opportunity for developing heritage tourism."

First, though, folks have to find it. Bankhead detective Dan Smith explains that Texas Highway 1, the road that became a part of the Bankhead, was more "assembled than built." Noting that early auto roads were mostly "rutted wagon trails at best," Garland historian Jerry Flook adds that existing roads were improved and linked to create Texas 1.

Fellow Bankhead historian Joe Specht of Abilene describes the process: "There was no blasting—they just followed the contours of the landscape." When newer, more direct highways were built, sections of the old Bankhead were sometimes left stranded. Near Rowlett, for instance, the route passes under Lake Ray Hubbard, continuing on the far shore. Bridge railings jut above the water as though floating in surreal tableau.

Finding his way by satellite imagery and antique maps, Smith has recently completed tracking, driving, and

documenting each mile of the lost highway for a book project. Much evidence remains visible. Between Fort Worth and Abilene, sections of the Bankhead, some built with bricks made in Thurber, Mineral Wells, and other towns. The town of Strawn features original brick streets and a newly repainted sign announcing the (long-closed) Bankhead Hotel and Apartments. The Old Jail Museum Complex in Palo Pinto displays a yard-wide panoramic photo of the hundreds of attendees who met in 1919 in Mineral Wells to establish the Bankhead route between Arkansas and El Paso.

Baird's T&P Railroad Depot Museum hosts a permanent Bankhead display, and Abilene's four-mile-long Bankhead Historical District is on the National Register of Historic Places. "A number of Bankhead-era sites like the Ponca Motel and the 1930 Abilene Courts still stand along the Abilene route, awaiting restoration," says Joe Specht.

Many of the sweetest Bankhead reminders, of course, exist in folks' memories. Ray Mack Thompson of Richardson, who says he is "old enough to remember when the brick Bankhead was the main highway into Dallas/Fort Worth," grew up on a Pecos cantaloupe farm just a mile north of the old road. "Our family specialized in individual gift packages shipped by railway express," says Thompson, "and I remember Mother saying that one of our biggest customers was the man who helped inspire the interstate highway system, Senator Bankhead of Alabama."

People often say we need to see where we've been to see where we're

The Bankhead entered the state at Texarkana, passing through Dallas/Fort Worth, Abilene, and Midland/Odessa before leaving the state at El Paso.

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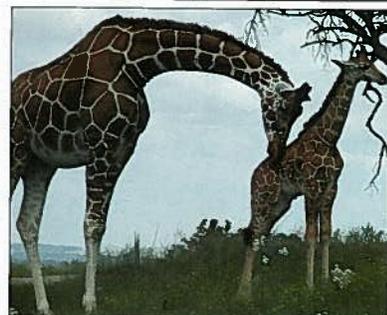


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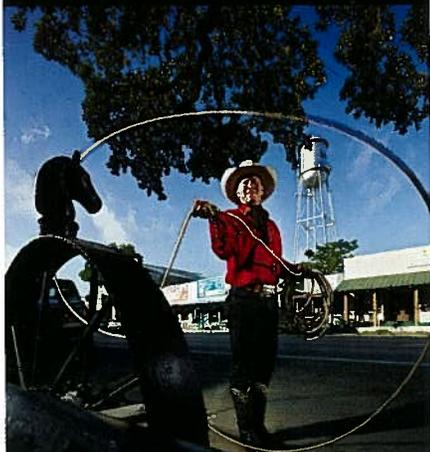
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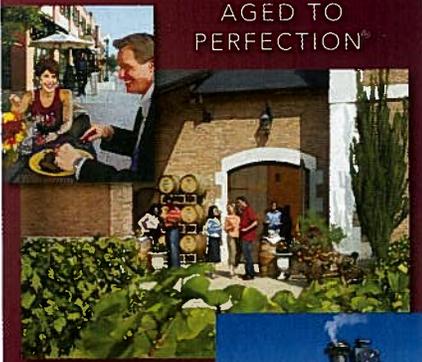
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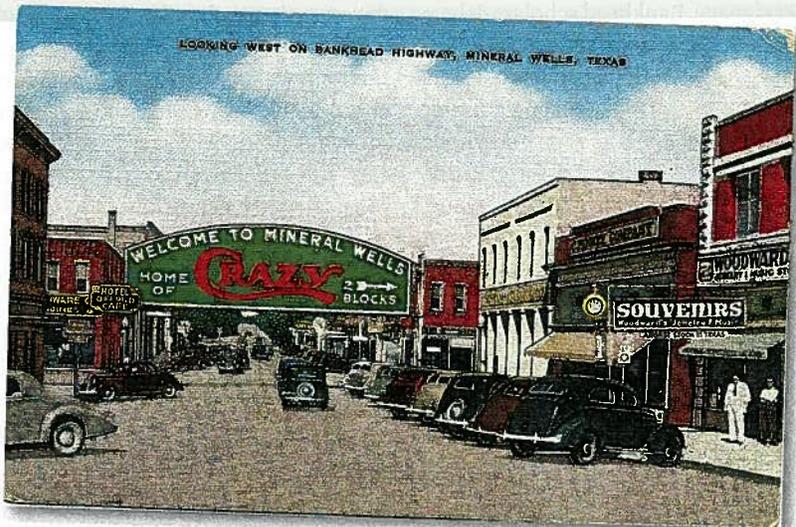


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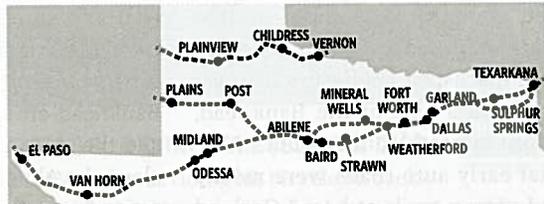
Bricks made in Thurber paved many Texas sections of the Bankhead, including the stretch through Mineral Wells.

going. The same goes for the roads that get us there. And just like the Camino Real, the Chihuahua Trail, Route 66, and other paths that carried our predeces-

sors to a place called Texas, traveling and preserving the old Bankhead Highway can help us keep from losing our way on the road to tomorrow. **TH**

Long Live the Bankhead

OPENED FOR TRAFFIC IN the early 1920s, the Bankhead Highway ran from Washington, D.C., to San Diego, California. In Texas, the main route passed through **Texarkana** and went west through **Sulphur**



Springs, Garland, Dallas, Fort Worth, Mineral Wells, Abilene, Midland, Van Horn, and El Paso—and the many towns in between. Several branch routes connected towns in the Texas Panhandle along present-day US 287 and US 70, including **Vernon, Childress, and Plainview**; as well as such towns as **Post** and **Plains** on present-day US 380.

For more information about the route roughly paralleled by present-day US 80 and US 180, see www.redriverhistorian.com/US80.html.

Dan Smith's forthcoming book on the Bankhead Highway is currently in development with State House Press of Abilene.

Some of the most visible remnants of the Bankhead survive in **Garland** and in **Baird**, where historical markers commemorate the route; in **Weatherford**, where the original brick street through downtown has been restored; in **Strawn**, where the former Bankhead Hotel and Apartments building has been repainted and awaits restoration; and in **Abilene**, where a yet-to-be-restored, four-mile stretch of the former highway has been designated the Bankhead Historical District and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In **Van Horn**, some 120 miles before the old Bankhead exited Texas at El Paso, the Hotel El Capitan was built in 1930 to cater to cattlemen, rail travelers, and automobile travelers headed west (or east) along the Bankhead route. Recently restored, the hotel offers 38 rooms and suites with private baths. Call 877/283-1220; www.hotelelcapitan.net.

—Lori Moffatt