TEXAS TRAVEL

TRAMMEL’S TRACE

THE FARM-TO-MARKET ROAD SYSTEM

HISTORIC GAS STATION DESIGNS
Texas travelers enjoy scenic vistas along the state’s expansive farm-to-market road system. Wildflowers, pictured here off of FM 1347 in Wilson County, are a common sight in the spring. All photos are courtesy of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT).
From historic American Indian trails to early exploration routes, Texas roads have always linked people and goods. In 1917, the State Legislature created the Texas Highway Department (THD), which is now the Texas Department of Transportation, to ease travel and increase safety for a growing population. Before then, roads and bridges were the responsibility of county governments, but much of that infrastructure was primitive and difficult for people traveling by wagons and horses.
County roads were unpaved and impassable after a soaking rain. This muddy path became FM 543 in Collin County before being paved in 1949.
MAKING THE CASE

When the THD was authorized, new roads intended to connect cities also were planned to link counties and extend into other states. The huge expanse of Texas, though, necessitated a vast transportation network to replace the piecemeal, scattered, and mostly unpaved roads that existed at the time.

In addition to the sheer size of Texas, there were also economic issues to consider. The state was mainly rural and agriculturally diverse. A vast assortment of crops was grown around Texas, and farmers needed to get those goods to market in a timely manner.

Cotton and corn were planted in East Texas, while rice was a mainstay in the southeast portion of the state. Near Fort Worth and Dallas, wheat was the main crop. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley, oranges and grapefruits were cultivated, in addition to cabbage, lettuce, and spinach. In West Texas, ranchers raised and sold cattle and hogs. An interconnected and efficient transportation system was essential to bringing these diverse products to consumers, and the establishment of the THD offered much hope.

A SLOW START

In spite of this great need, civic leaders and the state agency took an unhurried approach and developed Texas’ road system throughout the first few decades of the 20th century. This sluggish pace was partially due to a lack of financing. Some monetary help with bridge and road construction eventually came from federal New Deal programs designed to put people to work during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

FROM WAR TO WORK

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the U. S. Armed Forces noted that Texas had 6,375 miles of highway considered to be of “prime military importance” that required improvement. A national survey also found the state needed to upgrade or replace at least 600 bridges to make room for troop maneuvers, heavier equipment, and shipment of materials. However, due to a lack of steel and labor (both were being consumed by the war effort), THD was not able to complete many improvements at the time.

Using the difficult situation to his advantage, the agency’s shrewd State Highway Engineer Dewitt Greer stockpiled all the fees collected during the conflict from car registrations, driver licenses, and the gas tax for future infrastructure upgrades. He also directed THD staff to continue to plan new roads and bridges so that once the war ended, Texas would be ready to hit the ground running.

When peacetime resumed in 1945, the state’s economic and business development was in need of a jump start. Oil companies struggled to get their product from the rural fields into market towns. Farmers and ranchers still needed enhanced transportation to bring food, cotton, and livestock to consumers. To resolve these issues, THD used its cash reserve accumulated during war time to plan and implement the nation’s first network of farm-to-market (FM) roads. The inaugural rural route opened in East Texas in 1941 and connected U.S. Highway 96 to the Temple Lumber Company sawmill in Rusk County. Four years after this success, the Texas Legislature authorized a pilot program to in-
crease the number of FM roads. By the end of the decade, that initiative had added more than 7,000 miles of freshly paved, two-lane highways.

**A Texas-Sized Solution**

The state’s farm-to-market system (known as ranch-to-market roads in the western half of the state) is a one-of-a-kind national network. Unlike the rudimentary and unreliable motorways that counties initially provided, the new rural roads were paved and, in time, evolved into public school bus and mail carrier routes. These roadways also connected to existing state or federal highways. In 1949, Texas fully committed to the innovative concept by permanently funding the farm-to-market infrastructure, which ultimately established more than 35,000 miles of routes across the state.

**REAPING THE REWARDS**

For many locales, this new network determined whether a community became a ghost town or a boom town. For instance, Lometa, in Lampasas County, began to thrive when FM Road 581 opened in 1945. The Central Texas community’s agricultural auction barn became operational one year later, and Lometa blossomed because of this ease of access to larger cities and employers in Fort Hood, Killeen, and Temple.

In North Texas, Olney, a commercial center for surrounding oil fields, also grew because of the new roads. Further, the expanded transportation system better served several gins and mills situated along a rail line, benefitting area cotton farmers. The small town even attracted early tourists when a roadside park was built south of downtown.

**HITTING THE ROAD**

After the war, more and more people would take to their vehicles to explore the state and its vistas, with FM roads providing an important option for these explorers.

By 1950, automobile tourism had become the fifth largest industry in Texas. To encourage breaks from driving, THD constructed roadside parks, complete with picnic tables and native landscaping, on some of the rural routes. These improvements helped bring tourists and travel dollars to the smaller communities along the way (see page 22 for examples of these structures).

Today, the farm-to-market system continues to serve Lone Star citizens and visitors. While some components of the network, such as Parmer Lane (FM 734) in Austin and Westheimer Road (FM 1093) in Houston, are completely urbanized, more than 40,000 miles of these roadways connect rural areas of the state—establishing the enduring legacy of Dewitt Greer and the Texas Highway Department.

Rebekah Dobrasko is a historic preservation specialist for the Texas Department of Transportation in Austin.

**BEYOND THE ROAD**

Just like the story of FM roads, the state’s highways have tales to tell. TxDOT historians and archeologists uncover new information every day. To learn more about Texas road history, visit www.txdot.gov and use keywords archeology or history.

At left: Installation of the farm-to-market route system progressed quickly. This map shows that by 1956, THD had completed a significant amount of initial FM road construction.
Farm-to-market roads made everyday tasks easier for the state’s rural residents, such as sending their children to school and receiving postal service. Here, the U.S. Post Office delivers mail for a Bastrop County resident in 1959.

**FM Texas Highway Facts**

- FM 168, in the Panhandle, is the longest farm-to-market road at 139.4 miles. RM 187, which connects centrally located Ingram to Batesville in South Central Texas, is the longest ranch-to-market route, extending 81.9 miles.
- FM 122, in Ralls (near Lubbock), at 0.13 miles is the shortest farm-to-market road. In that same category, RM 3474, near the Panhandle town of Borger, measures 0.69 miles.
- Currently, there are 40,858.25 miles of FM and RM roads in the state.

Discover more at TxDOT Beyond the Road: https://arcg.is/Sf1Xn
Beginning in the 1930s, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) created stops along roadsides that enabled motorists to relax, refresh, and enjoy the state’s natural beauty and landscapes. Here are a few interesting rest spots. All images courtesy of Texas Department of Transportation Photo Library.

**A Travelers’ Oasis**

One sunny summer day, Gibb Gilchrist, TxDOT’s state highway engineer during the 1920s and 1930s, packed a picnic and took his family for a Sunday drive. Hungry and hot, they looked for a spot to pull over, cool off, and enjoy the scenery. The story goes that Gilchrest, unable to find a suitable location, decided then that TxDOT should build parks along the highways where travelers could take a driving break. Thus, the roadside park was born. (Picnic at a Roadside Park.)

**Happy Birthday, Texas!**

To celebrate the state’s 100th birthday in 1936, Texas made big plans. Since roads were the primary way for tourists to visit historic sites and interesting locales, centennial travel markers were placed along the way. Those signposts, designed by TxDOT as gray and pink monuments, recounted brief stories about the people, places, and events that shaped the Lone Star State. (Dedication of centennial marker at a roadside park near Paris, circa 1936.)

**A Rustic Reprieve**

Construction of early roadside parks was labor intensive, and mostly done by hand. Travelers today can recognize Depression-era facilities because of their rustic style and stone furnishings. (National Youth Administration working on a table for a roadside park five miles east of Gainesville on Highway 5.)
REGIONAL FLAIR
Inspired by local and regional landscapes and traditions, TxDOT built playful, new types of roadside parks during the 1960s. These designs created excitement and interest for motorists young and old. (Teepee roadside park along the Rio Grande on FM 170, the River Road in Presidio County. Original in color.)

ATOMIC STYLE
After World War II, the vastness of the interstate highway system required hundreds of new roadside parks and rest areas that would improve safety—about one every 37 miles. Engineers applied the aerodynamic style popular in the 1950s and 1960s to these public structures. The booming postwar economy supplied plentiful amounts of steel to efficiently manufacture prefabricated arbors and picnic tables, which glimmered like the chrome on a new car. (Safety rest area along an interstate highway at unknown location, circa 1960.)

SHOWCASING TEXAS
Driving on Lone Star motorways can be more than just a journey to a destination. It is also about the experience—one that puts a focus on the state’s natural beauty. Many of the roadside parks in use today were built more than 50 years ago, allowing travelers to relax and stretch their legs, just as countless other motorists before had done. (Park at the foot of the Guadalupe Mountains on U.S. Highway 62/180. Original in color.)—Laura Cruzada, of Austin, is the public involvement specialist for TxDOT.
Roadside Landmarks of Change
Gas Station Design Marks the Passage of Time

By Brett Fuller

Today, old gas stations, ubiquitous elements of the Lone Star landscape, sit in plain sight in cities, along highways, and sometimes in abandoned towns. Individually, these deserted, dusty boxes with rusted canopies offer little of interest for the touring public. However, together these overlooked landmarks speak to a narrative more than a century in the making and stand in testimony to the important role Texas played in the proliferation of automobiles in America.

That chapter in transportation history began in 1901 at Spindletop, outside of Beaumont, with the discovery of oil, the sheer volume of which created a hundred-foot geyser that spewed for days. Production boomed statewide, and by the end of the following year, more than 17 million barrels of crude had been pumped from Texas soil. The most common use of refined kerosene at the time was for lamp illumination; however, another byproduct, gasoline, soon gained prominence as a reliable source for the nascent combustion engines that powered automobiles.

As oil derricks appeared across the state, so, too, did small refineries, each one focused on undercutting their competitors to sell more fuel. Abundant sources of cheap gas made Texas a mecca for early auto-related businesses. In 1909, Ford Motor Company established a Dallas corporate branch and five years later opened the state’s first automobile factory, proudly labeling its vehicles “Built in Texas By Texans.”

Along with the explosive rise in car ownership came consumer demands for higher quality roads and more refueling stations. Early Texas-based oil companies sought to meet this need by building the first roadside filling stations in a network radiating out from refineries near Dallas and Houston. These fueling depots began as little more than pumps set along the pavement but quickly evolved into service centers with garages and a host of auto products and amenities. These historic businesses often reflected beauty and style in their design as a means of attracting patronage. Architecturally, some captured elements of the state’s heritage, while others represented progress and modernity. For much of the 20th century, structures of Spanish Colonial Revival, Art Deco, Streamline Moderne, and various other styles were common.

Today, many early gas stations lie abandoned, while others continue to serve local communities, albeit in different ways. Some are substantially altered, but their distinctive canopies, bays, plate glass windows, and raised concrete plinths (square slabs at the base of support columns) are elements that harken back to a past era. Regardless, historic Lone Star gas stations collectively speak to a story that began in Southeast Texas but stretched to all corners of the state and well beyond.

Brett Fuller, who completed an internship with the Texas Department of Transportation, recently graduated from Texas State University with a master’s degree in public history.

For more information about historic gas stations in the state, visit this TxDOT site: http://arcg.is/1PbvTC.
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