



Title: **State asks for help documenting highway**
 Author: **By MATT LOESCHMAN**
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Meridian Highway predetermined Georgetown's economic future

By MATT LOESCHMAN

The Texas Historical Commission wants your help documenting the history of the Meridian Highway, an informal network of marked routes that bisected North America in the last century and was key to Georgetown's growth.

The commission is embarking on a two-year study in association with Austin historic preservation company Hardy-Heck-Moore. They aim to produce a written history and survey of the Meridian Highway's 800-mile Texas sec-

tion — a portion of which meandered through downtown Georgetown in the early 20th century and was better known as Highway 81, the precursor to Interstate 35.

By choosing to build I-35 along that route and through

Georgetown and Round Rock in the center of the county, instead of the much larger Taylor, state transportation planners boosted the county seat's economic clout. The highway

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State documents highway that set I-35's path

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was Georgetown's "lifeline to outside money," Linda Scarborough wrote in *Road, River, and Ol' Boy Politics*, an examination of how public works projects radically transformed Williamson County.

More than half a century later, the Texas Historical Commission wants to document how the road has profoundly affected the history of the state.

"Some of you may know about this highway and some of you may not," Hardy-Heck-Moore President David Moore said Monday during a public outreach meeting at the Georgetown Parks and Recreation Community Room.

"But we are going to have some fun here tonight revisiting photos from the past."

A history lesson

During a half-hour slide show, Mr. Moore said the Meridian Highway was the historical north-south named highway in Texas onward from the early 1910s, when the introduction of the Model T brought about the need for more and much better roads.

The highway network began in Winnipeg, Canada, and

stretched through the middle of the United States and into Mexico.

In Texas, the highway split south of Waco. One branch ran south through Belton, Salado and Georgetown on its way to Laredo; the other headed east, passing through Temple and Taylor before ending in Galveston, Mr. Moore said.

In crossing about 800 miles of the Lone Star State, it also passed through Burkburnett (near the Red River and the Texas-Oklahoma border), Wichita Falls, Fort Worth, Cleburne, Austin, New Braunfels, San Antonio and other communities.

The Meridian Highway generally followed a similar path that Interstate 35 ultimately followed and was named for the 97th meridian west of Greenwich, England — the line that some historians have written splits the American East from the American West.

The commission is asking people to share information or visual items (such as photos, postcards and maps) related to the Meridian Highway. The survey of the Meridian route will include historic resources such as auto repair garages,

gas stations, diners, motels, traffic signs and other items.

"We are trying to find things that still exist today," Mr. Moore said.

The project is being funded by the state Legislature and the Texas Department of Transportation through the Transportation Enhancement Program.

Positive response

The Georgetown outreach session was the fourth of 10 planned sessions on the Meridian Highway project. Commission members answered questions from attendees and displayed maps and historic images.

"We have had small turnouts but very enthusiastic people," said Leslie Wolfenden, historic resources survey coordinator for the commission.

"People have brought memorabilia or data disks and that are going to be very helpful. There are only so many hours we can allocate to research, so the public's help is vital."

Georgetown Historic Planner Matt Synatschk believes most residents might not be aware the thoroughfare moved through the heart of our city a

century ago.

"People know about Business 35 and Texas 81 but they may not understand the full history of the Meridian Highway," Mr. Synatschk said.

The planner said the Georgetown Public Library has a "good collection" of materials that the city will contribute to the project.

About 20 people attended the Georgetown meeting, with some guests traveling from as far away as San Antonio and New Braunfels.

"We couldn't get to the San Antonio meeting so we came here," said Karen Boyd of New Braunfels.

"This road was important to our city, too, and we wanted to know more about it."

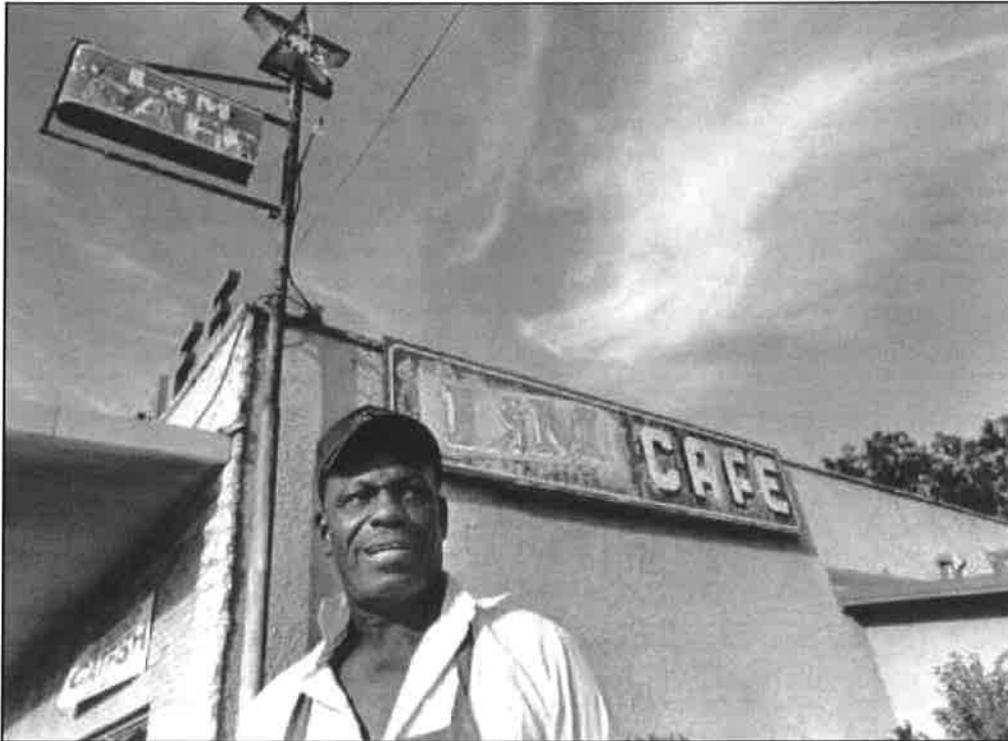
Georgetown resident Ronda McCauley has lived here since 2006 but "had no idea this highway existed," she said.

"But I like to study history, so this is an interesting project to me."

There are six more public meetings planned in other cities regarding the project, culminating with a February 19 open house in Galveston.

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Sun photo

R.Z. Anderson stands in front the L&M Cafe on U.S. Highway 81 in 1992. As former Chamber President Paul Hindelang recalled in 1998, crickets piled up so high in front of the eatery "they had to get dump trucks to haul them away. The cafes were open all night and their lights drew those crickets, as well as travelers. Highway 81 was the backbone of the United States."

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Terry Anderson, Babe Raum, John Null and Ray Isaaks enjoy coffee at the L&M Cafe in 1994. The cafe was on U.S. Highway 81, which brought economic clout to Georgetown. Interstate 35 later followed roughly the same route. Below, construction crews build an interstate access road bridge over the San Gabriel River in 1995. Sun photos

