

# Banking on the Bankhead

## Classic Cross-Texas Roadway is Vehicle for Proposed Historic Highways Program

In the 1940s and '50s, classic roadways such as Route 66 and the Bankhead Highway were major arteries through Texas, forever altering the development and cultural heritage of the Lone Star State. Decades later, Texas' landscape changed with the introduction of interstates that bypassed Main Street communities. However, vestiges of the forgotten highways are still visible today, and efforts are currently underway to identify, designate, and promote these historically significant roads.

Rep. Carol Kent of Dallas authored two house bills during the 81st Texas Legislature that established a program for the identification, designation, interpretation, and marketing of Texas' historic roads and highways (the Bankhead Highway, in particular). A partnership between the Texas Historical Commission (THC) and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is expected to result in research, preservation, and economic development through heritage tourism dollars, providing a vehicle for new job creation in the state.

The Texas Historic Roads and Highways Program, dependent on matching funds from the 82nd Texas Legislature currently in session, would enable the THC to prepare a historic context for Texas highways, a survey of historic resources along the Bankhead Highway corridor, and a Bankhead Highway travel guide.

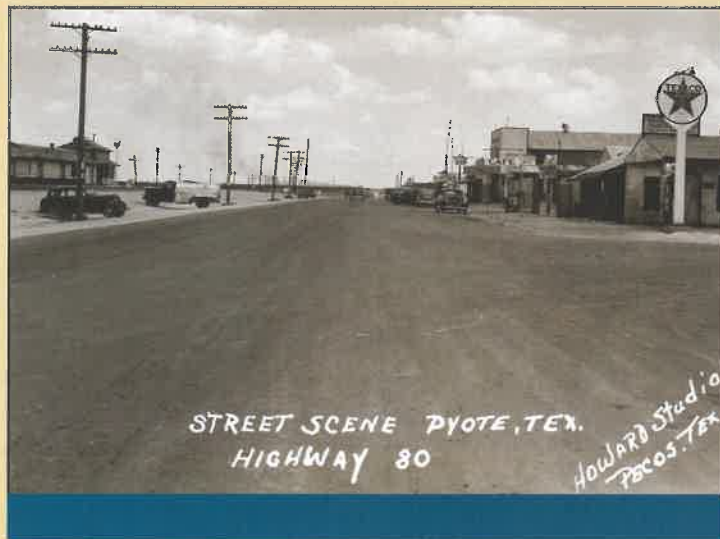
"This project would be a great benefit to Texas' rural and economically disadvantaged areas and increase marketing opportunities for expanding tourism statewide," says Terry Colley, the THC's deputy executive director.

"We expect a positive impact on the urban and rural communities in the counties (almost 50) along the Bankhead Highway route."

The Bankhead Highway—a trans-continental roadway running from Washington, D.C. to San Diego—had three routes in Texas, two of which connected Texarkana to El Paso and are roughly represented by current Interstates 20 and 30.

The original routes played important roles in the development of Texas by providing corridors for transportation, commerce, and tourism.

The Bankhead's legacy in Texas is immense, providing a scenic system for cross-country travelers to experience the real places and real stories of the Lone Star State. According to a report compiled by historical researcher Jerry Flook of Garland, the first auto excursion in Texas is widely believed to have taken place in October 1899 on a rutted dirt road that eventually became part of the Bankhead Highway between Terrell and Dallas. In 1916, the Bankhead Highway Association was formed (named for Alabama Sen. John Hollis Bankhead, the "father of good roads") and in 1920, Texas State Highway 1 from Texarkana to El Paso officially became part of the project. Flook notes the impact on Garland was significant, with 75 percent of drivers stopping on



*The Bankhead Highway traversed Texas' rural communities, including Pyote in Far West Texas (photo courtesy Dan Smith).*

the town square for service, drinks, and food. With the 1956 passage of the Interstate Highway Act, however, drivers soon opted for wider, safer, and faster new interstates, which typically bypassed small-town main streets. The THC and its partners hope the Historic Highways Program will rejuvenate interest in these historic roadways.

"Communities along the route will benefit from a new appreciation of regional history, facilitated economic development planning, and resources to attract heritage travelers," Colley says. "Identifying historic sites and structures along the corridor will also help preserve them for future generations and create an important link between the transportation corridors of prior generations and today's modern highway systems." ★

*This article was written by Andy Rhodes, managing editor of The Medallion.*