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Road to the past: Old Bankhead Highway to celebrate its 100th anniversary

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MINERAL WELLS — Before red-light cameras, drive-through restaurants and reflective road signs, there was Bankhead Highway.

It was the first coast-to-coast route extending across the southern United States, beginning in 1916 at “mile zero” near the south lawn of the White House and ending in San Diego. The route included about 850 miles in Texas, carving a path that — although it now exists under many different names, including Interstate 20 — remains a vital corridor in cities such as Fort Worth and Mineral Wells.

“Imagine a world in 1916, to understand what it must have been like to say, ‘Hey, let’s start out at the White House and find our way to California,’” said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

The 100th anniversary of Bankhead Highway will be in 2016. Congress kicked off the federal-aid highway program in 1916, funding highways that connected the far reaches of the newly industrialized nation. The aid program essentially defined a method for government to fund roads — and it’s a guiding formula that remains in use today.

To celebrate the anniversary, the Texas Historical Commission is conducting a two-year study of Bankhead Highway and its importance to the Lone Star State.

As a proper name, a handful of Texas communities still use the Bankhead Highway moniker on their roads — Weatherford, Odessa and Van Horn among them. But the history of the road lives on under different monikers in varying cities. Today, the road is called Division Street in Arlington, Main Street in Garland and East Lancaster Avenue and Camp Bowie Boulevard in Fort Worth.

The study will include public outreach meetings across the state, including Sept. 12 in Fort Worth and Oct. 1 in Mineral Wells. Anyone is welcome at the meetings, including residents with memories of the road.

“They’re going to be coming out with information on Bankhead Highway, but they’re also asking people to come forward with any maps, pictures that they can include in their research,” said Sandy Wesch, council of governments project engineer.

The historical road is named after John H. Bankhead, a senator from Alabama who was instrumental in passage of the federal-aid highway program.



View photos

Bankhead Highway

Residents with old maps, photos or other vintage fare related to the old Bankhead Highway are encouraged to attend any of several meetings hosted by the Texas Historical Commission. Among the meetings:

Fort Worth: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 12, Tarrant County Plaza Building, 200 Taylor St., fifth floor, Lone Star Room.

Mineral Wells: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Oct. 1, Mineral Wells Woman’s Club, 201 Northeast Second St.

Dallas: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 10, Old Red Museum of Dallas County, History & Culture, Restoration Room, 100 S. Houston Street.

• For more information, visit the Texas Historical Commission online: www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/historic-texas-highways/bankhead-highway.

Source: Texas Historical Commission, North Central Texas Council of Governments.



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The historical commission expects its study to cost \$1.4 million. Hardy-Heck-Moore, an Austin preservation firm, has been brought aboard to oversee the details. Funding comes from the state Legislature, which in 2009 approved the program using federal "transportation enhancement" dollars, a commission spokeswoman said.

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The work will include a written history of the road, and a survey of gas stations, diners and any other landmarks in the path.

"The idea is to encourage heritage tourism and boost heritage tourism in the communities these roads have gone through," said historical commission spokeswoman Debbi Head.

Commission officials say their goal is to make the Bankhead Highway the first of many studies of Texas roads with historical and cultural significance in the coming years.

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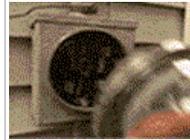
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