

Title: The Meridian Highway
Author: By Marc Robertson
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The Meridian Highway

Exploring Historic Route, THC Discovers Architecture, Hidden Gems

By Marc Robertson

The long-distance interstate highway that runs between the US borders at Mexico and Canada is recognized as one of the most important trade routes in the nation, and it owes its origins to innovators who blazed a trail that played a significant part in the development of the western states.

Known today as IH-35, the highway follows a north-south route previously covered by lesser highways, notably the Pan-American Highway and Hwy 81 - parts of which are still visible today as main streets through Texas cities and as an interstate frontage road.

It is this route and its predecessors that brought trade, tourism, intercity travel, business and recreation through South Texas, and in Frio and La Salle counties it lived up to its "American Main Street" moniker, typifying the two-lane artery that moved people, goods and services through the burgeoning rural communities.

The Texas Historical Commission has teamed with preservation planning and management group Hardy Heck Moore, Inc. to research, explore and present for education and posterity the highway whose course through the state became a fixture on maps and would forever secure the fortunes of Texas development a century ago.

As part of their two-year project, THC historic resources survey coordinator Leslie Wolfenden and Hardy Heck Moore President David More undertook County: Frio

a tour through the state from north to south last month, stopping at key points along today's IH-35 to meet with residents, local government, Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Program and historical commission representatives, outlining the scope of their assignment.

"From Ringold to Laredo," the monumental and visionary Meridian Road bisected Texas along its record distance between Winnipeg, Canada, and Mexico City, Mexico, becoming the only highway to cross three countries at the start of the 20th Century.

In South Texas, the Meridian road snaked southwards from downtown San Antonio and passed through towns hitherto served reliably only by the railroad: Devine, Moore, Pearsall, Dilley, Millett, Cotulla, Artesia Wells and Encinal, before making its final dusty leg across the harsh brushland to Laredo on the Rio Grande.

In his outline of the early form of today's interstate highway, More showed an audience in the AB Alexander Convention Center during his recent stop in Cotulla that it was an innovative step by developer John C Nicholson in 1911 that helped meld a number of historic trails into a single, named road on the cusp of the motoring age.

An idea of the road's significance to

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the American West is its very name; the route identified by Nicholson roughly follows the path of the 6th Meridian. Furthermore, it crossed one of America's busiest northern routes, the Lincoln Highway that led from the East Coast to the Heartland. In the South, the Meridian Road partly overlapped the Colorado-to-Gulf, the Old Spanish Trail and the King of Trails, routes followed by early settlers and subsequently by industrialists and developers. It also lay over many trails that had already been listed in the 1890s as "Good Roads," mapped to carry travelers safely from town to town.

More said he believes the road that would shortly become a recognized American federal highway was fortuitously mapped in the same age as the one innovation that would forever change the face of American travel and business: the Model T Ford.

When the US Highways Act was drafted in 1916, More said, the law affected the way in which highways were built, since federal funding would be directed only to those states that had established their own highway departments. While Texas was among the last states to create such an agency (in 1917), the Meridian Highway was only the second such artery in the nation.

"That speaks of its significance," More said of the road whose path, artifacts, symbols and signs he and Wolfenden are documenting today. "In 1908, the Ford

Model T had changed everything... car prices were going down, and mobility was opened up to a growing middle class. We had the origins of interstate tourism, and the road was here to carry it."

The Meridian Road was given a US Highway designation in 1926; a southeasterly fork carrying traffic from Waco to Galveston became Hwy 6. In South Texas, the main artery became Hwy 81.

Those who used the road and who played a part in the development of communities along its path varied greatly in background and mission, according to More, who includes early "vagabonds" and later agri-business leaders among them. The travelers depended on road houses, diners and cafes, early "motor court" motels, ready-made campsites, fueling stations and, significantly, signage along the way.

At the same time, far from being in competition with the railroad for freight haulage, the Meridian Road was in part promoted by the rail service as a means by which agricultural goods could be brought to the consumer after being delivered at stations or, conversely, could be carried swiftly to the rail terminals

from the fields.

Promotion of the Old Meridian Highway was undertaken through a variety of means, including low-cost or free maps offered to tourists or provided by hotels, resorts and Chambers of Commerce; posters and billboards; and postcards with images of the two-lane road passing some of the nation's most attractive landscapes and city landmarks.

Promoting the Meridian Highway was a matter of American civic pride, More said, and cities welcomed long parades that traveled the length of the road, created banners and pennants, printed pictures on maps and listed the many service stations,

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hotels, businesses and attractions they could.

“People loved to see their home town on banners,” More said of the long-term advertising blitz that helped affix the Meridian Highway into the public consciousness. “Caravans of promoters posed in front of historic landmarks; roads were graded and paved over time; official maps were printed... this became the Main Street of North America.”

Early maps of the road, More said, were out of scale and lacked compass references but included critical elements such as proximity of the road to the railroad line

(virtually parallel through South Texas) and identified every city and town.

“In all of the cities in Texas, this is where the road didn’t deviate all that much,” More told his audience in Cotulla, referring to the southernmost Texas leg of the Meridian Highway as it passes through towns that are today served by the interstate.

It is what remains of the road that was once a source of such pride that More and Wolfenden are tracking today in their

project. By stopping in each town, at every river crossing, near every landmark, and checking with local residents whose families date back to the highway’s early years, the historians are gathering scores of photographs, memorabilia, personal stories, and discovering pieces of American history still standing along the trail.

In some towns, these may include historical markers, bridges, signposts, even something as easily overlooked as an early ground-level Stop sign embedded in a paving stone. In other towns, museums may have copies of maps or pictures of hotels and parks that once stood along the highway.

In other towns, those in Frio and La Salle counties included, artifacts include surviving examples of highway architecture, almost all of it in the form of service stations and garages that once fueled travelers’ cars. While many of the stations have been demolished, some remain as cafes and other types of businesses; some have fallen into dereliction and a scant few have been saved and restored to their original appearance.

Easily recognizable among the styles of service station architecture is the Art Deco tile and whimsical turret-style castellation of the ubiquitous Sinclair stations, the flying Pegasus of the Mobil stations, and the soaring rooflines and slender pillars of the Modernist mid-century designs. More

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and Wolfenden said they have identified many such structures in Texas and hope to document them, find early photographs of as many as they can and use the examples as anchor points in their completed historical presentation.

Without the affordable motorcar and its dependence on service stations, and without the stations themselves, the cafes and the motels, traces of the historic road would long ago have disappeared, More said.

The THC has worked successfully with Hardy Heck More in mapping and documenting the history and landmarks of the Bankhead Highway, which stretches across the state from Texarkana to El Paso, including stacks of photographs and postcards as well as historic images provided by residents in towns along the way.

"You can really get a sense of the past when you examine these little corners of the state," More said at his presentation in Cotulla. "It's remarkable what we have uncovered so far. For example, we found a newspaper clipping from Round Rock, telling of a bus crash in which ten students from Baylor University were killed when their bus was hit by a train... It was incidents like that which helped encourage the construction of many of today's road-rail overpasses.

"We have found gas stations in small towns where the architecture is still clearly visible, and in one town we even found pieces of the original pavement," the historian said. "The

original pavement, the historian said. The work we have done so far has led people to take a second look at their communities and to identify historic buildings, and who are now taking advantage of tax incentives to restore those sites. Some of these sites are being added to the National Register of Historic Places."

Not all parts of the Meridian Highway have been replaced by the interstate, More said. While IH-35 may follow the historic trail's path, it does not always lie directly on top of the old pavement.

"We have also found that portions of the road are still in use today; people still enjoy driving on them," he added. "To use these stretches of the road today, in an environment where there are no fences, gives us a sense of the openness of the early road. Some are still in use as county roads."

"These things are still out there, and we are going to enjoy finding them," More said.

Photographs, maps, postcards, posters and other images provided by local residents for the historic research are digitally scanned and immediately returned to their owners; narratives and related accounts are documented by the historians. All area residents with material to offer in support of the research may reach More in Austin at (512) 478-8014, ext. 109, or email dmore@hhmnc.com; or Wolfenden at the Texas Historical Commission in Austin, (512) 463-3386 or email leslie.wolfenden@thc.state.tx.us.



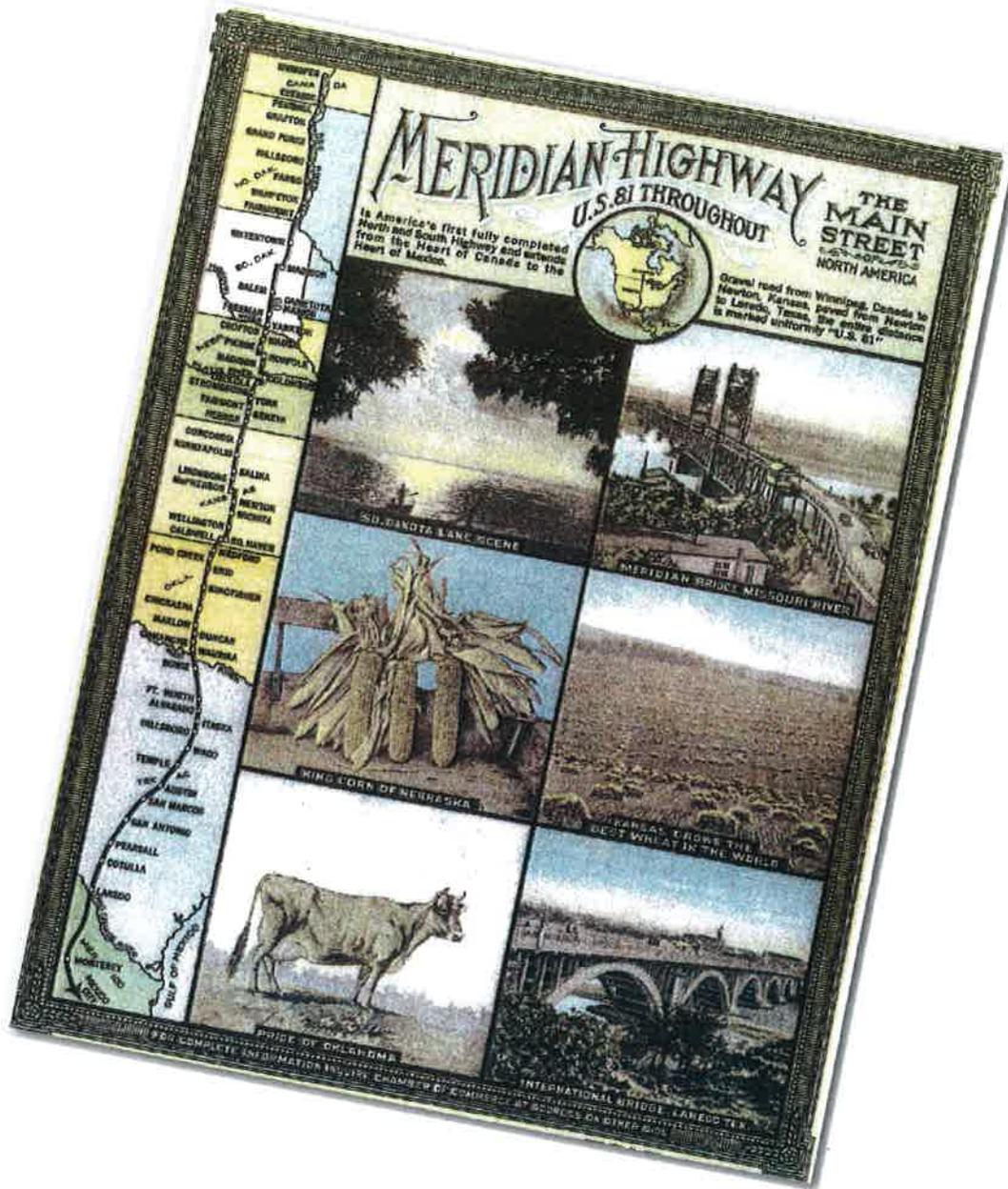
SURVIVORS, such as a miniature gas station in downtown Cotulla whose 1920s architecture includes decorative tile in a combination of Spanish and Moorish styles, will be documented as part of the Meridian Highway Project

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**DAVID
MORE,**
representing his firm Hardy
Heck More, is working with the Texas
Historical Commission on a two-year project to map
and document the Meridian Highway through the
state

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VINTAGE MAPS, created to promote the highway's attractions, included towns between Mexico and Canada