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Ronald Erdrich
Ron Erdrich's BC Journal

BANKHEAD HIGHWAY

Historical marker and new rest area tie past to present



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By [Ron Erdrich](#) of the *Abilene Reporter News*
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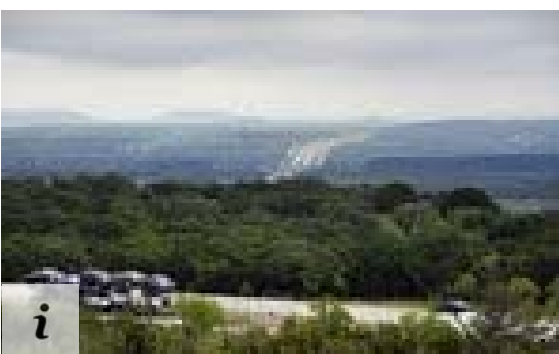


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RANGER HILL — All it needs is a song.

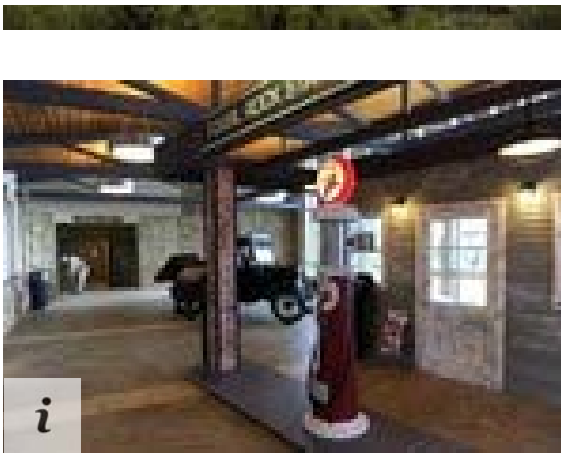
Eastland County Judge Rex Fields put into words Wednesday what a lot of people have felt over the years about the Bankhead Highway.

"I think this highway is more important than Route 66, we just don't have a good musician to do the Bankhead Highway in a song," he said.



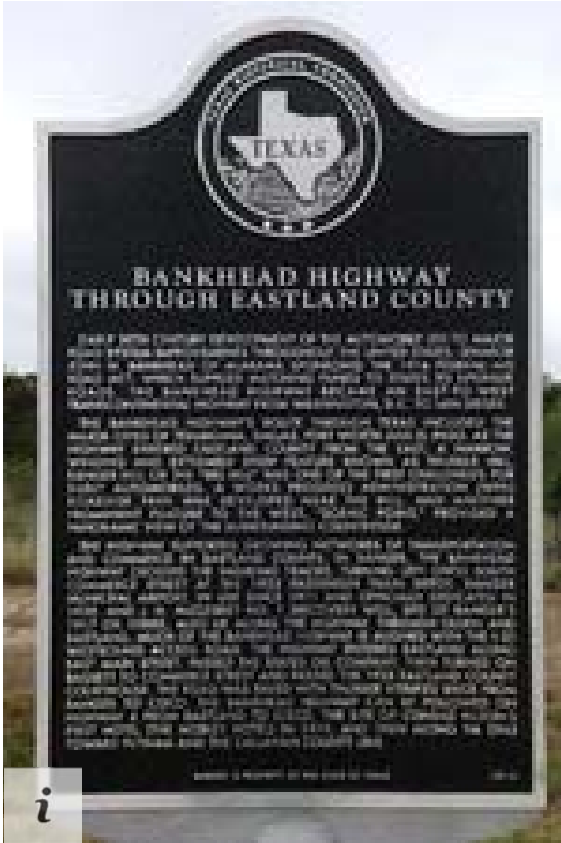
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The judge was one of about 100 people gathered Wednesday to dedicate a Texas Historical Commission marker to the Bankhead Highway. Called the Broadway of America, 850 miles of the Bankhead stretched through Texas where it was also known at one time as Texas



No. 1. The Bankhead was the subject of the Feb. 6 and 9, 2015 Big Country Journal.

The marker is located off the exit lane for the new westbound Eastland County Safety Rest Area at the top of Ranger Hill. There is a small parking area, a bench, and beyond the marker a remnant of the Bankhead paralleling the exit lane for about a quarter-mile until it disappears into the trees.



The rest area has been open since March 28 and originally the plan was to hold the dedication of the marker and the rest area at the same time. But the Texas Department of Transportation decided to push their end of it back to the summer.

"We want to give it a few months to let it get up and running," said Andrew Carlson, the TxDOT public information officer for Brownwood. "If we ran into any hiccups with plumbing or electricity or whatever, (we want to) get those worked out."

Construction on the rest area began in early 2013, Carlson said a variety of delays dragged it out six to eight months longer than they had anticipated. A near-identical eastbound rest area is located west of here six miles outside of Ranger and just past the Blundell Street exit.

Overlook points allow visitors to follow Interstate 20 with their eyes to the horizon, and picnic benches and a playground are available for those not interested in the view. Inside the travel center sits a Model T, along with educational placards about the area, an interactive video player, and a gas station replica from the Depression era.

Stanley McCallum's picture is featured in one of the educational placards. He now lives in Odessa, but when he was a young child he lived at the top of Ranger Hill.

"It wasn't called Ranger Hill back then," corrected his brother Melvin, who came in from Mountain Home.

"It was called Scenic Point, I lived out there when I was about 3 or 4 or 5 years old. My daddy ran that place, he was the chief cook and bottle-washer," Stanley said. "It was a truck stop, is what it was. We lived in one of the tourist courts in the back."

Back in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Bankhead in Eastland County was mostly brick, though the stretch alongside the historical marker is now broken asphalt.

"It's possible that at one point this was a brick road, but my research indicates that it probably never was," said Dan Smith, author of "Texas Highway No. 1: The Bankhead Highway in Texas." "What I am trying to figure out is just exactly when this road was built."

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Originally the road was gravel, Smith believed the Thurber Company, who later made bricks for the Bankhead in Eastland County, might have been the original builders. Eventually the road became part of Bankhead but this section, at least, never seemed to have been bricked.

Melvin and Stanley's parents traveled this same road when Melvin was an infant.

"I was born in 1943 with a club foot. We lived in Ranger at that time, and so they had to take me to Fort Worth," Melvin recalled. "That was during the big war, people would give us their gas rationing stamps so we could get to Fort Worth and back."

Their father drove a 1936 Chevrolet.

"It was a two-door sedan, and we got to ride in the back," Melvin said. "It might have had a heater, but no radio."

Stanley laughed at a memory.

"I remember Daddy used to kick it in neutral and coast down the hill, saving gas," he said.

Thurber Hill, as it was also known, had an even worse reputation in those days than it does now. The road up the hill rose 200 feet in less than a mile and early on, Model T's had to drive up it in reverse because without a fuel pump, gravity would stall the vehicle. Coming down the hill was a roller coaster; brakes were known to fail and drivers just had to hold on.

"It wasn't good, there were several people killed over on Scenic Point," Stanley said.

"We had a cousin that got burned bad out there, Don Ervin," Melvin said. "He went to help somebody."

"A gasoline truck fell off, went off the side. He and another old boy went down there to help the driver out," Stanley continued. "It blew up and killed the driver, Don was in the hospital for years."

But of course the story of the Bankhead Highway is about more than accidents. It's one about linking two coasts and fanning the spark of wanderlust so many Americans are born to. Highways like the Bankhead and Route 66 tapped into the same spirit that led people a hundred years earlier to pick up, move west, and see what they could find.

"We're real proud of being able to commemorate this," said Jeane Pruett, chair of the Eastland County Historical Commission and the president of the Ranger Historical Preservation Society. "Eastland County has the best-preserved part of the Bankhead Highway, all the way through Cisco."

"I'm with Judge Fields; Route 66 doesn't have anything on the Bankhead."