

II.3. WACO

Waco Wealth and Wonders

“It may well be said that Waco is the heart of Texas, being in the center of the State and center of population. What Cameron Park is to Waco, the Cotton Palace at Waco is to Texas. No wonder Waco is rich in people and wealth, for they live right in the Valley of the Nile or the Brazos. Waco now has 43,000 inhabitants, with every indication of a marvelous increase; but we cannot write here all the advantages of the capital of McLellan [sic] County. It’s the city of big springs, big hotels, big parks, the tallest building in the country; and the site of the great Baptist University, Baylor. There is so much of interest in and around Waco, that the tourist will conclude he has seen it all when he gets through Waco, and want to go no further. It is tarviated roads into Waco and its [sic] tarviated roads out of Waco; and so the going is good.”

G. A. MacNaughton, *The Meridian Road in Texas*, 1916

Waco is among the most important cities located on the Meridian Highway because it marks the location where the route separates into two branches (see *Figure 104*, to follow). The main road continues south to San Antonio and Laredo, while the other path extends to the southeast toward Houston and Galveston. The latter route became known as the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway.

When the idea of the Meridian Highway was first conceived, Waco was a major trade and commercial hub within the Blackland Prairie, a fertile and rich agricultural belt that extended through Central Texas. The city developed on the site of a village established by members of the indigenous Waco (Hueco/Huaco) tribe by the time Spanish explorers first reached the area. The Texas Rangers established an outpost at the site in the 1830s, and George Erath, a former Texas Ranger, laid out the town site in 1849.²⁵⁸ As settlers moved to the area, Waco became an important trade center. Land in the surrounding area proved to be fertile and particularly well-suited to the cultivation of cotton, which attracted more farmers to the region. A growing population and trade along the historic roads that extended through Waco led to the construction of a suspension bridge across the Brazos River in 1870. The bridge was an engineering marvel at the time of its completion that contrasted with the more conventional design and construction techniques used for other bridges in the state. The city’s stature continued to rise as the expanding railroad building campaign of the final quarter of the nineteenth century extended to Waco and tapped one of the state’s primary cotton-producing areas. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Waco developed into a major inland cotton trading center in Texas and was among the state’s largest and most affluent communities. Thus by the advent of the automobile

era, Waco was one of the state's most important centers for commerce and trade.



Figure 104. Detail of Highway Map published by the National Highways Association, 1915. The dark red line shows the route of the Meridian Highway by 1915. Waco marked the location where the route was divided into two branches. Source: Harvey County Museum and Archives, Newton, Kansas.

As originally conceived and promoted, the Meridian Highway entered Waco from the north via China Springs, then split in the downtown area and followed two separate routes. One branch extended south to Temple and continued on to Laredo, the southern terminus within the United States. The other route continued to Marlin, Bryan, and ultimately down to Galveston. In December 1912, John C. Nicholson of Newton, Kansas, arrived in Waco on a pathfinding tour and addressed the Waco Automobile Club to promote the route and emphasize Waco's role as the only "division point" on the entire route.²⁵⁹ Although no pictures have been found documenting Nicholson's presence in Waco, a comparable party promoting another highway (Colorado-to-Gulf Highway Association) came to Waco with a photographer who captured the scene as the caravan extended through downtown (see *Figure 105* below).



Figure 105. Sociability Tour of the Colorado-to-Gulf Highway in Waco, 1914. This is one of a series of photographs documenting the driving tour from Colorado to Galveston. This image shows the caravan as it entered downtown Waco. This view is looking south onto Austin Avenue. The obvious landmark is the ALICO building, designed by the Fort Worth architectural firm of Lang & Witchell. Source: Virginia J. Church 1914 Sociability Tour Photograph collection, Pikes Peak Library District, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The Colorado-to-Gulf Highway was one of several in- and out-of-state highways that passed through Waco, as noted in *Figure 106* (below). Besides the Meridian Highway and Gulf-to-Colorado Highway, other roads that extended through the city included the King of Trails and Central Texas Highway. The presence of so many highways in Waco shows how important the city was in the early stages of highway development in Texas. With multiple railroads extending into the city and area farmers bringing their locally produced agricultural goods to market, Waco prospered and became a significant commercial, transportation, and trade hub in Central Texas.

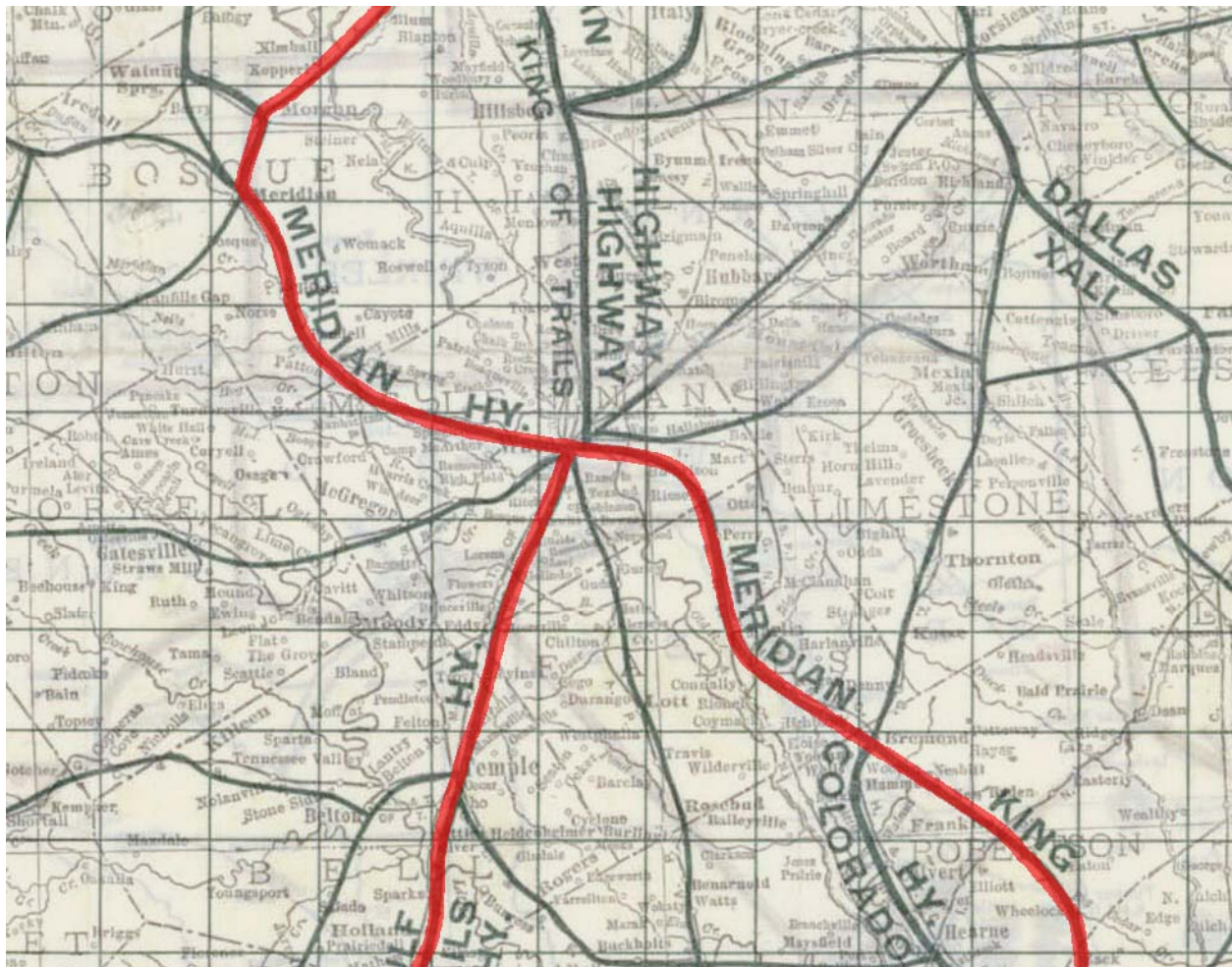


Figure 106. Detail of Highway Map of Texas. This map shows the many early roadways that extended through Waco during the auto trails era. Besides the Meridian Highway, Waco was served by the Colorado-to-Gulf Highway and King of Trails Highway. Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

One of the factors that made Waco so important stemmed from the two bridges that crossed the Brazos River. To augment the 1870 suspension bridge, Waco built a metal truss bridge over the waterway in 1904 a few blocks upriver. Its completion provided a secondary means for vehicular traffic to cross the river. The metal truss bridge linked Elm Street in what is known as East Waco to Washington Street in downtown Waco (see *Figure 107*, to follow). Its completion relieved burdens placed on the older suspension bridge, which was built over 40 years earlier and proved inadequate to handle the growing traffic

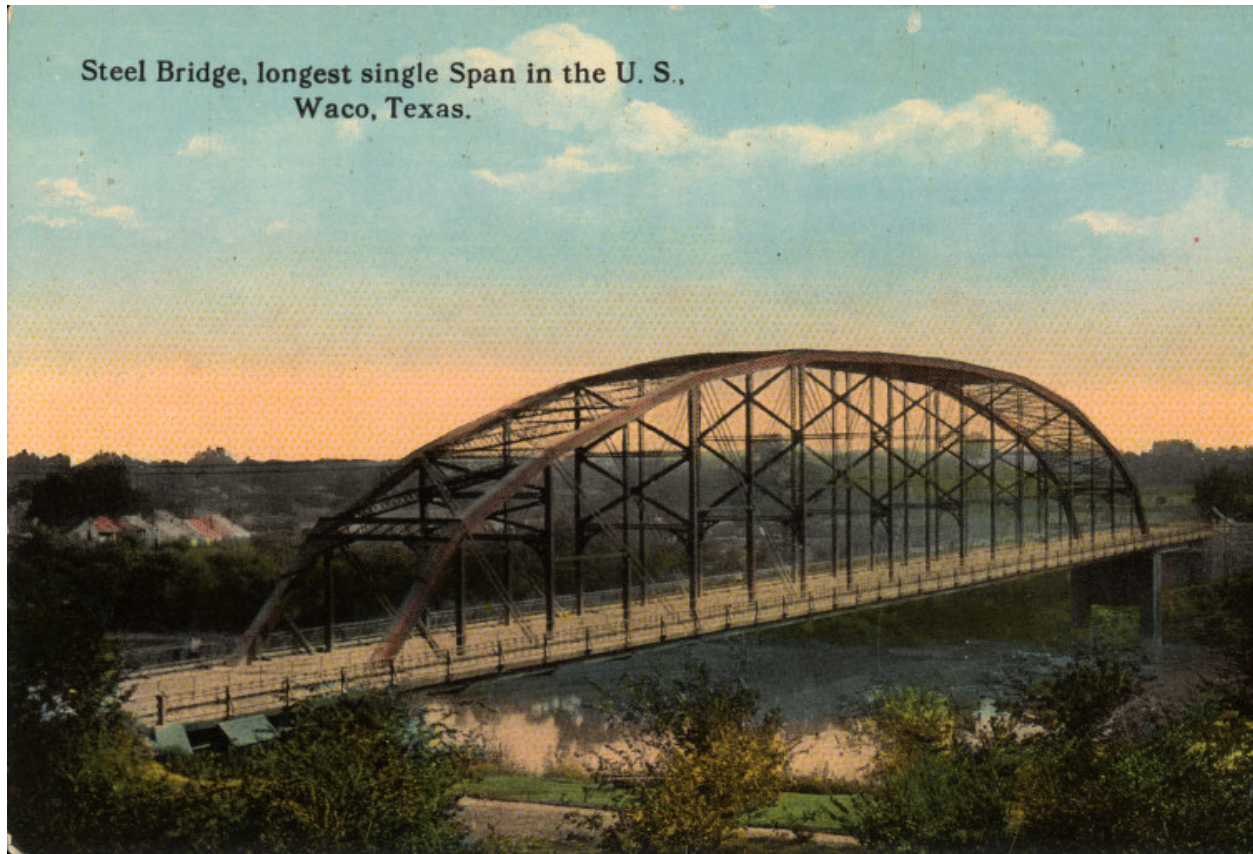


Figure 107. Washington–Elm Street Bridge in Waco, 1908. This postcard, created by Curt Teich & Company of Chicago, Illinois, claims the structure to be the longest single-span metal bridge in the United States. It not only provided a means for motorists on the Meridian Highway to continue on their way through Waco on to Houston and Galveston, it also enabled travelers on the King of Trails Highway and the Colorado-to-Gulf Highway to drive into downtown Waco. The metal truss bridge, which still spans the Brazos River and has recently been rehabilitated, is a particularly important structure within the entire state road network. Source: University of Houston Digital Library, Historic Texas Postcard Collection, Steel Bridge, Waco, Texas (<http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll16/item/687>).

extending to and from Waco. Like the nearby suspension bridge, the Washington–Elm Street Bridge was a significant engineering feat and was reported to be the longest single-span metal bridge in the United States at the time of its construction. It became particularly important to the Meridian Highway because it enabled the Gulf Division to cross back onto the east side of the Brazos River and extend southeast parallel to the waterway and the H&TC Railway.

Some of the earliest street maps of Waco that show the evolving highway network in Waco date to the mid-1910s. The B. F. Goodrich Tire Company published a travel guide that depicts the many highways that passed through the city (see *Figure 108*, to follow). It shows a complicated road system, especially in the downtown area with multiple at-grade crossings of railroad tracks and routes extending to various destinations. The travel guide published in affiliation with the Meridian Road Association in 1916 lacks the specificity of the B. F. Goodrich travel guide; however, as could be assumed by the title, it is confined exclusively to the Meridian Road (see *Figure 109*, to follow). It shows how the main line entered Waco from China Springs, extended past the courthouse, and continued southward to Temple.

In 1917, the Texas Highway Commission designated the entire Meridian Highway, including the two divisions that met/branched off in Waco, as SH 2. The decision meant that the Gulf Division still retained its

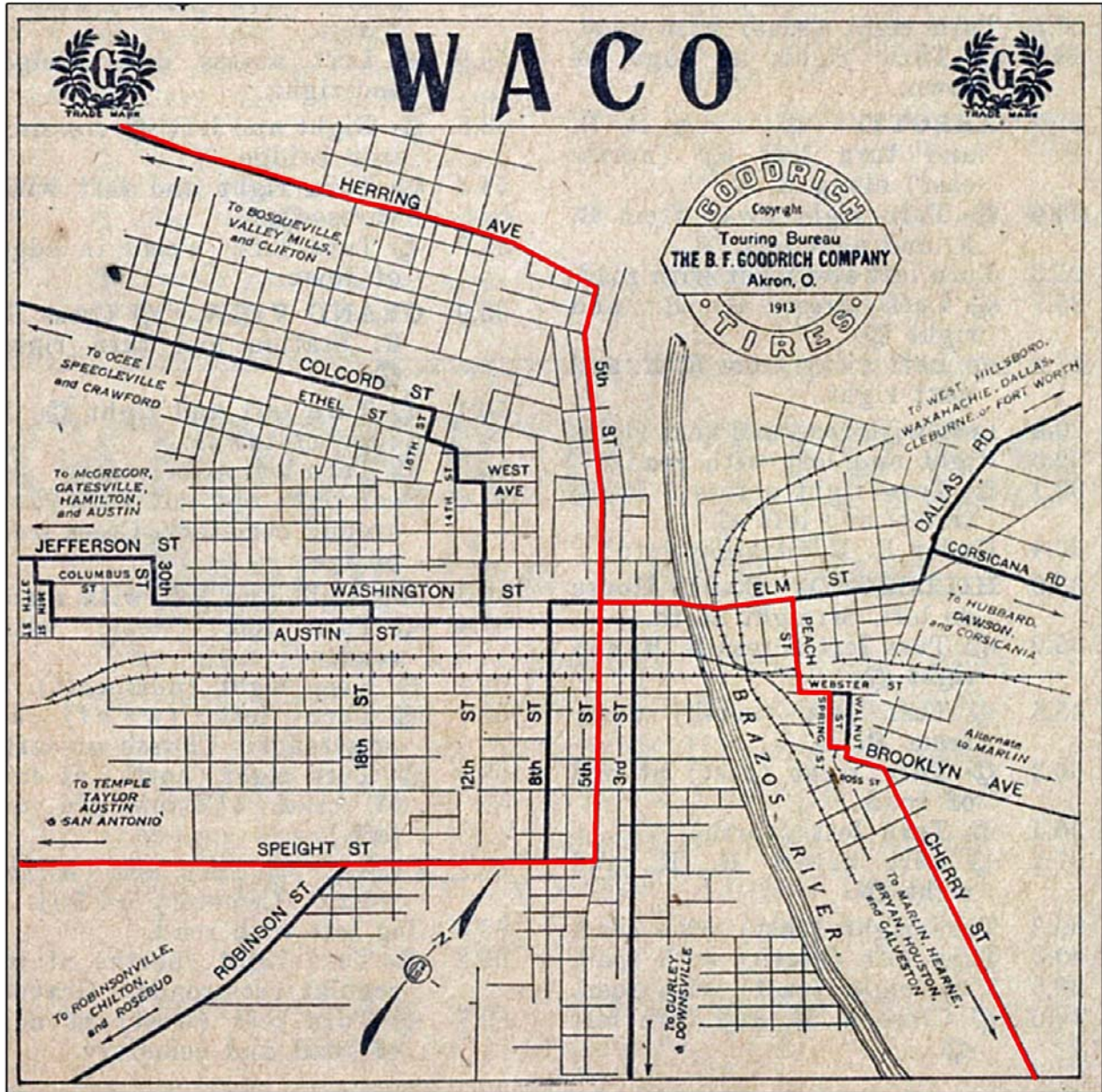


Figure 108. Waco City Map, B. F. Goodrich Tire Company, 1915. This map shows major roads within Waco but does not identify any of the routes by name. The Meridian Highway (highlighted in red) came into Waco via Herring Avenue and continued on to 5th Street where it extended to the McLennan County Courthouse. The Gulf Division route turned onto Elm Street and turned onto Peach Street where it stair-stepped its way to Cherry Street. The branch that extended to San Antonio and Laredo continued south along Fifth Street (with alternate routes along Third and Eighth streets) and turned south along Speight Street. Source: Martha Doty Freeman personal collection.

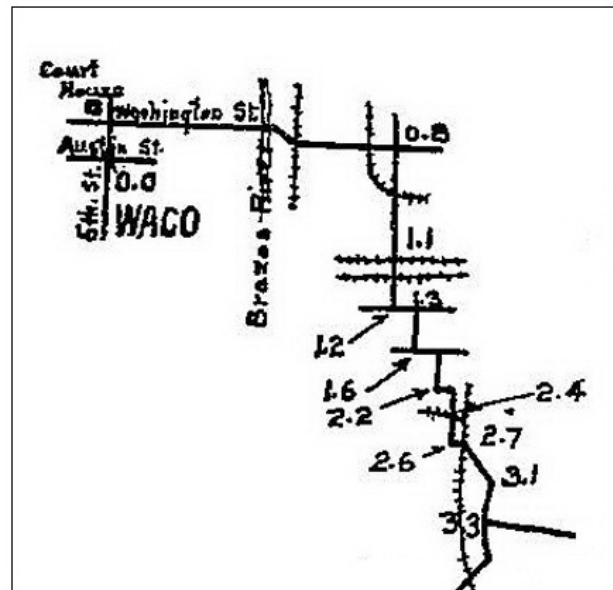
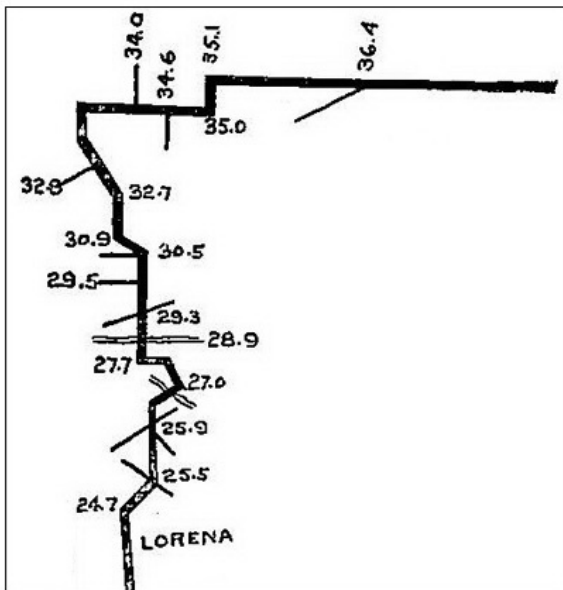
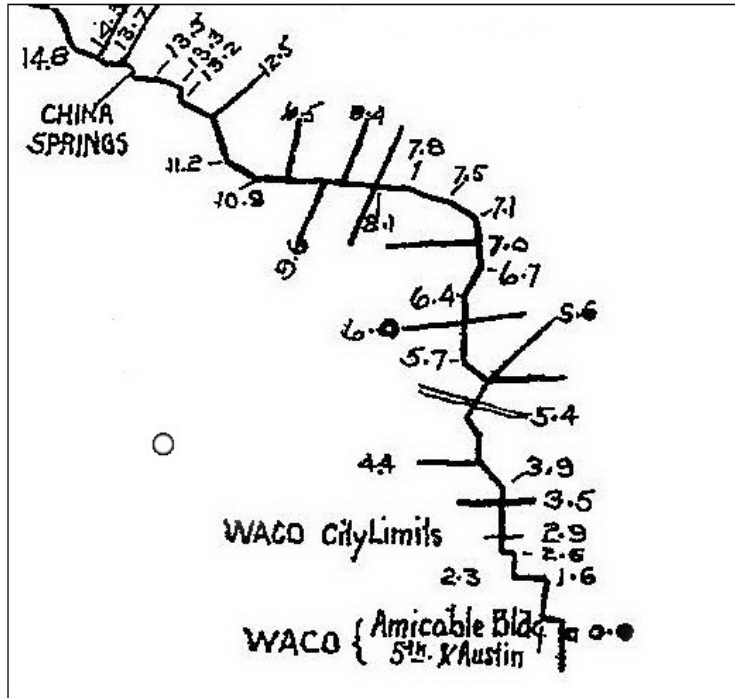


Figure 109. Composite of maps from *The Meridian Road in Texas* guidebook, 1916. These maps provide a visual representation of the route through Waco but do not identify any of the street names or include a verbal description of the route. Source: David Colp Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

association with the main trunk. However, when Texas adopted the federal highway numbering system in 1926, the main line was designated as US 81, while the Gulf Division (Waco–Galveston) branch became SH 6. The new designation was not well-received by residents in most cities along the Gulf Division, and over time, the route’s

association with the Meridian Highway has largely been lost and forgotten.

Although the Meridian Highway originally entered Waco from the west through Bosque County, the Texas Highway Department shifted the route by 1926 so that SH 2 excluded the Cleburne–Glen Rose–Clifton–Meridian leg (re-designated as SH 67 and SH 89) and instead followed the MKT Railroad from Burleson to Hillsboro, West, and Waco (see *Figure 110*, below). The Hillsboro–Waco segment was more closely associated with the King of Trails Highway, which the Texas Highway Department had previously designated as SH 6. This new route entered the city through East Waco and passed directly by Paul Quinn College, an African-American college established in 1872.²⁶⁰ The new route of US 81/SH 2 extended along Elm Street toward the Washington–Elm Street Bridge. Along this path were a number of gas stations, tourist courts, and other travel-based businesses (see *Figures 111* and *112*, to follow).

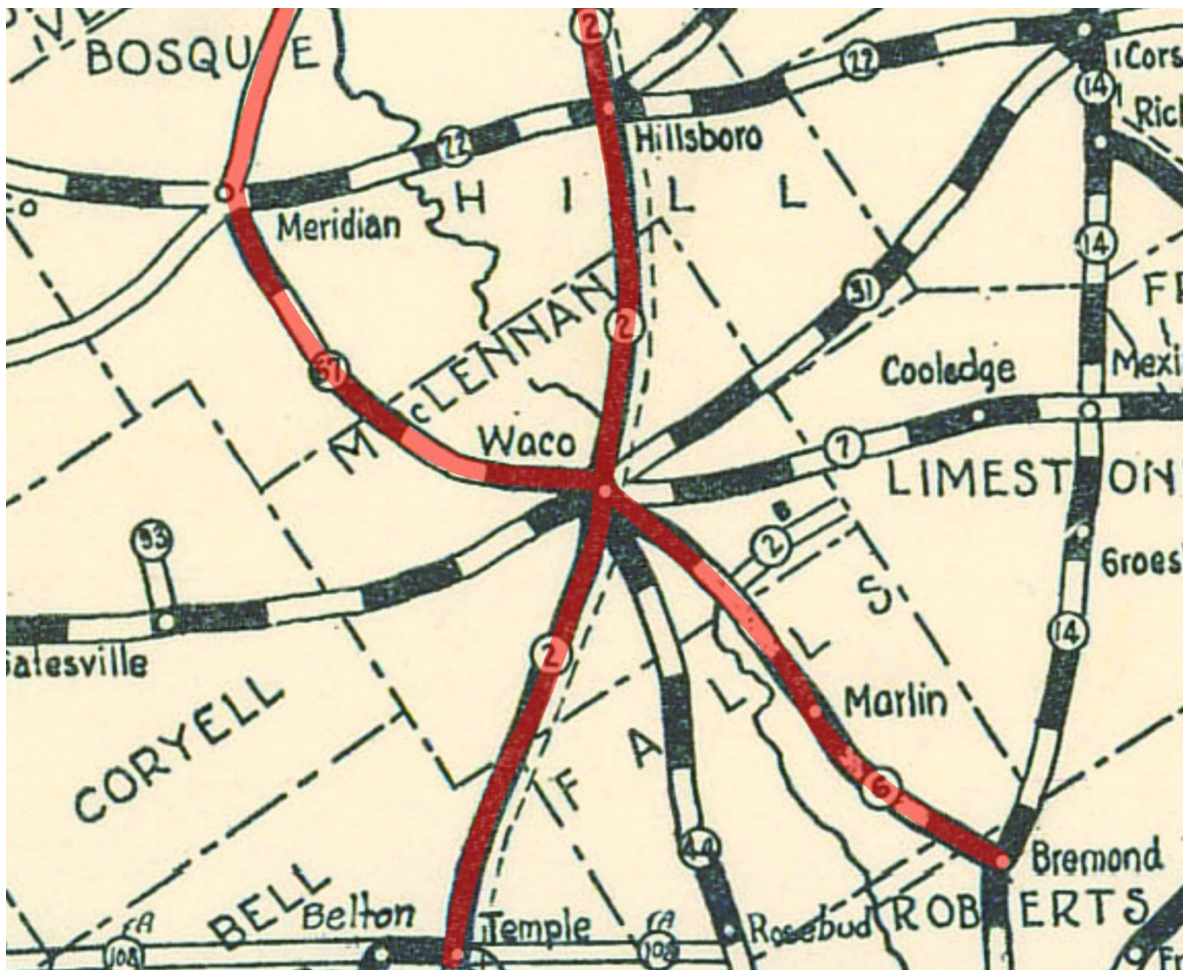


Figure 110. Detail of Official Highway Map of Texas, 1926. This map, published by the State Highway Commission, depicts the evolving route of the Meridian Highway (shown in red). As originally conceived, the highway entered Waco from the northwest along what is shown to be SH 67. The Texas Highway Department shifted the alignment that provided a more direct route to Waco via Itasca, Hillsboro, and West. The relocation directed traffic to Elm Street and crossed into downtown Waco at the Washington–Elm Street Bridge. Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

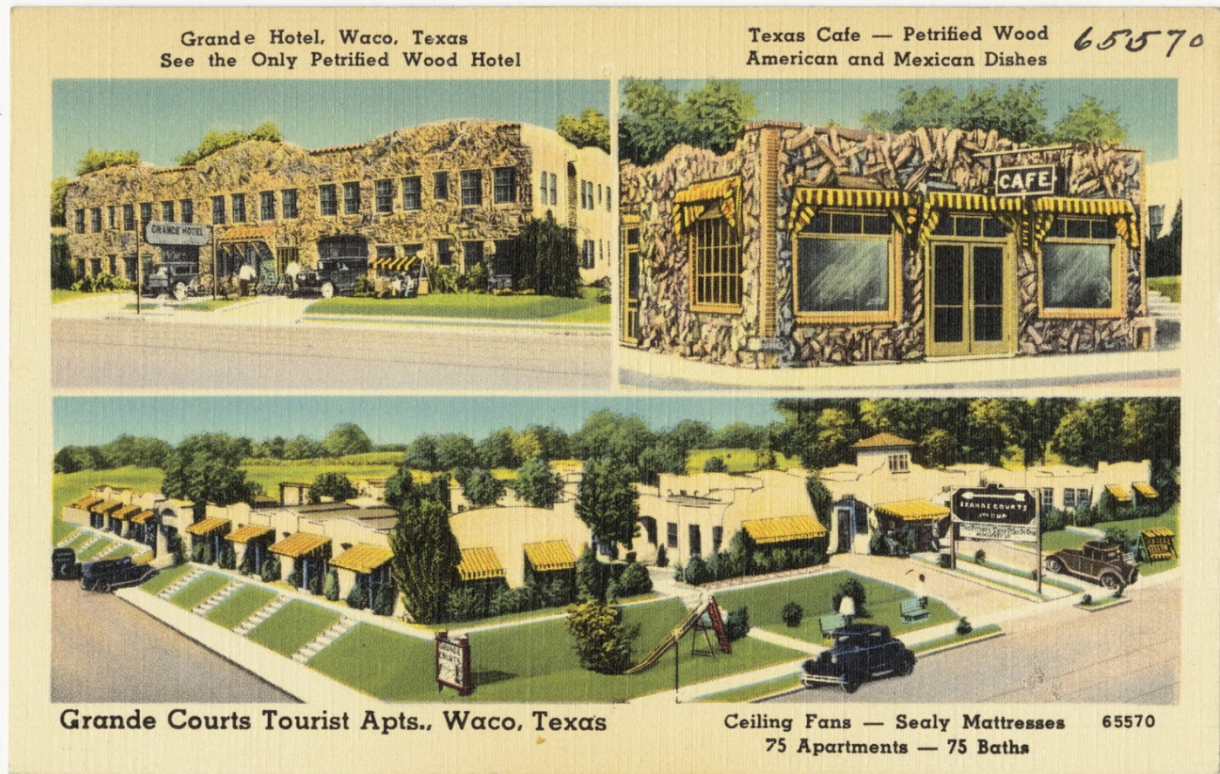


Figure 111. Postcard advertising the Grande Hotel located along the Meridian Highway in Waco with the caption, “Grande Hotel, Waco, Texas, See the Only Petrified Wood Hotel. Texas Café – Petrified Wood American and Mexican Dishes. Grande Courts Tourist Apts., Waco, Texas,” ca. 1930–1945. This postcard depicts the kinds of businesses that evolved on Elm Street in East Waco and greeted inbound travelers entering Waco from the north. Postcard Source: The Tichnor Brothers Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.



Figure 112. A ca. 1930 Sinclair gas station on the 1926 route located at 800 Elm Avenue in Waco. This is one of several historic gas stations that catered to travelers on the Meridian that still lines Elm Avenue. This is a standardized form and style for Sinclair gas stations from the 1930s. Such standardization in design of gas stations by Sinclair and other gas companies was common practice and made brand recognition easy for automobile travelers. Photo by HHM.

By the time the 1924 *Automobile Red Book* was published, the route of the Meridian Highway leading into Waco was altered. Previously, the road entered from the northwest as part of a loop, passing through Glen Rose. By the time that the Red Book was published, however, the loop was deemphasized and the new route shared a segment with the King of Trails, coming into town via Hillsboro and West. The 1924 *Red Book* was also the first guide to publicize amenities for motorists traveling along the Meridian Highway in Waco. The guide has pictures and listings of several of these amenities, including the Raleigh Hotel, which was listed as being the “Automobile Tourists’ Headquarters” (see *Figure 113*, below); the Elite Café, listed as “Waco’s Best Café” (see *Figure 114*, to follow); and the Allen-Porten Auto Supply Company, listed as the “largest drive-in filling station in the southwest”.



Figure 113. The former Raleigh Hotel (originally the Riggins Hotel) in Waco. Built in 1913, the Raleigh was designed by architect Roy E. Lane, who also designed the old Waco Public Library and the Hippodrome Theater, and collaborated on the ALICO building design. The hotel was part of a 1912 mayoral campaign to build “the most modern hotel in Texas,” that would cater to Waco’s growing business and touring travelers.²⁶¹



Figure 114. (Above) Opened in 1919 at 608 Austin Avenue downtown, the Elite Café became a Waco institution over time. The success of the downtown restaurant and the growing city led to the opening of a second location (pictured) on Waco’s traffic circle—on the new 1930s route—in 1941. In operation for over 50 years, the Elite Café was a popular stop for motorists along the Meridian Highway.

The 1926 edition of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Waco also shows the growing importance of auto-related traffic along the Meridian Highway (see Figure 115 below). Sheet 73 shows a “filling station” on the same parcel as the Dixie Ice Company, thus leading one to believe that it post-dates the ice plant and was part of the trend for gas stations to be built on available corners.²⁶² What is noticeably absent on this sheet, however, is the presence of tourist courts, which would later be constructed along the route, suggesting that the weary motorist would have to travel into downtown before finding a night’s lodging in any of the hotels operating in the downtown.

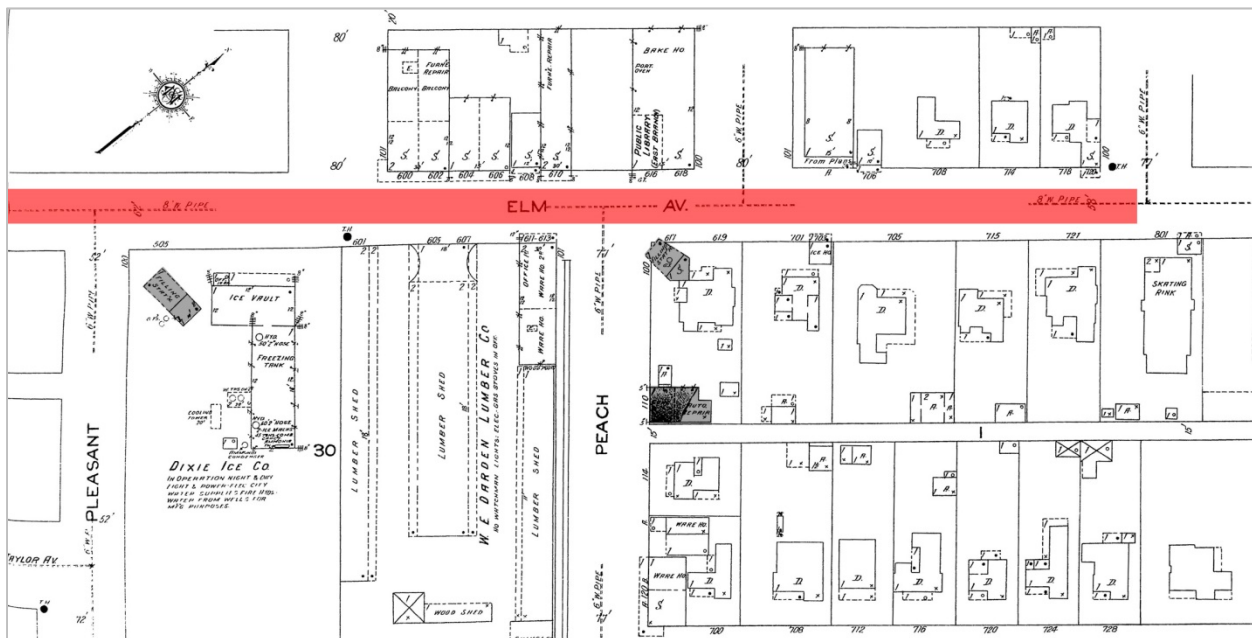


Figure 115. Detail of 1926 edition of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Waco, Texas. This map shows how Elm Street began to cater to the growing number of motorists who used the street to travel into and out of Waco using the Meridian Highway (shown in red). Located near Paul Quinn College, this stretch later included a number of gas stations and garages (shaded in gray) and motor courts. The Grande Tourist Courts (see again Figure 111) and Alamo Plaza Courts (see forthcoming Figure 117) were just a few blocks to the east. Source: Sanborn Map Company, 1926.

During the interwar period, Waco experienced significant growth and development, as evidenced by the buildings noted in a locally published booklet to promote the city and business and industrial expansion (see *Figure 116*, to follow). It stood at an important crossroads that was used to ship raw goods (mostly cotton) by rail to other markets in the nation and other countries. However, other companies established businesses that relied on trucks as means of distributing goods to local markets. A particularly noteworthy example was the plant constructed by the Borden Milk Company in 1929. In an article appearing in *The Texas Monthly*, the company's decision to build a facility in Waco stemmed from the success of the highway campaign there. The plant's location at the hub of a highway crossroads facilitated the distribution of milk and related products via trucks.²⁶³

One of the most significant aspects of development along the Meridian Highway happened in Waco with the establishment of the Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts. Founded in 1929 in the 900 block of Elm Street, the motor court was born out of the owner's vision to "offer high quality lodging available at moderate rates," and became one of the first franchising chains in the United States.²⁶⁴ Use of the iconic Mission Revival-styled parapet (so closely associated with the Alamo) on the primary building's façade also became an important identifying feature of the courts, and motorists traveling to different towns knew that high-quality service and furnishings would be available at each location (see *Figure 117*, to follow).

By the early 1930s, vehicular congestion in downtown Waco had become acute, and the Texas Highway Department began making plans to remedy the situation. As reported in *The Texas Monthly*, the Highway Department, in cooperation with county and city authorities, proposed a new route "through the suburbs in such a way that a boulevard will be created 150 feet wide, partly within and partly outside the city limits and completely encircling the city. . . travelers merely passing through will not have to make through the already overcrowded business section."²⁶⁵ The results led to the construction of the traffic circle or roundabout, which became a distinctive feature of the highway system in Waco. The confluence of multiple highways became a magnet for businesses catering to travelers. The Elite Café, for example, relocated to the traffic circle, and other restaurants and tourist courts, likewise, took advantage of the out-of-town traffic (see *Figure 118*, to follow). The new roundabout was completed in 1933.²⁶⁶

During the advent of the interregional highway-building campaign of the postwar era, Waco was among the cities in Texas that aggressively pursued this program. The Texas Highway Department developed plans for a possible route through Waco; however, local leaders did not support the proposed route. While the Highway Department designed the highway to cross the Brazos River between downtown and the loop,



Figure 116. "Waco: Magnet of Commerce and the Air Mail – The Center of Texas Population, 1929." This pictorial booklet provides an overview of Waco just before the Great Depression struck the city and the rest of the nation. The images portray the city as a dynamic and growing urban center with a diverse and vibrant economy. It also highlighted the highways and good roads that served the community. Source: Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

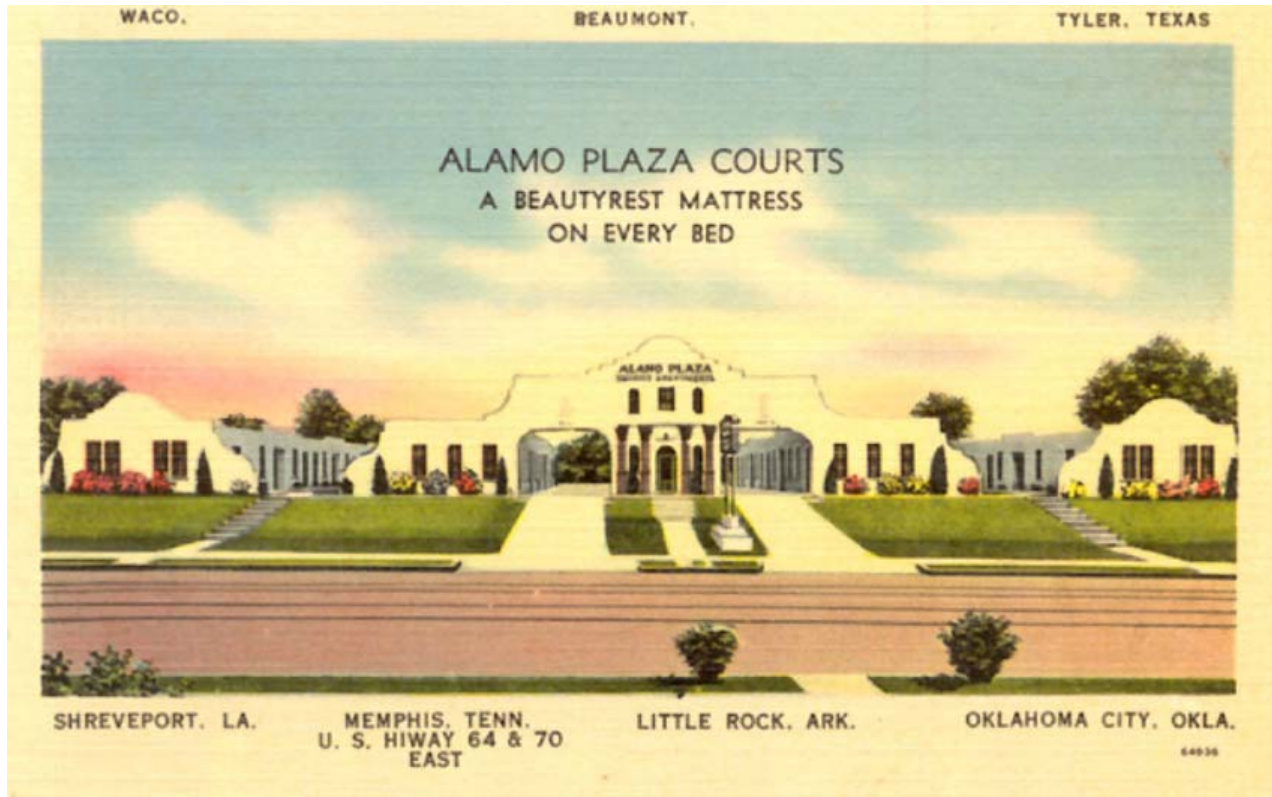


Figure 117. A ca. 1939 image of Alamo Plaza Courts in Waco. Despite the success of the chain, the construction of a loop along La Salle Street in the 1930s bypassing downtown Waco led to a steep decline in the number of travelers passing the motor court. As more and more travelers used similar loops in other communities, this iconic motor court and similar units elsewhere struggled to survive. Most have closed, were abandoned, or demolished, as was the case for the Alamo Plaza Courts in Waco. Source: Don O'Brien, Flickr photo, CC By 2.0 <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/motel/postcards/1001.jpg>.

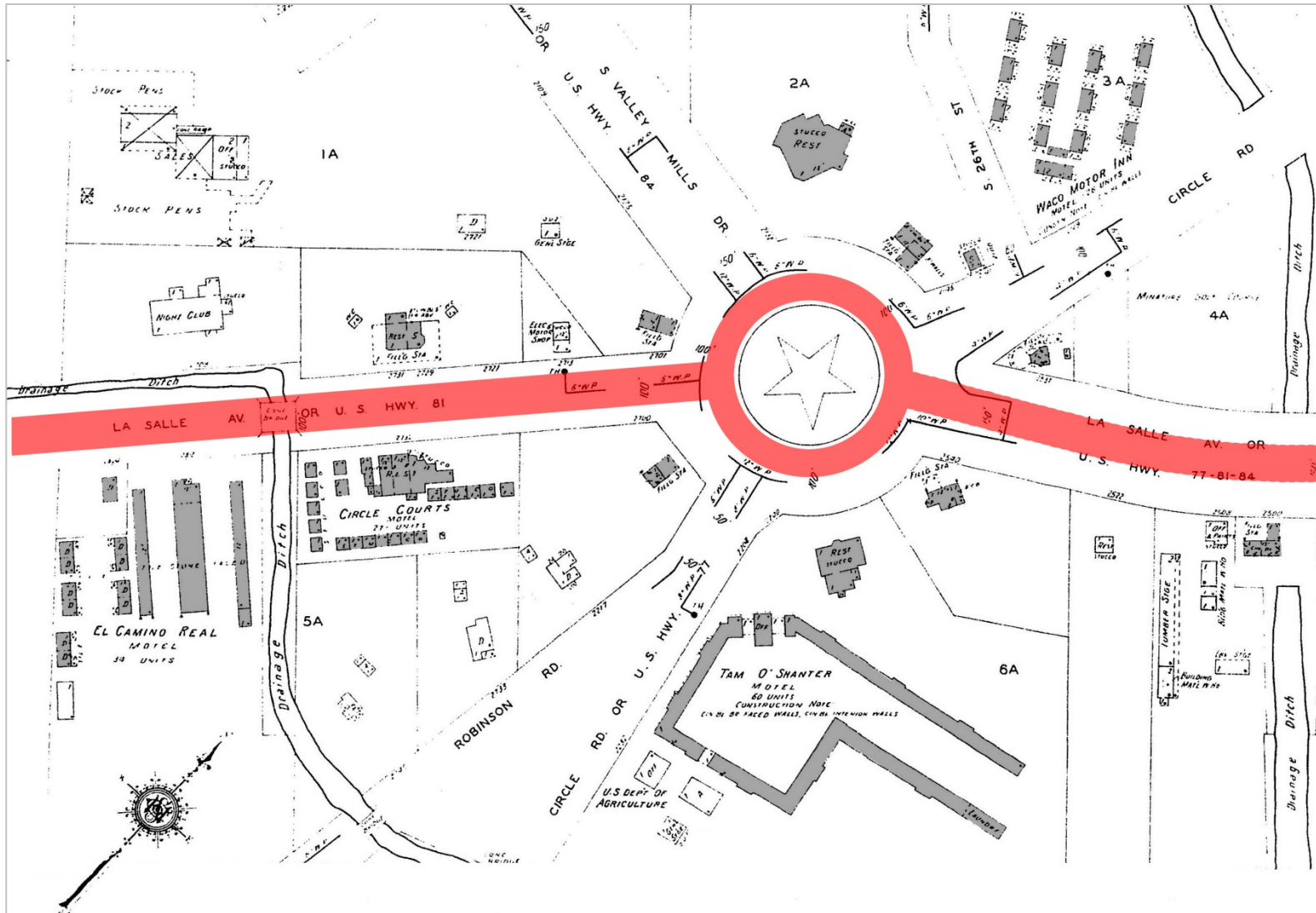


Figure 118. Detail of Sanborn map of Waco, 1926, updated 1951. This image shows how Meridian Highway traffic circled in Waco (shown in red) and the many auto- and tourist-related businesses (shaded in gray) that operated nearby. Note the Texas Star at the center of the circle, which was part of the landscaping scheme of this roadway feature. Source: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

the City wanted it to go upriver from the downtown area. This difference in opinion led to delays in the implementation of major highway improvements through Waco. Even after a proposed route was settled upon, problems were encountered with the proposal of the purchase of new right-of-way. In 1956, the *Waco News-Tribune* ran an article stating that the “major interregional highway bottleneck of Texas is located here in Waco where the question of how to buy extra right-of-way along LaSalle Street has stumped the best local financial experts.”²⁶⁷ The article continues by stating that a four-lane expressway was currently under construction to the north and south of Waco and that if LaSalle Street were left in its unimproved two-lane condition, the expressway would essentially dump “more traffic into it than could be moved in a day’s time.”

Although plans to construct an interstate were in place in Waco as early as 1959, construction was not completed until 1972. IH 35 was constructed on a new location and removed many buildings along its path.²⁶⁸

The opening of the interstate highway through Waco led to the demise of many of the auto-related businesses that fronted onto the historic alignments of the Meridian Highway (see again *Figure 118*). The downtown had already been in decline for years, as a destructive tornado in 1953 and urban renewal efforts led to the demolition of many buildings in the central business district. Several hotels have survived, such as the Roosevelt Hotel at 4th and Austin streets, but they have been adapted to new uses. The Roosevelt Hotel has been rehabilitated into offices and remains a prominent landmark in the downtown. Many of the garages and auto dealerships along the main thoroughfares have likewise survived, but their glory days are long past. Nonetheless, they remain as visible reminders of the intense automobile traffic that once extended through downtown Waco. Gas stations were particularly affected by the Interstate Highway System. While many have been demolished or converted to new uses, several of the city’s oldest gas stations remain along Elm Street, near the former site of Paul Quinn College. And even though Waco was the site of the one of the earliest chain of tourist courts in the nation (Alamo Plaza Courts), remarkably few motor courts remain. Moreover, few vestiges of the auto-related businesses along the Gulf Division outbound from Waco have survived. Perhaps the most visible physical landmark associated with the Meridian Highway is the roundabout at the south end of La Salle Street.

See *Figure 119* on the next page for a map showing the Meridian Highway and its successors through Waco over time.

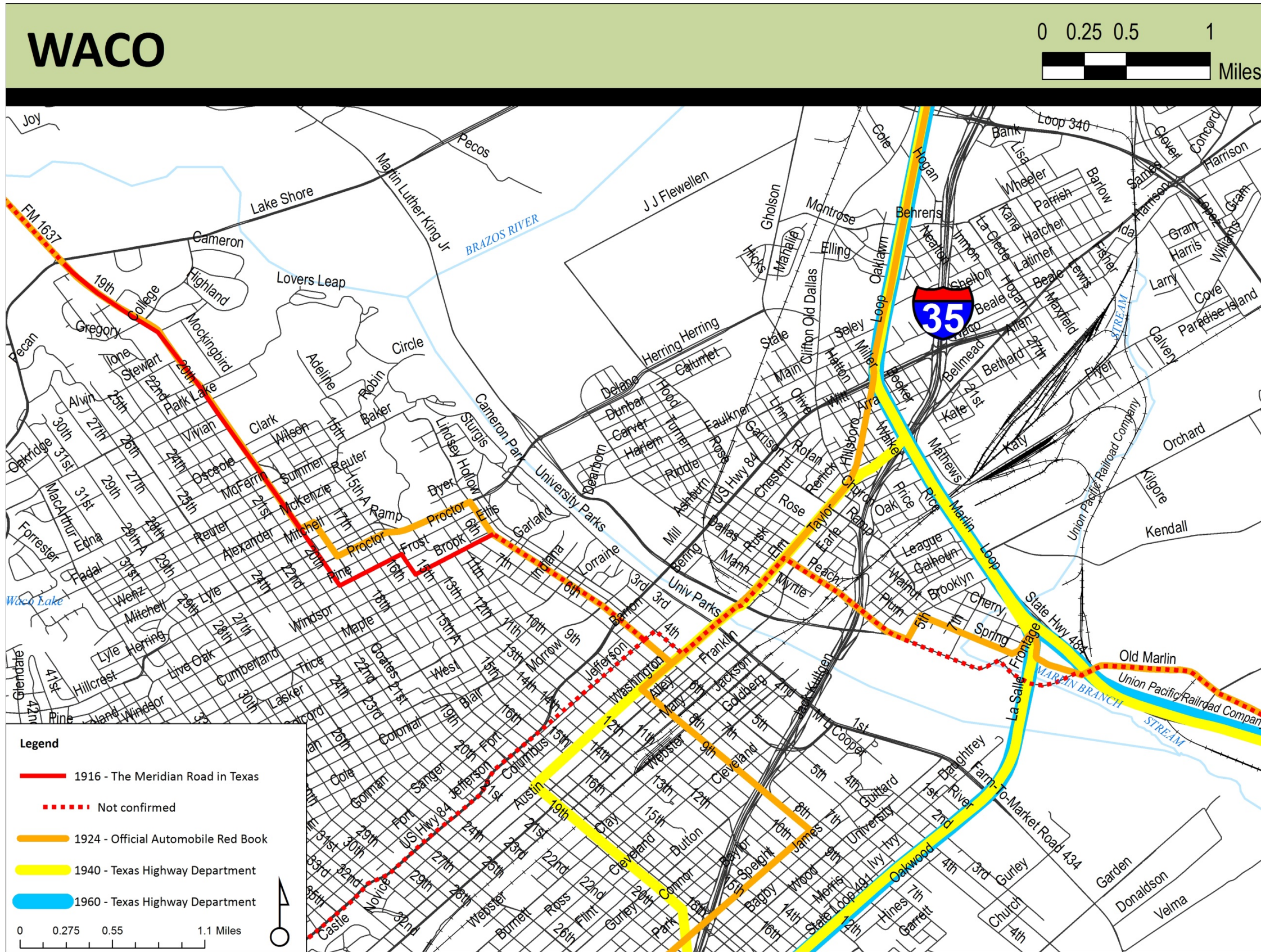


Figure 119. Map showing the route of the Meridian Highway and its successors through Waco over time.

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²⁵⁸ Roger N. Conger, "WACO, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdw01>, (accessed May 25, 2015). Uploaded June 15, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

²⁵⁹ "Meridian Road Party in Waco," *Waco Morning News*, December 12, 1912.

²⁶⁰ Douglas Hales, "PAUL QUINN COLLEGE," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kbp08> (accessed May 26, 2015). Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Modified on June 13, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

²⁶¹ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 92.

²⁶² Waco 1926-001-vol1-73.

²⁶³ P. J. R. MacIntosh, "Concrete Roads to Progress" *The Texas Monthly*, Volume V, No. 5, June 1930.

²⁶⁴ "Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts," <http://www.highwayhost.org/AlamoPlaza/alamoplaza1.htm> (accessed May 22, 2015).

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Randy Mallory, "Waco's Historic Roundabout," *Texas Highways: The Travel Magazine of Texas*, <http://www.texashighways.com/travel/item/5791-waco-s-historic-roundabout> (accessed May 26, 2015).

²⁶⁷ "New State Policy on Road Right-of-Way Cost Timely," *Waco News Tribune*, June 19, 1956: 7.

²⁶⁸ "City, School Officials to Iron out UHS Sale," *Waco News Tribune*, October 20, 1960: 5.

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