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Journey celebrates end of once-bumpy ride

April 24th, 2016 | by Les Minor | in Opinion Columns | Read Time: 3 mins. |

A bit of history zipped into Texarkana on Wednesday and zipped out just about as quickly.

It was a convoy on vintage automobiles traveling the so-called Bankhead Highway as part of a celebration to mark the 100th anniversary of the highway's origins.

The Four States Auto Museum played host here, and the city provided a tour of Arkansas Municipal Auditorium, a stage where many greats from the 1950s played—like Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash—and the city hopes to reclaim and restore it to its former glory.

But because these activities happened during the school and work week, it didn't receive the amount of public attention it should have. That's OK. In most respects, this was for them, the travellers, not us. We were just another stop on a much longer road trip.

But if you saw some really cool antique cars driving around town Wednesday and early Thursday, that's why they were here. And why they were here is worth more than passing mention. This centennial celebration represents an important milestone in this country's westward expansion.

The Bankhead Highway is actually not one highway, but a series of highways and alternatives that stretch about 3,000 miles through the South from Washington, D.C., to San Diego. This transcontinental traffic trail never received the fame or acclaim of Route 66, nor has it been romanticized as much, but it is just as important.

About a third of the Bankhead route stretches through Texas, from Texarkana in the northeast corner to El Paso at the southwestern extreme. It also cuts through Arkansas, running from Memphis to Little Rock, where it splits into two different legs. The most southern of these heads to Arkadelphia and then Texarkana, on U.S. Highway 67, a stretch that was dubbed the Rock'n'Roll Highway a few years back. (Interestingly enough, Tupelo, Miss., where Elvis was born and grew up, is also along the Bankhead Highway.)

Beyond the trivia, the Bankhead was important because it represented real progress and real commitment at the local, state and federal level to improving our roadways.

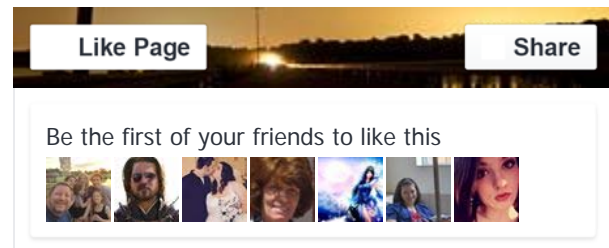
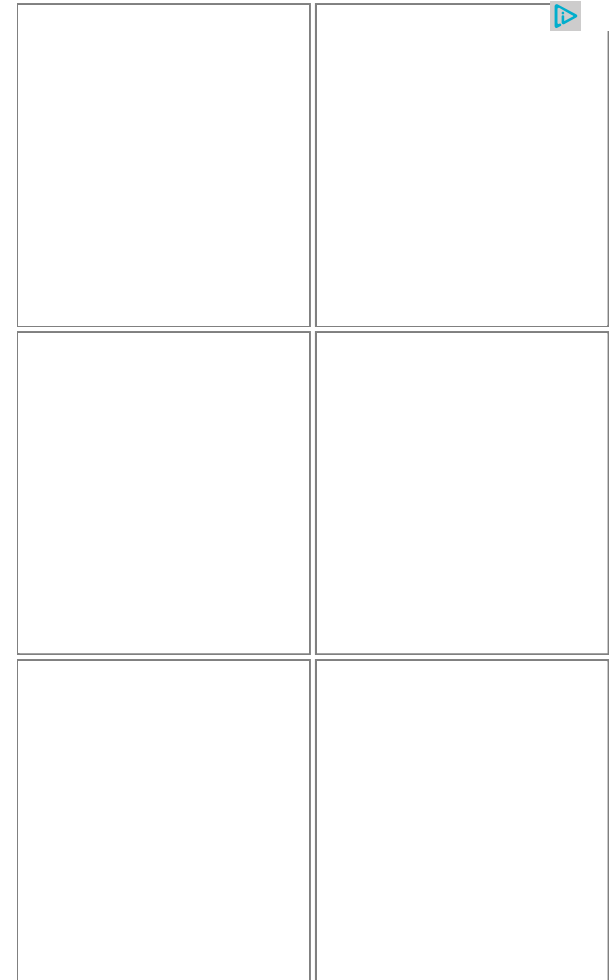
Before this time, we were a country with endless dirt and gravel roads. That was the norm.

Just because cars were coming of age didn't mean flat and dependable roads existed to support them. This was true everywhere, including inside cities. But early in the 20th century, car clubs pushed the Good Road Movement in order to spur economic development in rural America.

While roadways were being upgraded practically everywhere, most of the improvements were piecemeal. The first highway spliced together in this fashion was called the Lincoln Highway, going coast to coast in 1913.

The 100-year anniversary of the Bankhead Highway ties its origins to the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, which provided matching funds to states for road construction. From that point, highway building took off.

The plan was the brainchild of Office of Public Roads Director Logan Page, and was sponsored by U.S. Sen. John Hollis Bankhead of



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Alabama. Hence the highway's name.

suspects

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Texarkana is no different. As a transportation hub since birth, Texarkana has always had an important place at this table.

Even before the first lots were sold, it was the Southwest Trail. Later, and most obviously, it was railroads.

This was followed by a series of U.S. Highways: 67, 82, 71, 59, in no particular order.

In recent decades, our city has been changed by Interstate 30, I-49, and the ongoing pursuit of its completion.

In our future, the potential of I-69.

So if nothing else, this past week's commemorative convey serves to remind of the value of imagination, of foresightedness, of collaboration, of harnessing the energy of the moment.

If you think this sea of concrete we navigate every day is a good thing, you can thank the Bankhead initiative for giving it direction and traction, and for helping put Texarkana on the map.

If not, you've arrived at the station about a century too late. The train—or should we say the caravan of progress—has already departed. No looking back.